

The Reverend Craig T. Kocher  
Acting Dean of the Chapel and Director of Religious Life  
Genesis 32:22-31  
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“What Sort of God is This?”

Until that dark night by the river Jabbok, life had been going pretty well for Jacob. He wasn't a bad guy, just good at playing the system, getting what he wanted, advancing his station in life. It had always been this way for Jacob. When he was still in Rebecca's womb, he had gotten into a fight, a wrestling match with his twin brother Esau in the dark waters of the womb over who would come out first. It was as if the infant Jacob knew intuitively that the winners in the world were the ones who finished first. The aggressive ones, the ones who go full bore after what they want. Esau won the infant tussle in Rebecca's belly, the last win he'd have over brother Jacob. But knowing Jacob, it was Jacob who started the fight. Esau was born first but Jacob was right behind, clutching at Esau's heel as if to drag him full force back into the womb, or scratch his way to the front of the cue as if the rest of life would be determined by birth order, which of course in those days it was. Jacob's very name suggests a survivor, a “someone's going to be kicked off the island, but by God it won't be me,” mentality. In Hebrew it translates to something like, “one who supplants,” or in the Hollywood translation, “Top-Gun.”

Not so many years later, the infant twins now in their early teens, Jacob is at it again. He greets Esau at the end of a long hot day in the fields with an enticing bowl of soup and a loaf of bread. The temptation was too great for famished Esau and in a moment he traded away his birthright for a hearty meal. Esau may be a bit foolish, but Jacob doesn't seem to mind taking advantage of his short-sighted brother. After all, that's the way many people get ahead in this world. Take advantage of a fool or two along the way. If they are stupid enough to fall for it, maybe they deserve to be taken advantage of, so the thinking goes. Jacob has mastered the tenets of Social Darwinism. It doesn't stop with the birthright. Later on Jacob will trick his old man Isaac into passing along his blessing to Jacob instead of Esau. The world hasn't changed much since Jacob's time. This is life. People do such things all the time, and we should be wary of excluding ourselves from the likes of Jacob. As Frederick Buechner has said, “the world is full of Esau's and there is no law against taking advantage of somebody else's stupidity. And the world is full of Isaacs as well, people who cannot help but go on loving us no matter what we do, and whose love we are free to use pretty much as we please, knowing perfectly well that they will go on loving us anyway.”

In this sense Jacob is not so different from many of us. He's figured out how to make the world run according to his own desires, to get what he wants out of life, power, success, happiness. Sure, he's a little proactive, but who isn't? We may not think of it as swindling or manipulation; those words are too strong. We're more apt to operate with tamer language: networking, developing political-ties, relationship building, strategic planning, capitalizing on an opportunity. It's who we are and how we get ahead, succeed, satisfy ambition, push the limits, and it's not all bad. How many of us can truly say that every motivation is genuinely pure? Thus before we judge Jacob too harshly we

might be wise to remember that many who enjoy some measure of success in the world have a little Jacob in them, though perhaps in not so obvious ways.

All those stories of Jacob's trickery and family history are in the rushing waters of the Jabbok when we read the text for this morning. For you see, the next day, Jacob would see Esau for the first time in some 20 years, and Jacob is not the fool Esau is. Jacob knows too well how the world works. What goes around comes around, or so he assumes. And he fully expects that Esau, who by now has amassed quite a stable of servant-soldiers, will give him what he deserves. But if one is looking to find a moral to this story, a moral about how the past injuries we inflict on others, or the sins or our childhood will eventually catch up to us and shake our fragile psyches, driving us into repetitive sleepless nights and therapy couches, there is little to work with from this part of the Bible. Quite the opposite, the night before his famous wrestling match on the riverbank Jacob has the most lovely dream one could ever want, a dream of peace and beauty, of a ladder stretching to the heavens and angels ascending and descending. In the dream God himself speaks to Jacob, promising goodness, promising land and blessing to Jacob's descendents, and the abiding presence of the almighty himself.

But that dream was last night. Despite the promises of God, Jacob is still Jacob, and now he is alone, back in the political war room, having sent his wives, children, servants, and live-stock across the Jabbok ahead of him. Jacob is by himself in the darkness, once again scheming, trying to figure a way out of the reunion with Esau that is sure to go so poorly. This is Jacob at his best, the very model of a modern-major self-made man, built on the backs of others, digging deep to see if he can hatch one more emergency escape route and upend his brother a final decisive time.

That is when it happens. Alone in the darkness of a dusty riverbank something lurches out of the black night and grabs Jacob by the throat. This is not as simple as a metaphor of the past coming back to haunt him, or a guilty conscience getting the best of him. If it were the case, Jacob might simply give in, confess his sins, see the right, and straighten out his ways. This riverbank battle is physical, violent, tossing, turning, rolling around in the dust and mud, arms flailing, knees banging, heads jarring, a scratching biting brawl with neither one giving in. It goes on and on throughout the night and into the wee hours of the morning, the physical exhaustion dripping from the text like the sweat running down Jacob's brow.

Some night, some unexpected night, something will lurch out of the darkness and throw us to the floor, blindsides us with pain and exhaustion and anguish. Some enemy combatant that finds safety in darkness, who we do not fully know and cannot fully see, and certainly will never fully understand, will latch on to our lives with strength beyond strength. Who knows what it might be or has been for you . . . the mystery will rush towards you shrouded by one guise or another, but it will come and you will never forget it. As a wise friend told me once, "it will be that thing in your life that you could never imagine that will change your life forever."

It happens to Jacob by the river Jabbok. We might expect Jacob to cry uncle pretty quickly, having in the past always been the one to ambush others and manipulate them into quick defeat. But like most of us, when the chips are down, Jacob finds strength he never imagined and wrestles 'til the break of day. It even appears that Jacob has the upper-hand. He is winning. At least he believes he is winning. It might be the first time in his life that Jacob is on the verge of victory in an honest battle. And then, in

an instant, with just a touch of the hand, Jacob's hip is thrown out of joint and all is lost. Defeat thrown in the face of victory, victory snatched away with just a touch. Jacob had indeed been ambushed; set up. All the long sweaty hours of wrestling, Jacob believing he was in the fight from the beginning, that he had a chance to win, believing he was in control. Truthfully, it was all illusion. Jacob was never in control. The stranger was in control the entire time. The text seems to suggest that it was fated to end this way. That Jacob would come so close to victory and have that victory dashed just to make the defeat all the more stunning and devastating. The truth is he never really had a chance, never was really in the fight. This time it was Jacob who was fooled. It could have happened at any moment during the previous sweaty hours. Just a touch, a brush of his hip and the whole thing is thrown out of joint.

His last hope is to get a blessing, a reminder of the night, and he does. With dawn breaking that stranger of darkness cries to be let go, but Jacob, wounded hip and all, does not release him, not until he receives a blessing. "What is your name?, the stranger asks from the darkness." "Jacob," comes the answer. Then the man says, "You will no longer be called Jacob, but Israel." And that is the blessing, the deep abiding blessing of being known. The stranger in the darkness names him. In the world of the Bible to be named, to have one's name known is to be known completely, deep down into the depths of our lives. To be named is to have our lives cut wide open and all the posturing exposed, to be made completely vulnerable and thus known through and through for who we really are. This is Jacob's blessing to be known for who he really is. Frederich Buechner narrates the scene like this:

"The darkness had faded just enough so that for the first time he can dimly see his opponent's face. And what he sees is something more terrible than the face of death – the face of love. It is vast and strong, half ruined with suffering and fierce with joy, the face a man flees down all the darkness of his days until at last he cries out, 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me!' Not a blessing that he can have now by the strength of his cunning or the force of his will, but a blessing that he can have only as a gift.

Power, success, happiness, as the world knows them, are his who will fight for them hard enough; but peace, love, joy are only from God. And God is the enemy whom Jacob fought there by the river, of course, and whom in one way or another we all of us fight – God, the beloved enemy. Our enemy because, before giving us everything, he demands of us everything; before giving us life, he demands our lives – our selves, our wills, our treasure."

The next day Jacob crosses the river to meet Esau in the way that we have been accustomed to Jacob operating. Jacob wants the land that has been promised to him as a gift. And although gift is the way it was offered, Jacob intends to get it, to take it, anyway he can. He sends lavish presents of servants and livestock on ahead to Esau, hoping that Esau will be buttered up and thus reduce the severity of his revenge. Esau is one of the nice guys of the world. When they eventually meet. Esau repels the presents and instead embraces his long lost brother. All is forgiven, tears flow freely, reconciliation is at hand.

I would like to tell you that Jacob's story ends there. That he learned from the night before, having seen God face to face, having been blessed, he picked up some life-altering lesson like a stone on the riverbank and carried it with him as a moral compass, starting off down a new path in life. However, the Bible – real, messy truth – wasn't

written by Dr. Phil or Walt Disney. Life isn't so straightforward – and real life is often more complex than our easy answer story ending morals might have us believe. Rarely do lives change over night, even after the dramatic events down by the riverside. And so, when the embrace ends and Esau invites prodigal Jacob to come home with him, to live together as brothers, Jacob agrees, telling Esau to go on ahead, that he will be along shortly. But this is Jacob and he has one more lie in him. The tears barely dry on his cheeks, Jacob deceives his brother a final time and sets off down a different road, never to see Esau again.

So, is that it, we are left to wonder. Is that how the Bible leaves it? After all the swindling and lying and manipulation, does Jacob come out of it unscathed? Well, not completely. In one way the long night on the banks of the Jabbok did change Jacob. He may have gone off in another direction from Esau, but he did so gingerly, painfully, with a limp. For the rest of his God-given life, with every back-splitting step Jacob knew, no matter how many times he could fool other people, shape them, work the system to his advantage, fulfill his own ambition, happiness, success, pretending that he was in control of his own life and destiny, the limp was with him, as a blessed constant reminder that as he stumbled forward in life there was one who knew him deeply – and knows us the same. Way down in the depths of his being, with every step thereafter, Jacob knew the terror and the grace of being known by Universal Love.

There is One who will never be fooled. Amen.