

Charles R. Blaisdell, Senior Pastor
First Christian Church
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Our First Families of Faith Stories from the Book of Genesis VIII. "It's Quiet Out There...."

Genesis 32:22-32 RSV The same night he arose and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. 23 He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. 24 And Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. 25 When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and Jacob's thigh was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. 26 Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." 27 And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." 28 Then he said, "Your name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." 29 Then Jacob asked him, "Tell me, I pray, your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. 30 So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." 31 The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his thigh. 32 Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the sinew of the hip which is upon the hollow of the thigh, because he touched the hollow of Jacob's thigh on the sinew of the hip."

It's become one of those cultural cliches which has become parodied everywhere. You know the one I'm talking about. It's late at night, two guys (and it always seems to be guys) are talking, laconically as guys will, and one of them will say: *"It's quiet. Too quiet."* As a writer by the name of Leroy Sievers says:

It's a line that's used in almost every Western movie. I think there's some sort of Hollywood law that requires it. At night, one cowboy will look at another and say, "It's quiet — too quiet." Immediately, one of them will be struck by an arrow. You'd think they'd have learned not to say it. Maybe that's just how the stupid cowboys got weeded out.¹

It is indeed one of those ubiquitous movie phrases that has become a cliché. Shrek says it; John Wayne said it more than once standing around a campfire the night before whatever the next day's drama would bring; you can find the phrase in the movies

¹http://www.npr.org/blogs/mycancer/2007/03/too_quiet.html

“Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles” and “Galaxy Quest.”² And, of course, there has come to be a “standard” response cliché too: “It’s quiet. Too quiet.” ***“Yeah, I have a bad feeling about this.”*** That phrase is said, sometimes half a dozen times, in almost every Star Wars movie by Obi-Wan Kenobi or Hans Solo.³ ***“I have a bad feeling about this.”***

While scripture doesn’t use this line, I can only imagine that Jacob must have been *thinking* it on the night that is described in our reading for this morning. You see, it was time for Jacob to go home, and in today’s story we discover that he is on his way and he’s preparing to meet his brother, Esau. It’s been 20 long years spent at his Uncle Laban’s, but now it was time to go home. But the way in which he had left home two decades earlier did not make this journey to return home easy. Alone there on the banks of the River Jabbok, as Jacob no-doubt remembered his deceit and trickery, the way in which he had cheated Esau not once but twice, the way he had committed fraud on his father – well, Jacob had very good reason to wonder at what kind of reception he would receive. *“I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”* But, bad feelings and worries or not, he was going home, nonetheless. And he was taking with him his wives, Rachel and Leah, their children, their servants, their livestock, all their worldly goods. But again: how would he be received – that is the question that was wracking him with anxiety. And his first clue about how he might be received is rather ambiguous, for he sent some scouts out ahead to see what they could find, and then they reported back to Jacob and said, in effect, *“Well, we have good news and we have bad news. The good news is that Esau is on his way to greet you. The bad news is that he’s bringing 400 men with him.”* Now, you don’t need 400 men in order to have a friendly family

²<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/ItsQuietTooQuiet>

³<http://everything2.com/e2node/!%2520have%2520a%2520bad%2520feeling%2520about%2520this>

reunion. Jacob was scared. *"I've got a bad feeling about this."* So he divides his family into two groups, he divides his flock into two groups, and he thinks if Esau comes and attacks one, maybe the other will be safe.

And now he's camped, all by himself, there on the banks of the Jabbok River. He had sent his family and his possessions and his livestock across the Jabbok already, but now it is too dark and he must wait until morning to make the crossing himself. He is alone, utterly alone. He has nothing but the clothes on his back and what he is carrying. And, no doubt, he can't help but remember – and we can't help but recall – a similar night twenty years earlier when he had also camped out as he was fleeing for his life, fleeing his brother Esau's threat to kill him, for tricking Esau out of their father Isaac's final paternal blessing.

In the intervening twenty years, of course, much has happened, as we have seen. He works for his uncle for seven long years in order to marry the woman he has fallen deeply in love with, Rachel. And on his wedding night, his uncle tricks the nervous and no-doubt inebriated Jacob by marrying him to Leah instead – a trick Jacob discovered the following morning and to which he responds with a word that can't be said from the pulpit but for which the King James version uses the euphemism "Behold!" His uncle gives him Rachel too, but not before making him work seven more years of work. And then in the final six years at his uncle's, he becomes wealthy and he and Leah and Rachel have numerous children. But the tensions with his uncle never really abate, and Jacob finally decides to leave and go back home. Something is pulling him back. We saw last week that in his refusal to try to trick or defraud Laban in response to Laban's trickery against him, that Jacob might have taken some first small steps towards growing up. And now, I think, he has the wisdom and the yearning that come to so many people who realize that more of their life is behind them than ahead of them and that they want to come to terms with their past, make amends where that is

called for, admit the wrongs they have done and seek forgiveness. That need may not feel quite so urgent when you're 20 or 30, but it increasingly nags and pulls. It's why so many people who may not have been particularly close to siblings, or even parents or children, discover, sometimes to their surprise, that they want to re-establish that closeness as their life moves closer to its end than its beginning.

Whatever Jacob's motivations, he decided that it was time, indeed, to go back home. And so that's why he is there all alone on the banks of the Jabbok, re-tracing his steps of twenty-years earlier, no doubt having a *deja vu* moment, feeling the quietness as a palpable presence and not being able to help himself from thinking *"I've got a bad feeling about this...."* And he talks to God. In fact, he prays. But do you remember what Jacob had said to God the last time we found him camped alone on his journey, twenty years earlier when he had been fleeing Esau's wrath? God, you'll recall, told Jacob that despite what a scoundrel he had been, God intended to continue to bless him, to use him, to make him a blessing. And Jacob's response to this mighty act of grace is to offer to negotiate and bargain with God. His gall, and as the wonderful Yiddish word has it, his *chutzpah*, is amazing here. Here was a young man, cocky, conniving, and a cheat.

But not this time. This time Jacob is different. He's aged. He's matured. He's dealt with life's messiness and has learned that he can't trick his way out of everything. And he yearns to be a different kind of person. And what he says to God on **this** occasion, on **this** night when he is once again camped all alone is oh-so-different than the cocky, confident, conniving Jacob of two decades earlier. It's not in our scripture for today, but it's immediately adjacent and this is what Jacob prays to God, there all alone:

Oh God of my father, Abraham, God of my father Isaac, oh Lord who said to me, "Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper," I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness that you have shown your servant. I

had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two great companies. Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, Esau, for I am afraid....”

What a huge change in attitude. No conniving or negotiating. No cockiness. And then comes the story that is the centerpiece of this morning’s scripture. All night long, we are told, Jacob wrestles with a man, an angel, who is clearly understood to be a manifestation of God. All night long they struggle. They wrestle. This is the only time in the Old Testament that this word is used; in Hebrew it’s the word “abaq” and it means to “get dusty,” to “contend,” to struggle.⁴ Whenever a word in the Bible is used sparingly, it’s a sign to us that something crucial is going on; it’s our cue to pay serious attention. And so we should, for Jacob’s story that night is your story and my story, and the story of what it means to be human.

Now, have any of you ever actually wrestled? It is hard, sweaty work. And even the physical hard work of real wrestling pales in comparison to the kind of wrestling that Jacob was doing. For what Jacob was doing – what *every* human being must do from time to time if his or her life is to be as blessed and purposive and beautiful as it could be – was wrestling about the very meaning of his life and for the kind of person he wanted to be and for the kind of legacy he still had a chance to leave. Rev. Roberta Hesthenes says this about Jacob’s struggle there on the Jabbok, and about our struggles in this life:

What is it that Jacob wanted more than anything else in life? [...And] What is it that we, in the deepest longings of our being, want more than anything else in life? ...the word for Jacob was the word "blessing". I want to know the smile of God.... I want to know that what I am doing with my life is pleasing to the one who made me, that my life has purpose and significance.... What Jacob wants

⁴<http://bible.crosswalk.com/Lexicons/Hebrew/heb.cgi?number=079&version=kjv>

more than anything is the blessing. But the way in which Jacob has sought to get the blessing all through his life is a way that has led to brokenness.... He has tried to get the blessing by cheating and by guile and it has only turned to ashes, and with him fleeing for his life, and with a broken family, and now, with the fearful prospect of war with Esau.⁵

Jacob struggles all night, struggles for his very soul, struggles for a life that is one he can be proud of, struggles to discover the kind of person he truly wants to be, struggles to move past all of that which has so harmed those around him.

The key verse in our scripture this morning is near the end of Jacob's struggle when God asks him what his name is. Now this seems curious. I mean, God surely *knows* his name. But God is **really** asking Jacob to decide who he wants to be, what his legacy will be. For you see, the last time Jacob had been asked what his name was, it was by his blind father Isaac when Jacob had pretended to be Esau in order to steal Esau's birthright. *"What is your name, my son? It's Esau, father,"* Jacob had said utterly without shame. And God remembers. And now **God** is asking Jacob: what name DO you want to be known by? What name will the future use to sum up your life? And this time, unlike the last time he was asked, Jacob replies *"My name is Jacob."* You need to know that in Hebrew, the name "Jacob" literally means "trickster." So, in other words, Jacob is here finally admitting that he has indeed been a cheater and a deceiver and that so much of his life has been built on the pain of others. And while he has wounded others, he has also himself been wounded by his choices. He could have been otherwise; he could have made different choices. And so with the honesty that was so alien to him earlier in his life, he says to God: "Yes, "I am Jacob, the deceiver – *but I don't want to be anymore.*" Or, as Rev. Hesthenes puts it: *"...Jacob*

⁵http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/hesthenes_3910.htm I am very indebted to her for many of the ideas and some of the phrases in this sermon.

answers... [I am] the deceiver.... That's who I am. When I face myself and when I face my God I know the truth about myself - the mixed up, confused, conniving and yet longing and thirsting for something more.”⁶

The Good News this morning is that God always wants to satisfy that longing for something more. As I've observed many times already, God won't force a higher purpose on us; if God were that sort of God there would have been no need for God to wrestle. But God does wrestle with Jacob and with you and me. God contends with us. God wants to fill that longing. God wants to break through whatever holds us back. God wants us to forgive ourselves if there is something in our pasts that we think forever puts us outside the pale. God wants us to know that our pasts need not trap us forever. God wants us to live our lives with a purpose that is beyond ourselves. It's what God offered to Jacob: And God said *“From now on no more will your name be Jacob, the deceiver, but your name will be ‘Israel’ – which means ‘the one who struggled with God. By that name you and your descendants will indeed be blessed.”*

My friends, this morning, this story asks you: Where are you struggling, where are you wrestling? What old hurt keeps you from being who you could be? What resentment seems to feed on itself? What ways of being keep you trapped? Or where should you be wrestling? Maybe you are one who needs to set up camp by the River Jabbok and invite God to wrestle with you and help you change some things. It is not easy work, to wrestle with God, to wrestle with one's own demons, to wrestle with your own sin. One final word from the wise Rev. Hesthenes, who says this about this story: this

...is Jacob's message to us. [This] is God's encouragement to us. We are those who know what it is to struggle.... We're fearful, but then finally we realize that

⁶ibid.

God, who knows our name, cares about us and loves us. As we wrestle and as we struggle with our doubts and our fears, we discover that God is good and God is for us, and God gives us a promise of a good future, a promise of hope - a blessing.⁷

That is the good news to Jacob, to Israel, to you and to me – that our God indeed will wrestle with us, hoping that we will come out better persons because of that struggle, and never giving up on us. And for that good news, for the God who always offers a fresh future of blessing, let us give our thanks indeed. Amen.

⁷Ibid.