



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

Face to Face Genesis 32:24-32

Fr. William Klock

June 23, 2013 – Trinity 4

When we left Jacob last Sunday he was desperate. He was on his way home, but all the time he was thinking about the fact that he'd run away in the first place because his brother, Esau, had threatened to kill him. Twenty years had passed. Jacob was hopeful that Esau's rage had quieted. He sent messengers to Esau, hoping to feel him out, but also to assure his brother that he was no longer a threat. But when those messenger came back with the report that Esau was on his way to meet Jacob and was travelling with four hundred men—a war party—Jacob once again feared for his life. And in good Jacob-fashion, he cooked up a scheme to save himself. He split his camp in the hope that if Esau did come to fight, he might destroy one and leave without finding the other. But then Jacob realised that might not work. Esau was after him personally; if Jacob weren't in the first camp, Esau would no doubt keep looking until he found the second. And so, in desperation, Jacob cried out to God for help. It's the first time we've seen Jacob pray. It was a desperate and uncertain prayer made to his father's and grandfather's God—to a God Jacob only really knew second-hand—and it was a “what can God give me” prayer instead of a “what can I give to God” prayer. But it was a prayer and it was made in real faith. It was a big step for Jacob. And yet, after looking to God in his desperate fear, Jacob turned back to himself. A fresh idea came to him and he got the idea to send a huge gift of livestock to meet Esau, divided it up into five parties. If it didn't placate Esau's anger and his desire for revenge, at least it would slow him

and down and make an ambush impossible.

Jacob had set his scheme in motion, but still he couldn't sleep. In the night he took his family and forded the dangerous river. And there we left him in verse 24. He was afraid; he was desperate; and he felt alone. How often has each of us felt afraid, desperate, and alone? How often have we felt like there's no hope? Like Jacob, our faith isn't what it should be. Like Jacob, our knowledge of God isn't what it should be. He's the one who has promised always to be with us; he's the one who has promised always to look after us and to fight for us. He'd done that for Jacob. At Bethel, twenty years before, God had promised to be with Jacob through his exile and to see him safely home. For twenty years Jacob had experienced God's presence and his blessing, but because he didn't know God himself, he was blind to God presence and blind to God's hand at work in his life. Jacob had no real faith. Over the course of these last episodes in Jacob's story we've seen faith begin to sprout in his life, but Jacob still feels alone here. He feels alone, even though he's not, because he still barely knows God. It's hard to have confidence and assurance in someone you don't know.

The interesting thing is that God is with Jacob in a way we wouldn't have expected. Look at Genesis 32:24.

And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day.

There was poor Jacob, sitting alone in the dark, worrying about what the next day would bring, when he's suddenly jumped by a stranger—maybe a robber or a bandit. This “man” jumps him in the dark and Jacob begins to wrestle with him and the wrestling match goes on the rest of the night. While he was wrestling this man, Jacob had no idea who he was. Jacob was a strong man—strong enough to lift the stone from the well where he met Rachel, a stone that was normally

lifted by at least three or four men, and yet as we'll see, Jacob can only just wrestle this man to a stalemate. Who is he? And what's he got against Jacob? (As if Jacob didn't have enough to worry about already!)

Jacob is both literally and figuratively in the dark. The storyteller here is deliberately ambiguous: the stranger is just a “man”—the Hebrew way of saying this was just “some guy”. In the morning, after the stranger leaves, Jacob realises that he's had a face to face encounter with God. And yet, the prophet Hosea, in his divinely inspired commentary on this story, tells that it was an angel with whom Jacob wrestled. If that's confusing, remember what we've seen in the stories of Hagar and Abraham. When the angel of the Lord came to them, he came as a representative of God, speaking for God himself and was received by them as if he were God. It reflects the tradition in that culture in which kings sent messengers, who not only spoke as the king, but were received and heard as if they were the king himself. And so here, through his messenger, God confronts Jacob.

Of course, again, Jacob doesn't know whom he's wrestling. To him it's just a man who jumped him in the dark. And yet Jacob's ignorance and the storyteller's ambiguity—this is just “some guy”—have a purpose. Jacob thinks he's wrestling with a man and wondering why, as strong as he is, he's getting nowhere. In fact, he's wrestling with God and the true wonder is that God doesn't squash him like a bug. But there's the grace of it all. Right here, in the dark, on the banks of the Jabbock, Jacob's life is summed up in a single event. All his life he's been fighting with men and getting nowhere; it's never dawned on him that in reality, all his life he's been fighting God. The fact is that God wants to bless him. More significantly, God wants to use Jacob to do great things in his kingdom, but Jacob's been fighting him every step of the way.

And that reveals God's purpose here. God had spoken to Jacob in a dream and told him to return home to Canaan. Now, as Jacob's preparing to cross the river and enter that land of promise—getting ready to *obey* God's call—God assaults him, God stops him, God blocks him from taking that step of obedience. And we ask: Why would God do that? Why would God block Jacob as he tries to be obedient? This is where it's helpful to consider how God's fight with Jacob here is metaphorical for Jacob's whole life. And it's also helpful to look at two other instances in the Old Testament when God called and then dramatically blocked the way.

The first of these is in Exodus 4. Moses had met God in the burning bush and God had sent him back to Egypt on a mission: to free his people from slavery and to lead them out of Egypt. But in verse 24, as Moses was on his way back to Egypt, we're told that God confronted him and sought to kill him. God was only stopped when Moses' wife, Zipporah, circumcised their two sons. God called Moses to a task, but then got in his way.

The second instance is found in Numbers 22. The Moabites feared the invading Israelite army and so the Moabite king summoned the pagan prophet, Balaam, to speak a curse over them. God told Balaam to go and to speak only what he would tell him to speak, but on the way there God blocked his way and Balaam had his famous confrontation with his donkey, whom God caused to speak. Why would God call him to do something and then block his way?

The same thing is happening in all three events. Moses was called to lead God's covenant people, but he'd neglected to include his own sons in that covenant. He couldn't serve God in that position of leadership until he'd dealt with his own covenant failure. Balaam was ready to prophesy on God's behalf, but as a pagan he was

used to divining the word of the gods by pagan methods. He was, no doubt, expecting to do the same as he spoke for the Lord. But the Lord doesn't speak through pagan methods. And so he stopped Balaam and by speaking through his donkey, God taught Balaam that if he can open the mouth of a dumb animal he can open the mouth of a prophet and give him words to speak.

And so with Jacob. God is ready for Jacob to return to the promised land, but before he can enter—before he can be the man who will do great things for God's kingdom—Jacob need to be relieved of his ungodly baggage. God is ready for Jacob, but Jacob isn't yet ready for God. That's why God stops him at the river, before letting him cross back into Canaan. This is why God calls him to do something and then gets in his way. God's preparing Jacob.

And so the two wrestle all night, Jacob fighting desperately against this man whom he doesn't realise is God and God graciously and patiently waiting for Jacob to realise what this is truly all about. But eventually enough is enough and God makes a decisive move to end the struggle. Look at verse 25:

When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.

A dislocated joint is excruciatingly painful. For most people, the pain itself would probably end the fight. But the hip is also a major pivot point in wrestling. To dislocate your opponent's hip is to cripple him. With a mere touch, God deals this crippling blow to Jacob. And yet Jacob doesn't give up. He can't fight anymore, but God's touch communicates something to him. Jacob still doesn't know this is the Lord, but he also knows now that this isn't a mere human being. To

be able to dislocate a joint with a mere touch tells Jacob that there's something divine or magical about his opponent. He may have thought he was wrestling with a river god who was angry at being disturbed in the night or who didn't want Jacob to cross into his territory. We don't know the specifics, but what we do see is that Jacob—always thinking quickly—realises that this divine being could potentially bless him, and as we know, Jacob's *all* about acquiring blessings. And so, unable to fight this being, Jacob digs in his fingers and refuses to let him go without getting something for all his trouble. This apparently goes on for some time and in verse 26 his opponent finally addresses him:

Then he said, "Let me go, for the day has broken." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

Jacob doesn't know it yet, but this is just where he needs to be to receive God's blessing. As Griffith Thomas put it, he's gone from "cunning to clinging"¹. There's no more "Jacobing"—no more scheming or scamming—he can do; all he can do is hold tight to the source of blessing. Jacob is at the end of himself, he just doesn't know it yet. Bruce Waltke writes:

When the angel cripples his hip, Jacob does not quit. Instead, he clings to the angel and prays for God's blessing. His ambition to achieve through his own wit and strength is transformed to an ambition to achieve through prayer and faith. He prevails because 'when I am weak, then I am strong' (2 Cor. 12:10). Hosea puts it this way: '[Jacob] struggled with the angel and overcame him; he wept and begged for his favor' (Hos. 12:4). In other words, he overcame the angel by begging for his favor! Israel prevails through

¹ *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), p. 304.

words, not strength; through prayer, not human might.”²

Again, Jacob doesn’t yet realise what’s really going on here. He’s just being Jacob: always out for himself. But we see again how the whole event is metaphorical for his life. God has sovereignly brought him to just the point he needs to be at to encounter grace. But there’s one more step that Jacob needs to take, and so, in response to his demands for a blessing, God asks Jacob his name.

And he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.”
(Genesis 32:27)

“I’m Jacob.” To him it was a just a name, and yet as he speaks his name to the stranger he makes a full confession of the very thing that he needs to be rid of before he can serve God’s kingdom. In saying, “I’m Jacob,” he might as well said, “I’m the supplanter. I’m the back-stabber. I’m the self-reliant schemer. I’m the man who trusts only himself.” Jacob’s name represented his sin and God’s question, “What is your name?” was a call into the confessional. God responds to Jacob’s confession in verse 28:

Then he said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.”

God’s blessing is a new name. Literally, the Hebrew says, “It shall no more be said.” “You are no longer Jacob. You are no longer the supplanter, the back-stabber, or the self-reliant schemer. Jacob is history. You are Israel.” The new name literally means something like “God fights” or “God struggles” and God explains to Jacob that he’s being given this name because he has striven with God and men and prevailed. We might ask how that happened when

Jacob so obviously lost the fight. And of course the point is that in giving up on his fight with God and instead simply clinging to him he won by being transformed. And that’s just it: the transformation has to do with the way that Jacob conducts his life and prevails in his struggles. Up to this point he’s faced life on his own power and tried to prevail with his own cunning; now he faces life and prevails by faith and prayer.

I’m reminded of St. Paul’s words of encouragement to the Church at Corinth:

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Corinthians 6:9-11)

Just as Jacob could never receive God’s blessing and could never be a servant of God’s kingdom as a self-reliant and cunning swindler, neither can we. You and I don’t prevail through sin; we prevail only as we cling to Jesus Christ in faith and prayer and only as we trust him to transform our lives and accomplish our redemption. That’s what’s going on here with Jacob. Our problem—and Jacob’s—however, is that until we meet God in Jesus, we all think that these sinful behaviours—sexual immorality, idolatry, greed, and so on—are our sources of success. At some point God has to open our eyes to our sin so that we can see that it’s not truly the source of strength we think it is. That’s the point at which we’re ready to end our fight against

Jesus and instead to humbly cling to him for life.

Of course, still, as all this is happening, the significance of it is lost on Jacob. He still doesn’t know who the stranger is; he doesn’t realise that he’s just made a confession of his past; and he no doubt wonders where the blessing is in having this man give him a new name. Jacob’s still in the dark, literally and figuratively.

Then Jacob asked him, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And there he blessed him. (Genesis 32:29)

The angel’s response, “Why is it that you ask my name?” isn’t a put off. It’s his way of saying, “After all this, don’t you know who I represent, who I am?” It’s at this point that he blesses Jacob—or, maybe, gives him another blessing in addition to the change of name—and then goes on his way. It’s only as the angel leaves him that Jacob realises what’s just happened; it’s only after the fact that the significance of the wrestling, the injury, the clinging, and the name change all sink into him. Providentially it happens as the sun rises. It all *dawns* on Jacob—again, literally and figuratively—as we see in verses 30-32:

So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered.” The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. Therefore to this day the people of Israel do not eat the sinew of the thigh that is on the hip socket, because he touched the socket of Jacob’s hip on the sinew of the thigh.

“For I have seen God face to face.” C. S. Lewis’ most profound work of fiction is a book that picks up on this theme; it’s titled *Till We Have Faces*. The first part of the book introduces Orual, a princess in an ancient land

² *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), p. 345.

called Glome. As the years go by and as she grows older her life becomes nothing but misery. The second part of the book is the complaint she writes to the gods and the book ends with a court scene in which she's finally able to bring her complaint before the gods. Over and over she angrily repeats her complaint while the gods sit in silence. But in their silence she finally hears their answer and realises her own foolishness. As she hears her own complaint she realises that it's nothing more than babble and it dawns on her that if she doesn't even know what it is she means or wants to say, why would the gods listen?

What's that got to do with Jacob? As Orual comes to her realisation she makes the statement (from which Lewis took the title of the book), "How can they meet us face to face till we have faces?"³ Lewis' point is that to have any meaningful interaction with God, we need to be able to see ourselves from his perspective; we need to see ourselves as he sees us. The night Jacob had his wrestling match with God on the banks of the Jabbock was the night that he got his face. It began as he clung to the stranger and pleaded for a blessing; it continued as he spoke his name, confessed his past, and as the stranger pronounced a new name and a new way of life over him; and it concluded as the sun rose, the stranger left, and Jacob suddenly realised that he had encountered God. At the root of it all was Jacob's need to realise and to confess that he had built his life on himself and that he trusted in no one but himself for his own well-being. That night God took Jacob to rock bottom and hit him full in the face with reality—with the reality of who he really was and where he stood in relation to God. God stripped off the masque that Jacob had been wearing his whole life and revealed his true face. But in doing that, God prepared Jacob to be built back up into the man

he would have him be. But for that to happen, Jacob had to sacrifice the thing that was most important to him: his self-reliance, his self-sufficiency. Jacob had to give up his masque in order to see God.

It's no different for you and me. To trust in Jesus Christ we have to sacrifice the things that would take his place at the centre of our faith. Now, we all know this in our heads, I think. But has this knowledge really percolated down and permeated our lives and, especially, our hearts? We need to look at our hearts and ask what we need to sacrifice so that we can truly live before the face of God. For Jacob it was his proud self-reliance. For Abraham the very covenant itself had become an idol and in asking him to sacrifice Isaac, God was asking him to give up that idol. For some of us it may be pride or selfishness. For others it might be worry or vanity. Whatever it is, we need to acknowledge and confess it as Jacob did. We need to see ourselves honestly and from God's perspective so that we can then see him face to face. The good news is that as we confess, our God is faithful to forgive and as St. Paul wrote in that passage from 1 Corinthians 6, after making a list of sins that keep us from God: "Such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God." In Jesus Christ we are those things no more. Just he did for Jacob, he has transformed our lives, freeing us from sin's slavery, that we might live and serve in his kingdom.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, we thank you for your gracious patience as you work to draw us to yourself. Give us the grace to sacrifice those things that displace you in our lives and that disorder our faith. Wrestle with us, we pray, until we're ready to cling to you for life as Jacob did, we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

³ C.S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces* (New York: Harcourt, 1956), p. 294.