

THE EMPTYING RIVER

TEXT: Genesis 32:22-31

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on August 2, 2020

In general, I'm not a lectionary preacher. In fact, my favorite way to select sermon topics is to ask the congregations I serve what they want to hear sermons about and then preach on those things. I have every intention of asking you that question sometime in the fall. So, you can be thinking about what you want to suggest.

But right now, I'm preparing this sermon before I've even begun as your pastor, so I figured I would reach into the lectionary and see what it might be serving up for the first Sunday in August. I couldn't believe my eyes. There for Sunday, August 2, was a Bible story that has resonated throughout my adult life. Not only is the wrestling match at the Jabbok River a touchstone story for me, it also happens to be a story that couldn't be more fitting for our times as a world, a nation, a denomination, and a local church.

Ultimately, it's a story about identity and conflict; theft and atonement. It's about broken relationships, fear and anger, the ways we resist grace, and what real courage looks like. It's about our attempts at easy fixes and God stepping in to make sure we do the real work. It's about being willing to fully empty ourselves and take on hardship in order to receive and become a channel for God's blessing. It's about wrestling with our enemies until we can see in them the face of God.

One of the reasons I usually don't like the lectionary is that it leaves out too much. The passage we heard earlier is all you get for this story, which is not nearly enough. Context is important here. The whole reason Jacob is having this wrestling match at all is because his twin brother Esau is on the other side of the river with four hundred armed men coming to kill him. That's a pretty important piece of information, if you ask me.

So, we're going to take two weeks with the story itself—this week is about how we got here and next week will be about what happens next. And then we're going to take the rest of August and maybe longer to do our own wrestling around questions of identity. Who are we as human beings and why are we here? When we talk about God and being God's people, who is that God exactly? What are the identifying marks of the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus Christ? What does it mean to be the church? We'll wrestle with who we are as United Methodists and who we are as a local congregation situated in a very particular and very fraught time and place in history. Jacob's wrestling match resonates deeply enough that it might even serve as a touchstone for our entire first year together.

So, if you're willing, let's explore who Jacob is, how he got to this place, and why he's having a difficult moment at the ford of the Jabbok River. Next week we'll look at what happens to him on the other side.

To begin with, Jacob is Abraham's grandson, and the very first story we get about him tells us that there has been a struggle between Jacob and his twin brother Esau from the get-go. Their mother, Rebekah, had difficulty conceiving, and the first thing we learn about the two—before they are even born—is that Rebekah felt so much struggle even in the womb that she prayed to ask God what was going on. She was told in Genesis 25:23, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger."

When Rebekah finally goes into labor, it's Esau who emerges first, and thus is technically the first born, but Jacob is right behind him and the Bible tells us he was born literally grabbing Esau's heel—which is how Jacob got his name. Jacob means "heel-grabber." Esau means "hairy." You can imagine the baby pictures.

So, we know from the start where this is going; and when their father, Isaac, is blind and getting on in years, we get the next significant conflict between the twins. Being the firstborn in ancient Hebrew culture was a big deal as it still is in many cultures today. Since Esau holds that position, he's entitled to a greater share of the inheritance and also to a special blessing from his father. The short version of their early adult conflict is that Jacob exploits his brother to take the inheritance and then works with his mother on an elaborate scheme of deception to steal the blessing by literally dressing up as Esau—hairy body and all—to trick blind Isaac into giving the blessing that was intended for Esau to Jacob instead.

There are no do-overs for such things, even if they were fraudulently obtained, and Esau is beside himself with grief and rage. He plots to kill Jacob, Rebekah learns of it, and strongly suggests that Jacob go for a long visit far away with Rebekah's brother, Laban, and try to find himself a wife. Once Jacob gets to his Uncle Laban's home, we see that scheming runs in the family. For several chapters Laban and Jacob steal and deceive each other over Laban's daughters, Jacob's work, and who properly owns what. There's even some weird magical stuff with spotted sheep. It's quite the set of stories.

Jacob's last grab is to take the wealth that he believes is now his, pack all that up with two of Laban's daughters, two of their handmaids, the eleven children he had with them all and make a run for it while Laban is away shearing sheep. One of Jacob's wives, Rachel, even steals her father's household gods. Then they quite literally head for the hills; in this case the hill country of Gilead, aiming for the Jordan River and a return to Jacob's home.

It's been more than 14 years since Jacob has seen his twin, but Jacob appears to think Esau has been willing to let bygones be bygones. So, Jacob sends messengers to his brother to say, "Hey! Guess what? Your brother Jacob is now really rich and can't wait to see you." What could possibly go wrong?

The messengers return to Jacob to say, "Uh...Sir? Esau is coming to meet you. With 400 armed men." This was not good. Jacob wasn't exactly nimble with his entourage. Being rich in ancient times didn't involve carrying a sack of gold. Most wealth for the Hebrews was measured in flocks and herds. Jacob is in hill country with two wives, two handmaids, eleven children and at least a thousand goats, sheep, camels, cows, and donkeys as well as the servants tending to them. You don't just dodge an approaching army with all that.

Jacob first divides everything into two groups, thinking that if Esau slaughters one group, the other might escape. He then has a foxhole prayer, asking God to save him from his brother and promising to be faithful in return, and then he gets back to practical matters. Whether he's actually trying to atone or whether it's simply self-preservation we aren't told. But Jacob tries to right the wrongs done to his brother so long ago. Jacob stole two main things from his twin—his inheritance and his blessing; basically, wealth and status. So, he spends the day preparing gifts of wealth—totaling 550 livestock—and sends them in waves to his brother, each with a servant bowing and scraping and describing Jacob as Esau's servant. It's reparations of a sort—giving back the inheritance he stole with the livestock and giving status by taking a servant's role in relation to his brother.

That's the full context as twilight falls and the passage we heard earlier opens. Jacob, his family, and the rest of the entourage move into the ford of the Jabbok River, a tributary of the Jordan, surrounded by hills. And here the story moves from a concrete narrative about a particular family conflict to a mystical story filled with symbol and metaphor.

The ford is a liminal space—it's neither here nor there. In the ford, Jacob isn't really on one side of the river or the other. He doesn't keep everyone else in that limbo—he sends his family and all the rest of his flocks, herds, and servants fully across the river. But Jacob stays in the ford, which is exactly where he is in his life. He no longer belongs to the life with his uncle Laban behind him, and it's not looking good for his homecoming either. He has a promise that God will be with him, given once in a dream; but he's not exactly lived the life of a spiritual hero. Does God's promise still hold, or does it end here? The days of pretending to be his brother are over. He can't go back and he's afraid to go forward.

The word Jabbok in Hebrew, Ya-BOK, means “emptying.” And that’s exactly what Jacob is experiencing here. All his family and wealth have crossed over. He’s burned the bridges with his uncle behind him, and Esau wants to kill him ahead. In this moment, Jacob is empty of wealth, family, status and relationship. He is alone. And he sits in the neither-here-nor-there space of the ford of the Jabbok River—the emptying river—as night falls, contemplating how he ended up here, perhaps on the last night of his life.

A man comes—from where we’re not told. Some Jewish traditions say it was the guardian angel of Esau, which adds an even richer layer of meaning to the story. They begin to wrestle and the struggle continues throughout the night. By morning, Jacob has a new name, Israel, is convinced the man was God, and has finally earned his own blessing instead of just taking the blessing that belonged to his brother. It has cost Jacob. He has to limp across the river; but he does so with a new identity and a much deeper understanding of grace.

I don’t know whether this story is factual; and in a real sense I don’t care. What I do know is that this story is deeply true. If you haven’t yet found yourself in the ford of the Jabbok—a place in life where you’re unable to go back and afraid to go forward, wrestling down past events and praying into what seems like a void for help—if you haven’t yet been there, you will. Or at least, for the sake of your spiritual growth, you should.

My own Jabbok River moment came on my first night in a small apartment in Atlanta. Newly divorced and about to start seminary, I’d sold everything I had of value to get into the ford. My French horn and the grand piano I had inherited from my great aunt for whom I was named. Gone. My mother’s silver. Gone. My wedding dress, sold at a consignment shop—not that it held terribly good memories any more. My ex-husband got the dogs I loved with all my heart; I couldn’t have pets in my new apartment. People dear to me had helped me move, but they were now gone and I sat on an unmade bed, surrounded by boxes, and sobbed. I looked into the mirror and no one looked back.

Literally all I had was the memory that, as a child of 14, I had stood in the pulpit of my home church to preach for youth Sunday, and had finished with the sure sense that God was calling me to do that for the rest of my life. And so, there I was. I didn’t know a soul, classes were still a week away, and all I could do was pray that God was still with me, even though it didn’t feel like that was true. Who was I? Why was I here? What lay on the other side of this emptying river? I wrestled with that for two solid years, sometimes winning—sometimes losing. I came out limping; but blessed.

But the story is much bigger than our individual struggles. Jacob and Esau don’t just represent individual brothers. They are also nations—Israel and Edom. While both are grandsons of Abraham, they’re also different faiths. Esau married Canaanite women and one of the daughters of Abraham’s first-born son, Ishmael. Jacob married women within the Hebrew people. The Bible is never just about our behavior and issues as individuals—not in either Testament. The Bible’s message is ultimately about who we are together as families, faith communities, societies, nations, and ultimately as a human species, charged in Genesis with protecting an earth teeming with life.

Figuring out those identities, both separately and together, is the work of a lifetime. But the key to beginning that work is here at the Jabbok River, the tributary river whose only job is to empty itself into a much larger flow. Jesus taught us that in order to live we have to be willing to die. This story teaches us the same thing. What does that get us? What happens when we summon the courage to empty ourselves and cross the river? That’s next week’s sermon. See you then.