

The Emptying River

TEXT: Genesis 32:22-31

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Cranford Memorial UMC on September 14, 2025

When last we left our hero—Jacob, son of Isaac, son of Abraham—he was headed for his Uncle Laban’s settlement to try to find a wife. While Jacob’s father, Isaac, had basically done the same as a young man; Isaac sent a servant to find the right woman on his behalf. But the Bible tells us in Genesis 28 that the reason Jacob is making the long trip himself is because his twin brother Esau is planning to kill him for cheating him out of his birthright and Isaac’s blessing.

We saw last week that, during the trip to his uncle’s settlement, Jacob made camp outside of a Canaanite city. There he had a famous dream, where he saw angels going up and down a ladder that connected earth to heaven. In that dream, God also appears, at the top of the ladder, and makes the same promise to Jacob that God first made to his grandfather, Abraham, and then to Jacob’s father, Isaac: God promises to use Jacob to channel God’s blessing to all the families of the earth.

This is hardly a promise that Jacob deserves. Unlike Abraham, Jacob is not held up as some paragon of virtue; and in the stories about him thus far, we have seen a young man who is a greedy cheat and disrespectful scoundrel. But, he’s apparently a good cook and comes from a wealthy family, making his prospects with his uncle’s family still promising. So, after the dream, Jacob continues on his way—kind of amazed, as we all are, that God would appear to him in that way.

With that as background, we come to week two of our three-part look at Jacob’s transformation. Part two culminates in a 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 may not have been able to hold onto his birthright; but he certainly could hold a grudge.

Although it has now been 14 years since Jacob fled his brother’s wrath and had the dream at Bethel; when Jacob comes to the ford in the Jabbok River—fleeing the wrath of his uncle this time; more on that in a minute—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 context for this story, if you ask me.

Wait...now he’s fleeing his uncle? What’s that about? Let’s rewind the tape a bit. Once Jacob gets to his Uncle Laban’s home in Genesis 29, we see that scheming and deception 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 that allows Jacob to basically steal a bunch of Laban’s flocks. It’s quite the set of stories and by the end it’s not clear whether Laban or Jacob is the greater scoundrel.

Jacob does, however, get the award for the superior intellect; and his last grab is to take what he believes is now his—which is almost all of Laban’s wealth, two of Laban’s daughters, two of their handmaids, the eleven children he has 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, adding not just theft, but idolatry to the family's rap sheet. 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.

Laban gets home a few days later, discovers the theft, and takes off after Jacob. Jacob had a multi-day head start, but Laban catches up after seven days and they have it out—at least verbally. Laban doesn't have a strong hand here; and he has cheated Jacob many times over, a point which Jacob raises. So, the confrontation ends with a deal, sealed in chapter 31 with now the second stone pillar of Jacob's career.

Looking at the pillar and a heap of stones placed around it, Laban says: "The Lord watch between you and me, when we are absent one from the other. If you ill-treat my daughters, or if you take wives in addition to my daughters, though no one else is with us, remember that God is witness between you and me... This pillar is a witness, that I will not pass beyond this heap to you, and you will not pass beyond this pillar to me, for harm." They have a little ceremony, offer a sacrifice, and Jacob now has a boundary that he may not cross going back. That's important because of what is soon to be in front of him.

Laban goes home and Jacob continues his journey forward. It's been more than 14 years since Jacob has had any contact with his twin, but Jacob appears to think Esau will be willing to let bygones be bygones. Money talks, right? 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. And the door behind him has just been closed.

Jacob is in a spot; but he's also resourceful and hatches a plan. 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 Jacob is 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, Jacob spends the day preparing gifts of wealth—totaling 550 livestock—and sends them in waves to meet his brother and the approaching army, each wave preceded by 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.

All that is 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.

Jacob 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 and has continued to lie and cheat even after the dream at Bethel.

Does God's promise still hold, or does it end here? The days of pretending to be his brother, which is what he did to trick his blind father, are over. Unlike Isaac, God is not blind. Jacob 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 tributary river that literally empties itself into the Jordan—as night falls, contemplating how he ended up here, possibly 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 would add 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.

And, for the sake of your spiritual growth, when you find yourself there, if you don't stop and wrestle yourself free, you will be haunted by the space that is neither here nor there until you do.

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, the classical pianist 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 as well as one of the daughters of Abraham's first-born son, Ishmael. Jacob married women within the Hebrew people.

The Bible is never only 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 2:15 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.

Jacob's whole life to this point has been about grabbing all he can for himself. His very name, Jacob, we are told means "heel-grabber" since Jacob, as a twin, was physically born grabbing onto the heel of Esau who was technically born first. He then grabbed Esau's birthright and blessing. He then ran to his uncle's settlement and grabbed everything of value there, too.

In this story, we are shown—both literally and through metaphor—that no matter what blessings God has promised to us; we can't come into possession of those things by grabbing for them. We only get them by emptying ourselves; by giving it all up. And once we've wrestled that into the ground, when the river of our lives empties into the Jordan, we are truly baptized and given a new name to signify our new life among God's people.

In that emptying, we are not destitute; the river still flows. But the job of this river is only to be a channel; to empty what comes to us into the greater river that flows through the city of God. The river is meant to flow through us, not to us; God's blessings aren't meant to be kept; they are meant to be passed along downriver to all the families of the earth.

Back in the ford of the Jabbok, it is dawn. Jacob sets out across the river, but now with a limp. Esau awaits. What happens when they meet is next week's sermon. Amen.