

Not Your Teddy Bear God Genesis 32:22-31
Saint Marks UMC, Charleston, WV – 7th Sunday after Pentecost (July 31,) 2011

22 The same night he got up 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 Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. 25 When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacobs hip 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 So he said to him, What is your name? And he said, Jacob. 28 Then the man said, You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed. 29 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. 30 So Jacob called 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 hip.

After last week's foray into the Gospel of Matthew, today we return to the Jacob story in the First Testament. Where we left off, two weeks ago you will remember, is that Jacob (with his mother Rebekah's aid and counsel) had just tricked his father Isaac into giving him the blessing rightfully due to Esau, the elder brother. Esau came home, discovered the shenanigans, and momma Rachel told Jacob to leave home, and to lie low. Jacob, on the lam, fell asleep with his head on a stone, and dreamed of a huge ladder going from earth all the way into heaven, with angels going up and down its rungs. And he awoke, saying: **Surely God was in this place and I, I did not know it.**

This week we fast forward to the night before Jacob comes face to face with his brother Esau. There's been some stuff that happened ***in the meanwhile***.

Let me hit just a few of the highlights of "***in the meanwhile***." Jacob went to visit his conniving mother's brother – and apparently it was a family trait. He had to work seven years to get the hand in marriage of Laban's daughter, except it turned out to be fourteen years, because in the "wedding bed" when the lights were off and the veil removed, Jacob found that his father-in-law / uncle had done a bait and switch. Instead of getting **Rachel**, whom he loved and whom we are told in scripture was "**graceful and beautiful**," he got her older sister **Leah**, whom is **described** in scripture **as "having lovely eyes."** So he had to work an extra seven years to earn the wife he thought he was getting the first time. (Bigamy was freely practiced then.) So he was gone for ***at least fourteen years***. And there was ***also time spent in the two sisters having a baby-competition***: who could produce the most children (either personally or through the hips of their personal maid), which resulted in **twelve children** being born.

But Jacob ended up being **more than just worn out**, **“in the meanwhile.”** He also accumulated quite a personal fortune, as it was measured in that day – in livestock. But he and his uncle/father-in-law decided to part company. Indeed Jacob had his uncle and mother’s DNA, and some of that personal fortune may have been gained – shall we say – at Laban’s expense. They parted company agreeing that neither would pass by a memorial post into one another’s space ever again. They decided to do that rather than to kill one another.

You’ve got to love these Bible stories. Fully human – not at all prim and proper. And – YET -- still God’s chosen people.

So, here we are, at today’s scripture lesson. Never much of an explorer, no longer welcome in the home of his wives, Jacob returns to the only home he knew. It just also happened to be the home of his twin brother – the brother who stayed home taking care of the aging parents while Jacob ran off with Esau’s blessing to make his fame and fortune.

Home again – to what?

Have you been on the road Jacob traveled?

You did what seemed like a good idea at the time. You’ve not done badly for yourself. And yet, **there’s this nagging Voice that keeps saying:**

⌘ **Is that all there is?**

⌘ **I did it MY WAY, but did I really do it the RIGHT WAY?**

⌘ **What if there really is more to life than all these sheep, goats, cows, and bulls?**

⌘ **I’ve been in control all along, but what good has it really done me?**

⌘ And -- **perhaps, most of all – what’s going to happen to me NOW?**

On his way out of Canann, we remember from two Sundays ago, Jacob had a night time **stairway to heaven experience with God**. That was his **VERTICAL encounter**. But, now, he’s **got to face Esau** – and that’s going to be a **HORIZONTAL encounter**.

Jacob understands that this could be the end of the road for him. He knows, and tries to make **conciliatory** [**GIFT**] [**bribe**] [**SUCKING UP**] plans of action. He is fully aware of just how very, very serious it is.

To his credit, he understands just how serious it is. **And he does not**

- ⊕ **Give up,** nor
- ⊕ **Call in a consultant,** nor
- ⊕ **Try to redefine the conflict before him as a mere difference of opinion.**

This is serious stuff. And he goes on to face it.

But the night before he has to face something else – a wrestling match.

What was this wrestling match?

A **metaphorical wrestling with himself and his life questions?**

A **knock down drag out with a guilty conscience,** maybe?

Was there really some **First Testament era Bruno Sammartino, Hulk Hogan, Rowdy Roddy Piper, Andre the Giant, or Jesse Ventura** that happened along the River Jabbock, **looking for a title, a promoter, or a SPONSOR?**

Well – there are those who want to psychoanalyze it or commercialize it. But some details of the story prevent such explanations in my mind:

- (1) Jacob ended up physically wounded from the event
- (2) Jacob ended up getting a new name
- (3) Jacob ended up getting another blessing.
- (4) Jacob met his match. His conniving and scheming and attempts to always be in control did not matter here. Notice: he asked for a blessing and got a name; he asked for a name and got a blessing.
- (5) And, finally, perhaps most of all – when it was all done, he no longer believed that it was a man with whom he had wrestled; Jacob believed that it was God.

Sometimes – God comes (**as Jesus described**) like a **mother hen gathering her chicks under her wing**.

Sometimes – God comes (**as in our Baptism**) and **claims us as beloved children of God, precious and beautiful to behold**.

Sometimes – God comes and **assures us** that whatever we have done, we are **forgiveable and forgiven** – **if only we will accept that truth**.

AND **SOMETIMES** – God does *not come like a Teddy Bear at all*, but rather like a **wrestler in the night, that just won't let up.**

And when that happens:

- (1) We might end up wounded for life before it's all over.
- (2) We might understand that WE ARE NOT IN CONTROL, regardless of how right we think we are or regardless of how much we think we deserve it.
- (3) We might just understand that sometimes it's not about WINNING; it's just about ENDURING.

None of these experiences with the non-Teddy Bear God do we want to endure, but sometimes they are just the very best thing we need.

Rachel Naomi Remen, a physician who counsels people fighting cancer and other dread diseases told about one patient whose cancer required him to have his leg amputated at the hip in order to save his life. She worked with him for two years before he began to get over his anger and sense of loss. But, she told that he did make progress, and in doing so, decided to try to help others.

In one of his visits to the oncology wing of the hospital, a double mastectomy patient was deep in depression and would not even look up when he came to her bed to try to talk with her. A friend of the woman had left a radio to play music for her, but she ignored it, as well. Desperate to get her attention, he finally unstrapped his prosthetic leg and began dancing around the room on one leg, snapping his finger to the music coming from the radio. She looked up in amazement at this wild display in front of her, and then burst out laughing. She said, "Man, if you can dance, I can sing."

Dr. Remen continued her tale about this man who had taken so long to wrestle out of his melancholy to reclaim life. She recounted how they sat down one session to review their time together. She pulled out pictures she had asked him to draw when they first met. There was one picture where she had asked him to draw what his body felt like. He had drawn the picture of a large vase with a big black crack running from top to bottom. When she showed that picture to him these two year

later, he said that he had not finished that picture. He took a YELLOW CRAYON and drew down the big black mark of the crack. “You see, here – where it is broken – this is where the light comes through. That’s why I need to replace the black crack with yellow light.”

We ALL have our River Jabbock life experiences. We usually think we are ALL ALONE when they come our way. But, we all have our River Jabbock experiences, where it seems like God is anything but a big comfy Teddy Bear. **Jesus had one, too**, in **Gethsemane** and on **Calvary**.

Jacob limped away. Jesus resurrected with nail prints in his hands and a spear wound in his side.

But they came out, WITH JOY IN THE MORNING. And so can we.

Jacob thought he was wrestling with a man. But he awoke realizing that he had wrestled with God.

What he thought was a HORIZONTAL EXPERIENCE turned out to be a VERTICAL EXPERIENCE.

And the crazy thing was –when he had the dreaded encounter with Esau the next day – (we learn from the next chapter -- 33, at verse 10) **Jacob SAW GOD IN ANOTHER MAN; HE SAW GOD IN ESAU’S FACE.**

It is sometimes in our worst experiences – the ones so bad that we walk away wounded – in which we learn how to see God in others’ faces. Jesus said LOVING YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF IS LIKE THE OTHER GREAT COMMANDMENT: LOVE GOD.

How shall we behold the face of God? (as Psalm 42 says in our Call to Worship) Look around you. Look in the midst of human suffering. Look in the midst of human need. Look in the mirror when you feel like God is nowhere around.

Sometimes God is not a comfy feeling Teddy Bear, because sometimes we need something other than a hug.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.