

St Mary of the Harbor

Provincetown, Massachusetts



October 20, 2019

Pentecost 19 C Proper 24

The Very Reverend Terry R. Pannell

Genesis 31: 1-3, 17, 32:3,7, 22-31

Jacob heard that the sons of Laban were saying, "Jacob has taken all that was our father's; he has gained all this wealth from what belonged to our father." And Jacob saw that Laban did not regard him as favorably as he did before. Then the Lord said to Jacob, "Return to the land of your ancestors and to your kindred, and I will be with you."

So Jacob arose, and set his children and his wives on camels; and he drove away all his livestock, all the property that he had gained, the livestock in his possession that he had acquired in Paddan-aram, to go to his father Isaac in the land of Canaan.

Jacob sent messengers before him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom, instructing them, "Thus you shall say to my lord Esau: Thus says your servant Jacob, 'I have lived with Laban as an alien, and stayed until now; and I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, male and female slaves; and I have sent to tell my lord, in order that I may find favor in your sight.'" The messengers returned to Jacob, saying, "We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him." Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed.

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. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." 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." 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. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."



The Fight of Our Life

Ever since the Pilgrims first dropped anchor on the West end of town, countless people have made their way to this little town surrounded by the Atlantic. Many who ended up staying here were looking for a place they could settle down, a place where they could be themselves. Some of us who are not from Provincetown can identify with them.

Back in September, I visited that little town in the hills of North Mississippi I left over forty years ago. Before the end of the first day, Thomas Wolfe's words reminded me that you can't go home again, at least not in the metaphorical sense. You cannot return to the way things were even if you wanted to. You cannot hold onto what once was. That's because people change. None of us is the same person we once were. Yet the memories of all that has been said and done, as well as all that has *not* been said and has been left undone, the good and the bad, remain with us. And no matter where you go, you invariably bring your past along with you, something Jacob discovered while sitting by a river where he was about to face the biggest obstacle in his life.

The Jabbok River was the last place Jacob wanted to be. After falling out of favor with his father-in-law, Jacob read the writing on the wall and knew it was time to leave. Considering the number of bridges he had burned behind him over his lifetime, the question Jacob faced, was where? Where do you go when you've run out of options? To the land of his ancestors and his kindred, was the answer. But there was a problem. You cannot go home again, at least not to the way things used to be.

The long journey to the Jabbok began many years earlier on the day Jacob ran away from home to escape the wrath of his brother Esau. From the day he was born, Jacob had never liked the idea of playing second fiddle to his older sibling. And Jacob did everything he could, using any means available to him to circumvent his second tier position in the family hierarchy. It was bad enough that Jacob had taken advantage of his dimwitted brother to get him to sell his inheritance for a bowl of lentil stew. But then to add insult to injury, Jacob, with a little help from mama, also managed to steal his father Issac's blessing, something that had been reserved for Esau.

Sooner or later the past catches up with everyone and it was Jacob's turn. It happened at that river with a Hebrew name that translates "to empty." It was an accurate description, not of a geographical location but of what was going on inside Jacob.

My guess is that a number of you have spent some time on the banks of the Jabbok River. If you have, know what it is like to be confronted by the past. How many times have the words you have spoken come back to haunt you later on? How many times has a painful memory wandered unexpectedly back into your thoughts? How many times has your past deprived you of peace? How many times have you run away? Not in the literal sense of course. Avoidance is simply a form of running away.

The truth is, we cannot avoid or run away from the past any more than Jacob could. Fight or flight, as the saying goes. Those were Jacob's choices. They are our choices as well.

People run away for all kinds of reasons but fear seems to be the common motivator. Who among us does not avoid confrontation if we can? That was certainly true for Jacob for most of his life but not this time. He was out of options. This time he wasn't just running from his brother. Nor was he running to escape the past. Jacob was running away from the truth about himself. But in the immortal words of Martha and Vandellas, when it comes to the past, there's "nowhere to run, nowhere to hide."

As much as he wanted to, Jacob could not run away from himself. The day of reckoning had arrived and he had to accept that the old ways, the scheming, the self-deceit and the dishonesty would no longer work. And that's when Jacob's struggle began.

Jacob's struggle is our struggle as well. Alone in the darkness, and you are always alone in these struggles, the face off in the battle between fear and self-awareness, between stagnation and transformation, invariably demands an answer to a question. Who are you?

For most of his life, Jacob had been known as a trickster, a deceiver, a usurper. But that was not who Jacob was born to be. God had other plans for him from the beginning. But before Jacob could realize his true destiny as progenitor of the Jewish people; before he could inherit the promise made by God to his grandparents Abraham and Sarah, Jacob he had to first come to terms with his past. Only then could he become who he was meant to be.

The struggle to become our authentic selves is often painful because memories are so personal. Maybe that is why so many of us will go out of our way to avoid the struggle. But struggle we must because we can never really know who we can become until we are first willing to acknowledge who we are. And that requires honesty.

When we confront the truth about ourselves, when we confess the truth *to ourselves*, we place our lives in the hands of God. And that can be a scary place to be. But it is in that struggle we discover the reality that we are not alone. In the struggle, we learn that God does not give up easily. God is persistent. God loves us too much to give up on us.

To his credit, Jacob refused to give up. He stayed in the struggle and discovered something he did not know about himself, namely, that it is not the strength of the opponent but the resilience within the human heart that determines the outcome. And that resilience is a sign of faith.

Faith is not easy though. At least it isn't for me. Maybe that is true for you as well. Faith itself is a struggle.....every day. It also happens to be the key to unlocking that part of us that makes it possible to prevail in life's great struggles. For love, it turns out, is the muscle behind faith. That is what gives faith the advantage. For those of us who one day will find ourselves in the fight of our life, it is reassuring to know that when push comes to shove, love will ultimately prevail.