

**THE NARRATIVES OF OUR FAITH:
TWO STORIES OF TRANSFORMATION**

Sermon preached by Rev. Sarah Segal McCaslin

Genesis 32:22-31; Matthew 14:13-21

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Jacob was our focus last Sunday, and we will stay with him again this week. Already, we have journeyed with him from his homeland to his uncle Laban's land, in flight from his brother and in search of a wife. Deceived by his uncle, Jacob found himself with two wives, instead of the desired one, and 14 years of servitude to his now father-in-law. Jacob is the anti-hero in many regards, the chosen one of God but a man with his fair share of character flaws and dubious dealings. Yet, God, in God's infinite humor and grace, has set the promises of Israel upon this one - blemishes and all. We discovered, through this narrative of our faith, that God's activity is present in persons of all kinds and also in situations of all kinds, including places of scandal and deception. Whether we are aware of God's presence or not, we can be sure that God is there, working towards the good and keeping all promises.

Continuing on within the cycle of Jacob stories in the book of Genesis, the drama continues... Since last week, more deception has taken place, causing Jacob and his new family to flee from Laban, embarking on a new journey towards the very brother Jacob deceived. When we meet Jacob today, he is about to encounter his brother Esau, the one from whom he stole both birthright and blessing. Jacob, having become rich, prepares a lavish gift for his brother, to beg forgiveness and with a desire for the past to become just water under the bridge. The night before the fated meeting, Jacob sends his family and flocks across the River Jabbok, presumably as a safety measure, yet stays alone himself by the banks of the river.

Today's story stands as the climax to the Jacob cycle.¹ All that came before and all that will come after hinge upon this encounter with God. After so many years of trickster-ism and deception, the question is: Will Jacob really change? Will this second encounter with God enact a transformation, or will he remain the same? Very little change occurred when Jacob encountered God at Bethel, just prior to arriving at his uncle's. Jacob remained the same guy, self-reliant to a fault and confident in his ability to manipulate a situation to suit his needs. Jacob said to God at Bethel, "If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God." Jacob is not showing fear or reverence toward God in this divine revelation; Jacob is bartering with God. 'God, if you satisfy my demands, then I will be faithful to you.'

I am so obviously a product of my generation, because in thinking about this overly self-reliant Jacob who always gets his way, Tom Cruise immediately comes to mind. Not Tom Cruise the person, whom I have never met, but Tom Cruise through his movie characters. My mother has a theory that Tom Cruise plays the same character in every movie. She calls this character the Reformed Jerk. This character is self-assured to the point of arrogance, blessed with good looks and a wily nature. He almost always gets his way, by deploying either the good looks or his wits, often at the expense of those around him. Usually, however, his run of good luck is

challenged about a third of the way through the movie, and he must look himself in the mirror and make a change. The Reformed Jerk has a ‘transformation’ of sorts, and thus is rewarded with all he truly desires. But for my mother, and myself, this transformation is wholly unconvincing. The transformed character is just as self-assured and handsome and witty as ever, but added to this mix is a bogus humility that makes the women swoon. He hasn’t really changed at all, only outwitted the fates to his own good fortune. If you don’t believe me, I recommend to you *Top Gun*, *Days of Thunder*, *Rain Man*, and, of course, *Jerry Maguire*.²

So, based on this tangent into pop culture, I am skeptical about Jacob as he sits alone by the river’s edge. When the encounter at Bethel took place about a third of the way through the story, whatever transformation occurred was minimal. Now here we are again, and there is no reason to assume that things will be different this time around. Will Jacob fall into the ‘reformed jerk’ category of *Jerry Maguire* and *Charlie Babbit*, claiming a transformation but hardly changed at all? Or will something deeper be at work? Maybe we have underestimated Jacob, or overlooked his more sensitive, God-fearing side. It is not so far-fetched, as many of us are accomplished at putting on the face of bravado, while quietly shaking in our boots.

In this encounter by the banks of the Jabbok River, God does not come in a dream, speaking matter-of-factly about the promises God is making for Jacob. God comes disguised as a human, in the night, and physically, literally, wrestles Jacob to the ground. God takes no chances that Jacob will get away this time. And Jacob, as we know, will not go down easy. He fights back, showing incredible stamina and skill, to keep the match going through the night. God, disguised in frailer human form, and realizing what a strong opponent Jacob is, decides to make a permanent impression upon this stubborn heel-grabber by knocking his hip out of joint. And still, Jacob does not give up.

It must have been twilight, with the sun on the verge of rising, when God finally speaks. “Let me go, for the day is breaking.” (Presumably, to see the face of God in the light of day would immediately result in death.) Jacob seems not fearful of this possibility, and he once again lives up to his name: “I will not let you go, until you bless me.” And, like in every other situation, Jacob prevails and receives a blessing from God. And along with the blessing, Jacob receives a new name, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, heel-grabber, but Israel, for you have striven with God and humans and have prevailed.”

Something has changed in this encounter, and Jacob is left a different man than when he laid his head on the riverbank the night before. His body is changed, and his identity is changed. He is no longer the one-who-grabs, but one-who-has-striven-with-God. Is he no longer a trickster? It’s hard to know. Though there are no more stories of deception after this event, there is no proof that Jacob’s character is much altered. Is he more fearful and reverent of God this time? Also hard to know, but we do know that from that point on, Jacob carries the name of God in his new identity and bears the mark of the struggle in his limp. No one can deny that God made an impression.

It is worth considering the interpretation of one biblical commentator, who saw Jacob on the shores of the Jabbok as vulnerable and fearful, dreading the prospect of what might take place with his brother the following day, and:

“At the moment of deepest vulnerability for Jacob, God enters into the very depths of the struggle, binding God’s own self to Jacob at that level. In fulfillment of the promise, God will go with Jacob into future dangerous moments. God helps to make Jacob ready for the encounter ahead, arming him with continuing blessings for the journey. Jacob is about to embark on a life-and-death struggle, and he now knows that God the wrestler will be at his side.”³

However you interpret this text, the story remains elusive and Jacob’s transformation mysterious. And that is often the way of transformations. They are not always as dramatic and obvious as the ones we see on those extreme makeover reality shows. Transformation can be subtle, even undetectable to the naked eye. But for the one who has been touched by God, the transformation is indelible.

I wish that there was time enough in worship for us to share with one another the ways in which we have encountered God and been transformed. I know there are as many different stories as there are people in this space. For some of you, your encounter with God may have been as visceral as Jacob’s, involving the presence of God in your waking moments, speaking to you and holding you in a moment of anguish. For others, your encounter with God may have been through another person- a shared experience or conversation that revealed the very presence of God. For others, an encounter with God may have occurred alone and in nature, in solitude and silence. Perhaps some of you have not experienced an encounter with God that you can name, but you feel the closeness of God in your midst all the same.

What we share in these diverse experiences of encounter with God is the quality of transformation that takes place in these moments. We may not receive a new name, but in some form, we have received a new identity. Our lives have been changed by the encounter, and we can not be the same as we were before, no matter how hard we try. Maybe our actions don’t change immediately, and maybe no one notices that there is anything different about us, but we have been marked, touched by God and blessed in the process. Perhaps, like Jacob, we need more than one encounter with God to usher in this transformation. Jacob certainly shares a stubbornness and bullheadedness that is familiar to many of us. We often don’t learn our lesson the first go round, and we are grateful for a God who won’t give up on us when the transformation doesn’t stick the first time.

The Gospels contain, like the Old Testament, many stories of transformation. And the disciples, like Jacob, are notorious for requiring multiple encounters with God before recognizing the experience of God-among-us. The story we read in Matthew this morning is a story of collective encounter with God and transformation, for the disciples and for the people gathered on that hillside.

Jesus was grieving the death of John the Baptist in a deserted place when the crowds began to gather. Moved by compassion for the people, Jesus left his prayerful place and joined the crowds, moving among them and healing those who were sick. The sick were transformed bodily, just as those who witnessed the healing were transformed spiritually. Such holy ground was that shoreline by the lake, where the sick and bereaved and struggling gathered, that no one got up to move when the hour became late.

It must have been twilight, with the sun on the verge of setting, when the disciples came to Jesus and told him to send the crowds away. Maybe the disciples hadn't seen what Jesus was doing, or maybe they were so caught up in other thoughts that they missed the power of what was taking place, because they seemed surprised by Jesus' response to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." And when they replied that they had nothing but five loaves and two fish, Jesus intervened (as God intervened with Jacob in the dawn twilight by another shore) and set about to transform those meager offerings to a feast of such abundance that there were twelve baskets of leftovers. And those who ate the meal were transformed by the power and presence of God among them.

The similarity between this story and the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is evident. Christ took the bread and blessed it, and broke it, and gave it to the people of God, who ate and were satisfied. In just a moment, we will take part in this transformation. We will bless the bread and break it, and we will pass it among us. And it will be enough, and it will satisfy us. And we will be transformed into the body of Christ together, nourished and sustained by the sacrament. Communion is an act of encounter, an act of conversion and transformation, and the creation of a new identity. We can not take communion without the risk of transformation.

Once we've encountered God, or, more realistically, each time we encounter God (in the sacraments, in worship, in relationships, in nature, in solitude) we are changed for good. We can't go back to the way we were before. Jacob couldn't; the disciples couldn't; and we can't. We can leave the crowds when we are frightened or vulnerable or tired or fed up and find ourselves alone on the edge of the water, but God will find us there and draw us back. How will God find us? We are easy to locate because we have been marked. We carry the indelible image of our Baptism upon our forehead, identifying us as one of God's own. God gave us this identity, even before we were born, and we will carry it with us through this life and beyond. We may forget it, and we may think that the mark has faded due to time or our own wanderings away from the one who marked us, but the transformation has been accomplished completely, once and for all.

¹ Soards, M., Dozeman, T., & McCabe, K. *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, After Pentecost*. (Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN, 1992).

² www.imdb.com

³ *The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume I* (Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN, 1995).