

“Pastor Jeff’s Favorite OT Lesson”

Genesis 32:22-32

Hyattstown Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

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READ THE PASSAGE

In seminary, our Old Testament courses were taught by Brevard Childs, one of the most esteemed scholars of Old Testament history and theology. Many summers following graduation, I would visit with Brevard and his wife Ann at their Chautauqua cottage, where he would immerse himself in research and writing for his academic duties at Yale.

In one class, Dr. Childs gave us the freedom to use our imagination for the interpretation of any Old Testament passage of our choosing. My classmate Jerry and I decided to produce a short movie portraying Jacob wrestling with God at the River Jabbok. Our friend Ron, an outstanding athlete and daily jogger, was the ideal candidate for the starring role. We filmed Ron spraining his ankle as he jogged, and that constituted Jacob’s hip injury causing him to limp following the wrestling match: “Jacob said, ‘I have seen God face-to-face, and I am still alive’; so he named the place Peniel. The sun rose as Jacob was leaving Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip.” We even filmed Ron as the sun was rising! Jerry and I never made it to Hollywood, but we got a passing grade from Brevard Childs!

Citing this Genesis passage in his book entitled “Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments”, Dr. Childs states: “Often in the Old Testament the biblical narratives recount the strange, hidden working of God in human life.” I had no idea when fulfilling a seminary class assignment that some twenty years later I would be experiencing my own version of the Jacob story, living a narrative of the strange, hidden working of God in my life. **That is why Genesis 32:22-32 is your pastor’s favorite Old Testament lesson.**

Let's recall more about Jacob.

Jacob and his twin brother Esau were the grandsons of Abraham and Sarah. Their parents were Isaac and Rebekah. If God had not intervened when Abraham was prepared to offer Isaac as a sacrifice, to prove his faithfulness, we would not know about Jacob and Esau. Esau was born first, but Jacob was born "holding tightly to the heel of Esau", as it is reported in the 25th Chapter of Genesis. In fact, according to the scriptures, the boys fought with each other even while in Rebekah's womb, and that only foretold how competition would characterize the relationship as they matured.

Isaac favored adventurous Esau, and Jacob knew it. Rebekah favored self-confident Jacob, and Esau knew it. One time, in a fix, Esau sold his birthright to Jacob. Later, with the help of his mother Rebekah, Jacob fraudulently acquired Isaac's blessing, as if he were Esau. So Esau, having lost to Jacob both his birthright and his father's blessing, planned to kill Jacob.

Over time, and through a series of events, Jacob built a life with Rachel, and became very wealthy. He hoped to make peace with his twin Esau, and was on his way to do so, when he and his entourage came to the banks of the Jabbok River. Jacob sent gifts and peace messengers to Esau, but felt threatened when he learned that Esau was approaching with "four hundred men".

For the safety of his family, and the security of his possessions, Jacob left everyone and everything on one bank of the Jabbok, and crossed alone to the other side for the night. There, just before daybreak, he wrestled with a man, and prevailed. The man blessed Jacob with the new name, "Israel". "Israel" is interpreted as "God struggles", or "the struggle between humans and God". Ultimately, the life-long feuding of Jacob and Esau concluded, and they were reconciled.

While producing a short movie in divinity school, I had no idea that one day I would be experiencing my own version of the Jacob story. But my professor Brevard Childs is right: "Often in the Old Testament the biblical narratives recount the strange, hidden working of God in human life."

What for me was the River Jabbok, thirty years ago this month, was the St. Croix River separating Minnesota and Wisconsin, 30 miles east of Minneapolis/St. Paul. Night was approaching, and I had driven all day from Chicago, where I had left my family and most of my possessions safe and secure at home. I crossed alone to the other side of the river, as I did on many subsequent occasions over the next four years. It had been an emotional, gut-wrenching departure that morning, because my teen-age daughter was in crisis, my three other kids were in various stages of transition, and my marriage was well on its way to falling apart. Waiting on the other side of the river were new responsibilities as executive minister for a conference of 160 local churches and over 200 clergy. Waiting on the other side of the river was six months of living in a dormitory room at the United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities. Waiting on the other side of the river was no one who knew of my heavy heart.

I wrestled with God that night, and many nights in the months and years that followed. Gradually, I prevailed, with the understanding of a dear, veteran administrative assistant, with the collegiality of a competent staff, with the friendship of a few clergy confidants, with the aid of professional therapy. In fact, I realized, having wrestled with God and in some measure prevailed, a self-confident but wounded executive minister could more sensitively serve others wrestling with God and struggling to prevail. I had seen God—and God had seen me—face to face. Another beloved professor, Henri Nouwen, maintains that a minister can only help others deal with problems if he is willing to go beyond his professional role and leave himself open as a fellow human being with his own wounds and suffering.

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There is more to the story, just as there was with Jacob.

Around the same time that I was wrestling with God on the other side of the St. Croix River, I became aware that the relationship with my older brother Jim was becoming strained, even dissolving. We had always been competitive, with different personalities. We had pursued different careers, developed different worldviews. But Jim had ceased initiating communication of any kind. Our families were not visiting with one another. Something was not right.

I asked if we could have whatever conversation we needed to have together, and fortunately, Jim agreed. I asked if our sister Elly could be with us, and again, Jim agreed. Elly and I drove to where Jim lived. We made some progress in that first meeting, and then more progress in a second meeting. It turned out that the conversation that Jim really needed to have would have been with our mom and dad, both of whom had died long before. Jim had the experience that our parents were disappointed in him, while I was the favored son. I realized more fully than ever before that he was right. Figuratively speaking, our parents, especially our mother, had awarded me the blessing and the birthright. I realized more fully than ever before the hurt which my brother harbored.

By the Grace of God, wrestling with God and with each other. we prevailed. Face to face, we sought and found peace together. Like Jacob and Esau, Jim and I reconciled, and recovered a brotherly relationship until his death.

My good friend Brevard Childs, before he died, wrote: "Often in the Old Testament the biblical narratives recount the strange, hidden working of God in human life." I had no idea when fulfilling a seminary class assignment that some twenty years later I would be experiencing my own version of the Jacob story, living a narrative of the strange, hidden working of God in my life.

But, that is why Genesis 32:22-32 is your pastor's favorite Old Testament lesson.

If it speaks in any way to you—crossing rivers alone, wrestling with God, and reconciling relationships--perhaps it will become one of yours.