

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, August 6, 2017
Rev. Andrew Reid
Genesis 32:22-31; Matthew 14:13-21
“Unexpected blessing”

Our texts today both tell stories of unexpected blessing. I want to focus today just on the Old Testament and the story of Jacob.

We are told more about the life and character of Jacob than of just about anyone else in Scripture. Today’s text from Genesis 32 is the eighth chapter in a row to tell his story, and it doesn’t end there.

It all starts before he was born: we are told that he and his twin brother Esau struggled together in their mother’s womb, and that Jacob was born grasping Esau’s heel. We are told that the brothers grew into very different people: Esau was a hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. We are told that both brothers were subjects of their parents’ favouritism – Isaac favoured the rugged outdoorsman, while Rebekah favoured the quieter stay-at-home. We are told that Jacob used his cooking skills to take advantage of his brother, and made him promise to give Jacob the birthright that should rightfully have been Esau’s. Indulging her favouritism, Rebekah then helped Jacob take advantage of his father, and got him the blessing that Esau had given away. And then she helped Jacob run away to escape his brother’s wrath.

Then there seems to be a change. Sleeping under the stars at Luz, Jacob dreams of a ladder reaching from earth to heaven, and angels going up and down. He awakes to the realisation that the LORD was in that place and he had not known it. And he makes a vow that *“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, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you.”*

On the face of it, that seems like a decision to make a fresh start, to live a new, more godly way of life, though it was certainly hedged around with several conditions. But the first event of this new, more godly life: he meets Rachel and falls in love with her, and commits to work for her father for seven years, in order to marry her at the end. But when the seven years are up, Jacob – the trickster, the conman – finds himself the victim of a trick. He ends up married not to Rachel but to her sister, Leah. But, romantic that he is, he works for another seven years in order to marry Rachel.

But the old pre-Bethel Jacob comes to the surface again, and there follows another piece of trickery. When the time comes for Jacob and his father-in-law Laban to go their separate ways, they agree to split the herds which had done well under the 14 years of Jacob’s care. But they

each want to keep the best of the animals, so they each try to trick the other into ending up with the less valuable animals. Jacob wins, and Laban ends up with the feebler animals.

And Jacob has to flee again, this time to escape the wrath of Laban's sons who were furious at the way he had treated their father. They meet up, there is a confrontation, but in the end, Jacob and Laban agree to get along – interestingly enough it's for the sake of the children and grandchildren – and seal the agreement with covenants and gifts.

But that's not the end of the story. Jacob's brother Esau appears again, at the head of a small army, still seeking revenge. Jacob takes precautions to protect himself and his family and his flocks. He took his wives, his maids, his children, and everything that he had, and sent them across the ford of the Jabbok. And it is as he waited there alone, that a man wrestles with him until daybreak. Who was the man? When Jacob tries to get him to identify himself, all he gets is a very enigmatic reply.

Is he a symbol of life itself, with all the twists and turns that Jacob has passed through and the struggles he has faced? Or does he represent Jacob's conscience? Is Jacob so emotionally and spiritually wracked with guilt and shame over the things he had done, and the way he had lived, and what had been done to him, that his demons appear in physical form? Or was he simply a man, an outlaw, someone who was willing to violate the ancient customs of desert hospitality so far as to attack a vulnerable, solitary traveller? Could he have been an angel? Or was he indeed, as Jacob concluded in the end, none other than the LORD? After all, Jacob renamed the place Peniel, which means the face of God.

And, as others did who had an encounter with God, he left that place with a new name. No longer Jacob, he is now and ever since known as Israel, a name that James Newsome translates as "God-Scrapper." And, with profound symbolism, the sun rose on him as he left that place.

Was he a changed man? Read on in Genesis and the story becomes a bit confusing. Stories seem to be repeated, and we seem to be told different versions of the same stories. There are confrontations, conflicts, reconciliations, a rape and terrible bloody vengeance, and the whole Joseph story.

But they seem to show a different God-Scrapper, maybe a wiser, certainly a more peaceful, man. So his wrestling that night at Peniel does seem to have changed him. Maybe we should expect nothing less from an encounter with God than that he should be changed?

But there is something else about that encounter with God. It's in the closing words of the story of the struggle: the sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, *limping because of his hip*. Jacob may have been blessed that day, even if he had to struggle for the blessing. He may indeed have emerged from the struggle a changed man, a better man. A new day may have dawned as the sun rose upon him. But that encounter with God left him limping, bearing in his physical frame the marks of his struggle.

Can we draw any conclusions from Jacob's experience that might shed light on our spiritual journey? Perhaps we can.

Sometimes, we must face the demons that we all carry around with us, and wrestle with them. Sometimes, we must do it alone. Sometimes, we will only emerge from the struggle by hanging on tight and refusing to give in. Sometimes, we only receive the blessing after the battle. Sometimes, the battle will leave us limping, bruised, scarred, marked and changed for ever.

But as it did for Jacob, a surprising blessing is still a blessing, and can result in a fresh new start. For which, thanks be to God!