

March 7, 2010
Third Sunday in Lent, Year C
The United Church of Northfield
Genesis 32: 3-31, Luke 13: 6-9

"Jacob: The Man Who Sought a Second Chance"
A First-Person Sermon
Preached Extemporaneously in Costume
Rev. Roger L. Brown

Character Introduction

Good morning! It's good to see you here today! Let me introduce myself. As you might guess from the bulletin cover, I'm Jacob. I've come back from the distant past to share with you a special event in my life. In fact, it was a real turning point for me. Well, when you get to know me, you'll find out that I've had quite a number of turning points. I just seem to get to one point in life, and then God sends me in a different direction! Has anything like that ever happened to you?

The Story up to Now

As you might remember, I've had a pretty tumultuous life. Even though I've done very well, and have two wives, servants and hundreds of animals, it hasn't been easy. So, now let me tell you something about my family and perhaps you will remember some famous stories about me?

My father's name was Issac, and he had two sons. The oldest was Esau. I'm the youngest, but we are almost twins. Born just moments apart. In spite of being born at the same time, we're very different. My brother Esau is has lots of hair on his chest. I don't have any. I'm smooth. I grew up in Rahoboth -that's in the southern part of Israel. Anyway, growing up into the early 20's I was a very emotional person. As the younger son, I always felt I had been cheated. As you may know, the older son gets the inheritance. Now that didn't seem fair to me. I know it was the tradition of our ancient culture, but I didn't think it was fair.

First, I made a deal with my brother Esau, to sell his birthright. Then,, with my mother, Rebecca's help, I stole my father Issac's blessing from my brother Esau. My mother helped me put on a hairy animal skin, so when my blind father touched me, I'd feel hairy like Esau. It worked! My father gave me his blessing. Well, that sure felt good! I always felt like my Father didn't care about me. (I guess you could say I grew up in a dysfunctional family?)

You wouldn't be surprised to discover that when my brother, Esau found out I'd cheated him out of his Father's blessings, he was roaring mad! So, I figured the best thing I could do was get out of town! And go somewhere far away!

So, I went to Harran, in the far northern part of Israel, north of the Sea of Galilee.

There I met one of the chief patriarchs of the region. His name was Laban. He had two daughters – there was Rachael – she was beautiful and it was love at first sight! Then there was Leah – she was the oldest daughter – she was kind of plain, and she was almost blind. Well I wanted to marry Rachael, so Laban, said, work for me 7 years and you can have her. But after 7 years, Laban tricked me, and gave me Leah instead! What a bum deal! I had to work another 7 years to get Rachael. I sure felt cheated. I think I know how Esau felts when I cheated him out of his blessing! At least Laban gave me a second chance. He offered me another way to marry Rachael.

The Three Questions – Again!

Now I had two wives, and my flocks of animals were growing bigger. This in spite of the problem with Laban trying to cheat me out of the best animals. He gave me the stripped and spotted animals. I began to wonder if I'd married into another dysfunctional family? I guess no family is ever quite perfect?

Now that I'd begun to mature. I was a husband twice, and owned a lot of animals. All this matter of managing the family household, meant I had to give up sowing my wild oats. As I looked back on my life, I began to feel very guilty about my relationship with my brother, Esau. God knew how I felt too. So God told me to return to Haran and see if I could patch things up with my brother.

Perhaps, I thought, God was giving me a second chance. A second chance at a healthier, more meaningful relationship with my brother. This was going to be a very big step. In those days, you know, I couldn't just jump on a bus and pay my brother a quick visit. O, no, I had to take everything along with me!

Preparing for a Second Chance

When I began to think this whole matter through, I realized that I faced three questions with my life. Where was I on my life's journey? How did I get to this point? And where was I going with my life? What sort of person did I want to be? What sort of person did I want to become? I know I didn't want the heritage of a dysfunctional family control my life! I think I've come to a point where I don't always feel like I'm in second place. I'm not longer the cunning, scheming Jacob of my youth.

I also kept reminding myself, that when I follow God, his way leads to unexpected blessings. If I hadn't taken God's suggestion and gone north to Haran, I'd never have met Rachael and even plain Leah. (I found out Leah wasn't that bad after all!)

So, now I'm on the journey to reconciliation.

Prelude to Reconciliation

So I took my animals, my two wives, and my servants and journeyed northeast toward Haran to meet my brother. I had crossed the Jordan when I learned that my brother Esau, was coming down from Haran to meet me. I had been feeling very hopeful about a possible reconciliation with my brother until I learned that he was coming with 400 men. Then I got very worried that perhaps he was still angry with me and wanted to wipe me out. I think I'm pretty good at strategy. So just in case, my brother is going to make trouble, I divided my holdings in to two groups. I sent one group over the Jabbok, and kept the other group with me. Then I decided to get a good nights rest before crossing the Jabbok the next day.

The Wrestling Match

In the middle of the night I encountered this man who challenged me to a wrestling match and told me I should not go on to meet my brother.

As we wrestled, this stranger reminded me that my brother had been hurt very badly by me. He reminded me that Esau had been hurt very badly. He reminded me also that when I get to Haran, I will arrive and I will feel like a stranger, he said. He reminded me that the people of Haran will not remember me, and that when I left, I had a very bad reputation.

But, I think the angel is just testing me. I argued with him all night. I told him that I'm a different person now. I have changed. The angel said, "If your a new man, prove it when you get back to Haran. Prove it." Finally, as dawn was breaking, the Angel called it quits.

Then it dawned on me that this man was more than a man. So I asked for his blessing.

A New Identity

Finally, at the very end I received my blessing.

Then this stranger – this stranger that I now believe was God, said he would give me a new name. It was a name which changed both my sense of identity and my sense of purpose. My new name is Israel. This name came out of my experience. It means in Hebrew, one who has contended with God and won.

Final Reflections and Commendations

What have I learned from my life experience so far? I've learned to be open to new directions in life. I've learned to count my blessings when life is challenging and I think everything is going wrong. I've learned to listen to God for guidance, and that is ok to argue with him. That wrestling match by the Jabbok, was, if you will, a long night's argument with God. I've learned that family life can always be a challenge. Each family member is unique, and it is commitment that keeps the relationship going. I've learned to be open to renewing and old relationship and to ask God's help to do that renewing.

Commendations

So, listen carefully for the still small voice of God. Your journey may not cross rives, but your journey may cross into a new territory of life experience. Remember to say thank you God!

Thanks for listening to my story!

Amen.