

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

A Sermon Preached at the Larchmont Avenue Church

Rev. Dr. Bill Crawford

Encountering Faith

The passages from scripture this Lord's Day reflect on spiritual transformation in a time of crisis. [We read in the Book of Genesis that] Jacob goes to a solitary place as he awaits a showdown with his brother Esau, whom he has cheated out of his father's blessing. And [in the account from Matthew] Jesus, in the wake of the death of John the Baptist – his cousin – “retreats [we read] to a deserted place all by himself.”

Both Jesus and Jacob find themselves at spiritual crossroads in which they must choose the next steps of their journey. They step out of the way, off to the side, into moments of solitude, reflection and retreat.

The Jacob story has been always been compelling to me around vacation time, when our family is on the road, and we're traveling, in different places. As I am an early riser, I love to get up at dawn, or even before dawn, and explore wherever we are – while everyone in my family is still asleep.

As we were on Cape Cod two weeks ago, true to form, I was eagerly awake and out the door on my mountain bike just before sunrise.

Down the road from where we were staying in the town of Brewster, I found my way to a beach, and looking out to the north and west, I could see far across Massachusetts Bay. Ordinarily, it was a great expanse of water. Only there was hardly any water. It was low tide. The dry, sandy beach gave way to wet sand, which -- because the tide was out -- stretched for hundreds of yards.

And so I left my bike, and walked out, across that great expanse. I walked for what seemed like a mile. Far back on the beach, I could hardly make out my bike, where I had locked it. Along the way under my feet, there were shallow pools and rivulets of water. Lots of marine life: small fiddler crabs, clams and snails just under the surface of the sand, as I touched some with my toes.

I realized that I was walking in an area that was surely covered with water when the tide was high -- probably over my head! So when I started to notice that those rivulets of water seemed to be turning in, flowing toward the beach, then I thought that heading back to the shore was a good idea. But not until I got to the water's edge, out where the wet sandy flats on which I had been walking dropped off, and the bay really became a bay. That far out, the water became different. Little waves were crashing a bit. I was into water that was now up to my ankles. I had made it to the point I had hoped to be. I beheld the beauty of it all, God's creation, to be sure. And then a hearty wave came up a bit higher and splashed across my knees. I counted it as a blessing. [And then I made my way back.]

In the bible, Jacob arrives at a blessing. On a journey himself with his family, he comes to the water's edge at a river named Jabbok, he goes off to reflect. He's coming from different, disparate directions and circumstances. His quest is for a “just a little time to think and plan a strategy.”

A ways back, in time and distance, Jacob has been at odds with his brother over the family inheritance – actually, he swindled his brother. And here, at the Jabbok, Jacob knows that his brother Esau is literally on his trail. Esau is tracking Jacob down. That may be why Jacob keeps his family on the other side of the stream with “everything they had” as the scripture reads, so as not to have harm come upon them.

Surely, Jacob must reflect on what he must do next. There he is, alone. It’s a dark night of the soul. The scene and setting might be one of great natural beauty, but life appears to have caved in on Jacob. The currents of discord have come crashing; and much of this was his own doing.

There in the night he encounters the Messenger of God - the Angel - and Jacob wrestles through the darkness of the night. He is determined in his desperate persistence to hang on to God, to pursue the truth, whatever the cost.

And as he does so, he receives blessing. He finds a new perspective on himself, on his purpose in life, on his relationship with others, and the peace to live with the mysteries of God.

Jacob asks for a blessing. But first, the angel asks him his name. Jacob, the name, means “trickster.” Jacob knows that, and he knows what all of that behavior has meant along the long road of his life, that is now closing in on him.

But then the blessing comes in the form of a *new* name. The angel says: “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but now you shall be Israel, for you have wrestled with God and with humans, and have prevailed.” “Israel” is the new name, meaning “God wrestler.” And to be in such close contact with God is a blessing.

Jacob’s self-identification is: “I am Jacob, the trickster, the gamester.” And it leads to a discovery of a new name and a new identity.

Jacob, in giving his name, gives his confession. The one who always sought the easy way out, the cutting of the corners, deceptions and duplicity, the pursuit of the biggest return at the greatest expense of those closest, only to skip town and leave them in the dust – Jacob, for once persists in relationship and encounter . . . with God. His persistence gains him a larger self, self-understanding and blessing, with a new name: He becomes Israel, the God-wrestler who has “striven with God and prevailed.”

How do we wrestle with God, with the matters in our life? What is it, with which we wrestle? Decisions? Direction? The difficult ones in our lives? Personalities, situations? Loss? The questions of why? Evil? War? Suffering?

Jacob, comes to that place of solitude and time, to reckon – not without a tussle – he names himself, for who he is and who he has been, despairing, anxious – you can imagine such a scene, literally, figuratively – wrestling with conscience, with God.

And where do we find God? . . . In those places, where our truest selves are. Where we the questions and the struggle of our being reside. Where we can’t hide or cover over, or connive or compromise. Beyond the places and the positions of our own doings and dealings, God is there . . . God is here present all the while.

It's just that Jacob, as do we, does all sorts of things to ignore or avoid, or circumvent, designing or defending his ways . . .

I imagine God must be pretty amused with us sometimes, considering all the things we do, heaping all that importance on things -- as we do them -- and on our maneuverings related to them. Jacob is all about himself . . . And the story of Jacob is all that to the max, to the extreme, and even to the faults . . . Along the way, his story allows us to recognize that stuff in our own humanity.

Jacob's solitude, that space he's finally arrived at, affords him that time, and that encounter. Such time, for solitude, is a really an important ingredient of the life of faith. We should be religious about such time. "Be still and know that I am God," read the words of the Psalm. I hope you can find that time in these summer days -- What, when might that be? Those moments of retreat, apart from, separate from whatever else-- if you haven't yet, I hope you will make that a feature in your life, sometimes. Here at LAC we will be talking more about spirituality and solitude in the time ahead.

For Jesus, that solitude and retreat, as it was for Jacob, by the water's edge -- was a window as well into his inner life. John, his cousin and spiritual advisor, had just been killed. That moment of retreat for him, was a discerning space -- which he took to heart -- from which he directed himself all the more to the calling of compassion for those who were hungry of body mind and spirit . . .

For Jacob, Jesus, you, me . . . The place we gather, coming together with all that is upon us, is God's presence. Here. With the questions we bring, the failures we confess and the celebrations we savor, we encounter God, and God's blessing is upon us . . . and in the communion we share, in Jesus Christ. Amen.