

Genesis 32:22-32
Romans 9:1-5

Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost
Midway Presbyterian Church
August 20, 2023

Jabbok Crossing

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

Our Old Testament lesson today carries forward the story of a brother who had fled from his twin brother Esau's wrath at the loss of his birthright, only to encounter the eternal God of all creation at a place to be named Bethel. There in a dream Jacob saw a ladder or stairway between heaven and earth. Now after twenty years, he is about to re-enter the land of promise at a river ford. As Jacob prepares to meet Esau, he has another life-changing encounter. Listen to these words from Genesis 32:22-32 . . .

Introduction to the Epistle Lesson

In our Epistle lesson from Romans 9, the Apostle Paul wrestles with the question of how the inclusion of the Gentiles within the people of God affects the destiny of Israel. For the Gentiles had received the gospel more warmly than the Jews. In fact, many Jews had outright rejected Jesus and his message. Listen to these words from Romans 9:1-5 . . .

Sermon

Some years ago a man in his sixties said, "I was born in the month that World War II ended and the atomic age began. My generation has lived all its life with fears from the past and doubts about the future. And that's no way to live!" True enough, but his was not the first generation to live like that. In fact, there is something of a case that can be made for a little healthy fear, and even some wholesome doubt. Angelo Patri, at about the time the First World War ended, observed, "Education consists in being afraid at the right time."

There's an old Aesop fable which describes a lion and a goat quarreling at a water hole as to which should drink first. There was ample room for them to drink together, but they argued still over precedence. They were on the verge of fighting when, looking up, they saw vultures circling overhead, waiting for the battle and its outcome. So, says the fable, they decided to drink together!

A woman was approached by a minister in regard to her becoming a member of the church. Her response, "I would like to join, but first I want to resolve all my doubts." With that mindset she will never join the church. Some doubts (even for long-time church members) will never be resolved, at least not in this life.

In 49 B.C. Julius Caesar found himself at the Rubicon, the river that stood between him and the future. He had his doubts and his troops had their fears. But then those famous words: "The die is cast." And his army marched through the shallow river. What do we do when we come to our Rubicon, when we are up against a river of doubt or fear?

Some 1500 years before Caesar crossed the Rubicon, a wandering tribesman named Jacob crossed the Jabbok, a tributary to the Jordan River. He too entered history, though with much greater significance for future generations than Julius Caesar.

The story of Jacob and his twelve sons is prominent in the first book of the Bible. In fact, half the book of Genesis is about this man Jacob. Jacob had fled from his brother, Esau, after stealing the blessing that rightfully belonged to Esau as the firstborn son. He wants to go home, but can he?

At some point we all leave home. We leave behind the life that was. We move out of familiar ways and places. Sometimes this is a welcome move and other times, not so much. Growing up or growing old are both a process of leaving home. Other times the circumstances

of life dictate a move; a hurricane, a fire, a decline in health, a death, a divorce, a job transfer, going off to school.

Over and over throughout the Old Testament God promises to bring his people home, to a new land, the promised land. You and I are heirs to that promise. Jacob is an heir to that promise, a promise that was first made to his grandfather, Abram. Sometimes that promise may be all that sustains us.

This new home, the promised land, is more than a physical place or a geographical location. It is a spiritual home of wholeness, healing, and peace. It houses love and union with God, neighbor, and self. The journey home is not easy or without struggle. To the contrary, the journey home always brings us to the River Jabbok.

On his journey Joseph first came to a barren mountain place, he lay down and slept. And through a dream, God spoke to Jacob, and Jacob discovered that God was with him, and that God had included him in his plans. Through Jacob God would continue his covenantal promise to bless Israel, and through Israel all the families of the earth.

So now Jacob arrives at the Jabbok. Twenty years have passed since he had fled from Esau with a stolen blessing from their father, Isaac. Faced with the prospect of meeting up with his brother, who might still seek revenge, Jacob finds himself at a turning point: he can face up to what may await him or he can turn and run. To cross over the river meant to visit this brother whom he had so deeply wronged. It meant he had to seek some sort of reconciliation. It meant he had to deal with old memories and past fears—his father's favoritism toward Esau, his brother's greater physical ability, his own conniving. No wonder doubts and fears haunted Jacob. Alone in the dark of night, Jacob is afraid of going forward. But before he can hope to be reconciled with his brother, he must deal with his doubt and fear, and ultimately with God.

And there at the Jabbok he encountered a mysterious stranger with whom he wrestled all night long. He would not let the stranger go until he blessed him. In the aftermath, Jacob came to a stunning conclusion: that he had wrestled with God. And in the outcome he came to believe that God knows him and all his faults, but accepts him anyway, that he is important to God and that God still has something for him to do with his life. In the wrestling, Jacob is changed again. God reshapes his character so that he is able to live into the promised destiny of Israel. Jacob's transformation deserves a new name. No longer will he be called Jacob but Israel, indicating that "God strives for his people." The stranger refuses to be named. God has come so close, yet there is still a great mystery. Nonetheless, Jacob goes forward—blessed, wounded, but transformed for good.

Jacob's twelve sons will form twelve tribes and his descendants will be known as the "children of Israel." And one day, in the fullness of time, a distant descendent named Jesus will choose twelve men. He will teach them. He will lead them. And before long he will die on a cross for us and our salvation—for the salvation of all.

But what we want to note in our Genesis story today is this: In spite of conflict and struggle, Jacob crossed the river and got on with his life. In spite of foibles and follies, God was able to use him in his purposes. Wrestling at a river crossing, Jacob discovered that God was present even in the midst of his fears and doubts. Thereby was he able to face and deal with things dangerous, difficult, and painful.

Truth be told, fear is part of life. To be sure there is a kind of fear that keeps us from becoming what we might, a fear that paralyzes the will, that stymies creativity, that is an enemy and an intruder upon our lives. But there is also a useful form of fear. And the Bible recognizes it. For example, in both Psalms and Proverbs we read, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." (Ps. 111:10, Prov. 9:10)

And it's that sort of fear that we humans need to value and respect. Rather like Jacob, people of different races, or religions, or nationalities still drag around all sorts of old and sordid memories. We see it especially in the Middle East, but also in antisemitism and prejudice in America. There is anger over past hurts. A scapegoat is sought. The vultures circling overhead are ignored. These people fear the wrong things. But fear is not the enemy; it should be a friend; it could bring people to their senses.

Yes, in each of us there is something of that sort of thing. We dredge up memories of the past. We hold some grudge against a parent, or some fault against a spouse, or some displeasure toward a child. A grudge is a heavy burden to carry. We ought to fear what has happened to us. And let fear bring us to our senses and to our God.

The story of Jacob at the Jabbok reminds us that God is not always found in the bubbling mountain stream, nor in the quiet grandeur of an October sunset. Sometimes God is met in the throes of a drug addict struggling to be free, or in a painful divorce proceeding, or in a person trying to come to terms with a business that has gone bad, or in a nation dealing with terrorists, tyrants, and threats, or a church dealing with a declining membership.

Human imagination is a wondrous thing. With it we can conjure up nightmares or we can create daydreams. By the grace of God, at the Jabbok River, Jacob began to turn his fears into opportunities. In the Gospel lesson from Matthew 14 two weeks ago, we saw how Jesus had compassion for human hunger and sickness, and how he turned the disciples' doubts into enough food to feed a multitude.

The Biblical men and women were not without doubt. But by the Spirit of God, they were enabled to live by faith, not by certainty. And it does take a leap of faith to cross the river of doubt and get on with your life.

A news account told of a father who had plunged into one of the Great Lakes to save his infant son from drowning. That seems hardly remarkable, until we learn that the man did not know how to swim. But he had such love for his child that he took the risk and jumped in anyway. In his love for his son he overcame his fears and doubts.

Some of us may doubt that Midway Presbyterian Church can provide a buffer against the constant changes people face in the world today. That it can provide an alternative to a culture indifferent or even hostile toward God. Some doubt their church can continue to provide effective ministry and mission, witness and service, worship, education, fellowship, and proper care of our buildings and grounds. If so, let us bring our doubts before God and seek his guidance and his blessing.

My friends, may the same God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, may he enable us to wrestle with our doubts and fears, to know his presence, his care, his blessing, his transforming love and power. So that we can cross the river of fear and doubt and get on with our lives and the life of our church.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.