

August 6, 2023 Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church
Genesis 32:22-32
"God's Hustler"
Douglas T. King

The New Testament may give us the glorious stories of the Gospels, but it is the Old Testament which gives us the greatest characters of the Bible. Jacob rightfully belongs near the top of the list of intriguing Old Testament characters. He was small but tough and wily, picture an amalgam of Humphrey Bogart characters, perhaps Fred C. Dobbs from "Treasure of the Sierra Madre" and Philip Marlowe from "The Big Sleep."

Born the twin of Esau, he came out of his mother's womb grasping the heel of his older brother. Jacob was a hustler since the day he was born. He hustled Esau out of his birthright as the elder brother with some fast talk and a simple bowl of lentil stew. And then he stole Isaac's blessing of Esau by dressing up like his brother and fooling his near-sighted father. To avoid the wrath of his cheated brother Jacob took his act on the road to a distant land.

When he was on the run, fearful and escaping his brother, Jacob was visited by God in a dream promising him a vast multitude of offspring which will be a blessing to the entire world. But, during his exile Jacob did not stop his grifting ways. He often matched wits with his shady father-in-law Laban in hustler-showdowns over cattle. When he had bested Laban to the point of rage, Jacob had no choice but to flee once more.

When we join the action, Jacob has sent his entire household before him to appease his brother Esau who he fears is still angry with him and he is left alone by the river Jabbok. Jacob is at a crossroads in his life, fleeing from someone he has hustled and fleeing toward another he has hustled in the past. This night he is without the property he has so voraciously accumulated and by which he identified who he was. For a man engaged in a continuously hectic life of three card monty, it is a rare moment of quiet introspection.

However, you know things cannot stay quiet for long with Jacob, so just as we was visited as he left his homeland, Jacob is visited upon his return. But this visit is no pleasant dream. This visit is an attack. Jacob spends the night wrestling and rolling around in the dust and dirt, struggling for his very life. Hour after hour he sweats and strains, and grunts and groans, against this foe who does not tire. We do not know exactly who Jacob is wrestling. We do not know if Jacob knows exactly who he is wrestling. Regardless of who it is, Jacob does not relent.

As the light of dawn approaches, his wrestling opponent wounds him and asks to be released from scrappy Jacob's grasp. Wounded or not, the ever-greedy Jacob will not release his opponent without receiving a blessing. The wrestler renames Jacob, Israel, because he has "striven with God and with humans and has prevailed." But ever-covetous Jacob does not release his grip. He asks his opponent for his name and in turn is blessed. As Jacob limps toward his brother and his homeland he says "I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."

In the darkness, in the struggle, Jacob found God and became Israel. Once again he is on the run from danger of

his own creating and once again God is there in the darkness with word of the future for this hustler who will lead a nation. God brings no word of condemnation on this man from whom you would not dare buy a used car. God gets right down in the dirt with Jacob, right where he lives. God reaches out to Jacob in a way he will understand, in a grappling match for the upper hand.

No matter what Jacob does or where he goes, this God will not stop pursuing him with a message of his future. God has a plan for Jacob and that plan will not be lost, even if it means wrestling all night long to get his attention. Imagine a divinity that chooses to get dirty and sweaty just so one man might hear a whisper in his ear.

Of course there are consequences for Jacob, now named Israel. It will not be so easy for him to run away if he seeks to continue his scamming ways. With the wound he has suffered his running days are over. When you choose to strive with both humanity and God there will be serious consequences.

So besides being an interesting vignette in a colorful character's life, what does this tale of Jacob wrestling by the river have to offer us? The odds are that few of us are being chosen by God to be the patriarch of a great nation. And the odds are that few of us are leading lives quite as adventurous as Jacob. I would also bet it is unlikely that we will find ourselves wrestling in the dirt with God any time soon.

Although we may not be chosen to be patriarch or matriarch of a great nation, I do deeply believe that God has a purpose for our lives which is solely ours. It may be as deceptively simple as caring for our loved ones, or volunteering our time to work with those in need, or doing

our job as a butcher, baker, or candlestick-maker the best we can. Or God may be calling us to an adventure we have yet to even imagine; to something well beyond our plans for ourselves; to an identity of which we have yet to envision. But God has a plan, has a dream for what our lives can be and what we can offer to this world.

And we may not be sneaky hustlers running from town to town, but not one of us is without our own set of faults and idiosyncrasies. I believe that God even has a purpose behind those. God has a plan for how we can use those parts of ourselves that are less than perfect in ways that can be about building God's perfect kingdom.

And God may not be grabbing us in a headlock at three in the morning but God is seeking us out, seeking to whisper in our ears in a way that will reach each of us, exactly who we are and where we live. It is up to us to listen intently, live intentionally, to hone our perception that we can begin to hear the murmuring in our ear. We need to have the same fortitude as Jacob did and be willing to continue to engage and even strive with our God and with our world, to hear the Word God is sending us, to understand who we have been called to be, to recognize God's blessing.

It is interesting that Jacob does not receive these gifts from God in the midst of a sunny happy day. Twice Jacob is brought face to face with God on a dark and fearful night. The joyful, wonderful moments of our lives may fill us with gratitude toward our God, but I believe we are much more likely to tangibly experience the presence of God while we are in crisis or at the least in confusing times of transition. This is not because God is any more intently present in those times. We are just more likely

to be straining to listen for the words being whispered to us when we are urgently seeking answers. In these times we are more likely to reach beyond our assumptions and thus be called into a new reality, a new identity; God's reality and the identity God has chosen for us.

It is also important to remember, even when Jacob prevails through the struggle and receives his new identity and his blessing, he does not walk away unscathed. His grappling with God leaves him limping and to some degree broken. This text is one of good news but difficult good news. We are reminded that God loves us with all our faults and idiosyncrasies. We have been chosen by God to be called forward to a great purpose and to be blessed by our Creator. But the journey is not an easy one. In seeking to be faithful and hear God's Word, there are no guarantees that we will not be left limping as we make our way through this life of ours.

But we are guaranteed that we never make the journey alone; the journey is never without a purpose; and that in the midst of our woundedness, our idiosyncrasies and our failings, we are being called forward every step of the way. When we face the fearful nights in our lives, the divine is always closer than we think.

Thanks be to God. Amen.