

“On the Banks of the Jabbok”

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August 6, 2023

²²The same night [Jacob] got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. ²⁴Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. ²⁵When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. ²⁶Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking."

But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."

²⁷So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." ²⁸Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed."

²⁹Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. ³⁰So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." ³¹The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

(Genesis 32:22-31)

Back in 2008, I myself crossed over the Jabbok River. I was traveling with a seminary group. We had spent the previous night in Amman, Jordan, and we were headed that day to Jerash, the city of the Gerasenes. If I had blinked I would have missed it, because the bridge over the river is small. In the dry season, the Jabbok is really more of a wide creek than a river. But the bus started slowing down as we crossed, and just on the other side our driver turned left into a dusty little parking lot. We scrambled out of the bus, down a short path into a flat, sandy area littered with smooth stones, and there we were -- on the banks of the Jabbok River.

The sun had just come up, but it did not take much imagination for us to picture a lonely and worried Jacob, sitting alone on that beach by a fire in the darkness. Just across the stream was the land of his brother Esau, and Jacob was worried about the greeting he would receive over there. Jacob had not seen Esau since the day when he deceptively stole his elder brother's birthright twenty years before. He had essentially been on the run ever since, but it was finally time for him to come home and face the music. Maybe that's why he sent his family and the moving caravan across the river ahead of him. Maybe Jacob just needed a little more time to build up the courage and the will to face the awkward and potentially dangerous reunion with his estranged brother. Our bus had stopped in that place because it was a Sunday morning. Our plan was to have a brief worship service on the beach, and to celebrate the sacrament of the Lord's Supper on the riverbank where Jacob had seen God face to face.

It was a peaceful morning. The dew was still clinging to the grass along the shoreline, and the early sunlight was softly filtering down through the leaves of the trees. It was beautiful, but it was not perfect. The water in the slow-moving river had the faint odor of street drainage, and we noticed a few soft drink cans nestled between the rocks, and some plastic bags hanging in the low-lying branches. To our left, the underside of the bridge we had crossed was marked with graffiti. And just across the river, just a few miles away, there



was a camp. It had been built in 1968, the year I was born, as an emergency shelter for thousands of Palestine refugees from the Gaza Strip who had been bombed out of their homes by the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. It was meant to be temporary, but today, 55 years later, the camp now covers an area larger than Phoenix, and is home to more than 130,000 impoverished and displaced persons.¹

At the center of Jacob's story, there is a blessing from God. But on either side of that blessing, before it and after it, there was struggle – one literal struggle with an unnamed adversary, and more emotional struggles that we humans know very well -- lying, deception, greed, and the selfish mistreatment of others. Standing on that riverbank that morning, we were drawn into both the light and the darkness of that ancient story. Even as our group felt the blessing of being together in that historic place on that peaceful Sunday morning, we could also see and feel -- on the ground, in the trees, and in the distance across the river -- plenty of dark reminders of how ugly human existence can be, and the awful scars that human sin can leave on the world.

This morning, I think we can be drawn into the complexities of this story right here and now. It is certainly a blessing for us to be together as a community in the presence of God. We probably didn't come expecting that we would see God face to face, but we may have come to gather around God's holy name and perhaps get to know that God a little better. Those blessings lie at the center of our spirits this morning. But even here, even now, we are all aware of challenges and difficulties – hard things that have happened to us in the past, and things that we have not yet faced, but will soon face, that make us uneasy, or perhaps even make us afraid. In our various situations, whatever they may be, we can enter this story by taking a look at some of the things Jacob was feeling as he sat alone in the darkness on the bank of the Jabbock, because these are feelings that we can know very well.

The first thing Jacob must have been feeling was **alone**. We all have that feeling from time to time, the sense of being disconnected from those around us, wondering if anybody really gets us. As the popular novelist Jodi Picoult has written, *"Let me tell you this: if you meet a loner, no matter what they tell you, it's not because they enjoy solitude. It's because they have tried to blend into the world before, and people continue to disappoint them."*² Jacob had been disappointed by people, but he had disappointed others just as much. His very name in Hebrew meant "trickster," or "deceiver," and he had lived up to his name. The brother he had tricked was so mad at him that he had sworn he would kill Jacob if he ever saw him again. And there on the banks of the Jabbock, in the darkness all by himself, with all of those bad memories and regrets swirling in his head, Jacob felt painfully and completely alone.

He also knew what it was like to be **on the run**. For decades, he had been running from past mistakes, running from danger, running from the mantle he was born to wear and the leader he was born to be. There are things in every life that must be confronted, and sometimes it takes us some time to gather up the courage. I think Jacob had come to that point when he could no longer run... but he still needed a night alone to gather himself. The good news is that it was that moment when God really found him, and blessed him with a new name and a new resolve. But most of us know how it feels to run from something hard.

¹ <https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/jordan/baqaa-camp>

² <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/97202-let-me-tell-you-this-if-you-meet-a-loner>

Then, all of a sudden, Jacob was *in the fight of his life*. A stranger came out of nowhere and took hold with a death grip. Jacob had no choice but to fight back as long as it took, working and waiting, working and waiting for the dawn of a new day to come. If you have ever found yourself in a struggle you never saw coming, a fight where someone or something wanted to do you harm, then you know how it feels to fight for your life, and wonder if you will have the strength to win.

And, finally, when it was all said and done, Jacob *limped away*. When the contender saw that he could not beat Jacob, he dropped a final blow on Jacob's hip and knocked it out of joint. I have been told that the pain of dislocating a joint is incredibly intense. So is the pain of popping it back into place, which we assume Jacob found a way to do. He survived his battle on the banks of the Jabbock, but the next day he walked away with a bit of a limp – older, wiser, but also bruised. Many of us carry scars from conflicts we have survived. Those challenges have helped make us who we are, but they do take a toll on our bodies and our spirits. We understand how it feels to walk with a bit of a limp.

So, as we stood in that place where Jacob had wrestled with God, we could actually feel his story in our bones: blessed but also broken... standing in the light, but also aware of the darkness... surviving but limping a little. It made it easy for us to join our hands, hearts, and voices to pray the words that are known as the Prayer of Jacob:

"O God of our father Abraham and God of our father Isaac, we know we are not worthy of even the least of the steadfast love and faithfulness that you have given us, yet you have still blessed us in so many ways. Deliver us, please, from the misdeeds of our past, and from the threats that are closing in upon us, for we are afraid. Remember your promise, O Lord, that you will surely do us good, and that your faithful people will grow, and prosper, until they are too many to count, until their number is greater than the sand of the sea."

Then someone in our group opened her bag and produced two fresh rolls from that morning's breakfast buffet... and a graduate student pulled out a glass borrowed from our hotel... and a third classmate opened a small bottle of red wine purchased at a roadside gas station. And after the appropriate words were said, as the waters of the Jabbock drifted by, we passed the broken body of Christ around the circle, each of us breaking off a small piece. We passed the cup of Christ around in the same way, each of us dipping our bread into it. And when the sacrament was complete, we turned and walked reverently up and out of the riverbed and got back on our bus, and we left that place deeply and memorably blessed, but still limping just a little.

And that will be the way we will come to this table this morning...

in some ways alone, but also together as the body of Christ...

perhaps on the run from something, but also secure in the knowledge that, here, we are safe from harm...

in the midst of struggles and fights, some of which are known only to us, but also at peace in the presence of God...

and even limping a little, aware of the scrapes and scars life has given us, but ready, as always, to be blessed anew by the Lord our God. **Amen.**