Epworth Chapel on the Green October 20, 2013

Pentecost 22

Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Genesis 32:1-30

Psalm 113

2 Timothy 2:1-15

Luke 18:1-8

If you read the Bible long enough, you will discover that it is filled with

intriguing, perplexing, head-scratching stories. For me, one such story is the one

found in our Old Testament lesson today from Genesis. It is the story of Jacob

wrestling all night with a man at the Jabbok River.

When paired with our epistle lesson and our Gospel lesson, we might read

this text and conclude that it is a message on the importance of endurance and

perseverance in the life of faith. And certainly these qualities are necessary and

important to us.

But this story of Jacob wrestling with what appears to be an angelic

messenger has too much in it to be reduced to a parable on the importance of

perseverance. We have the text in front of us, but the story cannot be contained in

the text alone. We need the *context*. We need the details that have brought us to

this point where Jacob is in a crisis at the Jabbok River.

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You remember that Jacob was a twin, born with his brother Esau, to Isaac and Rebekah. When the twins were born, Esau came out first, and Jacob came out clutching or grabbing onto Esau's heel. The name Jacob means "supplanter."

Jacob was not only the younger of the two boys, but he was also more slight of stature. Esau was the rugged, wild, wooly hunter. Jacob learned early on to live and get by on his wits, not his brawn.

As the oldest son, Esau is entitled to Isaac's inheritance and fortune. He is the heir to Isaac's blessing. But these two brothers perhaps gave new meaning to the term "sibling rivalry." Or perhaps they invented it! And their parents did not help the situation. Isaac often favored Esau and gave him preferential treatment. And Rebekah did the same with Jacob.

We see this relational tension at a couple of crucial times before we get to today's story. The first is when Esau comes in from a long hunt, famished and hungry. He wants a pot of stew that Jacob has made, and so Jacob demands that Esau surrender his birthright as the oldest son to him in exchange for the stew.

Some years later the sibing rivalry erupts again when Isaac is old and blind, and Rebekah and Jacob conspire together to trick Isaac into thinking that Jacob is actually Esau, and the old father anoints Jacob and pronounces his blessing on him instead of Esau.

This causes such anger and frustration that Jacob actually flees and goes to live with his uncle, Laban. This is one of those "two peas in a pod" kind of things, for Laban is also a deceitful and duplicitous man. Time and again Jacob and Laban match wits, until Jacob eventually must flee from Laban, taking with him two of Laban's daughters, most of his flock, and much of his fortune.

Jacob is on the run from Laban and his household when our text picks up the narrative today. He learns that his angry brother, Esau, is coming after him, bringing with him an army of 400 men.

The text tells us that when Jacob learns this, he is terrified. Jacob, whose name means "supplanter," or "cheat," has spent years living up to his name. And now it has caught up to him. He finds himself literally between a rock and hard place.

So he hides away half of his wealth, and with what remains he sends three caravans of gifts ahead to Esau, hoping to bribe his way back into his brother's good graces. But he's not sure it will work. So in a desperate measure he sends the rest of his servants and his family across the Jabbok River, hoping that if Esau refuses his bribe that he might at least take pity on Jacob when he sees his defenseless servants and family.

What a scene. This is the stuff of reality T.V., only this was real.

And then it happens. Pacing along the river in the middle of the night, unable to sleep, Jacob is encountered by a man. The two wrestle through the night, neither one prevailing. In the morning, the man strikes Jacob's hip, knocking it out of joint. He tells Jacob, "let me go."

Jacob says, "Not until you bless me."

The man says, "what is your name?"

And here we must pause for a minute. We need to understand the significance that names held in ancient near-eastern culture from which our Old Testament comes. In this culture, your name did not merely identify you. Your name revealed your essential character, and sometimes your destiny.

Jacob's wrestling partner says to him: "what is your name?"

Jacob replies: "my name is Jacob." In other words, he says, "I am the supplanter, the usurper, the trickster – the cheat."

And how appropriate this name seems to be, for all of his life Jacob has spent his time and energy tricking people and stealing from them what is rightfully theirs. He is a *fraud*. He is a charlatan. And deep down, in his heart of hearts, Jacob *knows* this.

And so when the Lord pins Jacob down here and demands to know his name, he is demanding of Jacob *that he confess who he is and what he has done*.

He is demanding of Jacob that he acknowledges his misused talents and his wasted life.

At this point in the story is where I scratch my head, because I'm not ready for what comes next. In my way of thinking, I'm ready for Jacob to get what's coming to him. I'm prepared to see him get his just deserts. I'm ready for the hammer to fall.

Instead, what happens? The Lord gives Jacob a new *name*. He calls him Israel, which means "one who has wrestled with God and prevailed." And the scene ends with Jacob limping away from the encounter not defeated, but victorious. *Instead of limping away in tragedy, he limps away carrying a new name and living into a new nature. He walks away as a new person*.

And if we read the rest of the story, we discover that indeed Jacob and Esau will reconcile. And we discover that Jacob will give birth to a nation from his twelve sons, and their descendants proudly bear his name to this day.

I confess that there is so much to this story that I don't understand. But there is one thing I do understand from this story: I understand that Jacob confesses who he is, and that God transforms him into someone else.

And I understand something else. I understand that you and I are each called by many names, day in and day out. Some of these names are good and affirming, and others are not.

But I want to remind you this morning what happened to you in your baptism. In your baptism, God spoke a new name for you. God proclaimed you as His *beloved*, as His precious child. Your baptism pronounced a love upon you that is unalterable, unending.

In the subsequent months and years after your baptism, there may have been times when you've taken on additional names, either by listening to other people or by giving them yourself. Names such as: *failure*, *victim*, *unlovable*, *ugly*, *abnormal*, *discouraged*, *divorced*, *widowed*, *disappointing*, *broken*.

But that's not who you are. How do I know? Because your baptism says so! And every time these other voices try to crowd your mind and heart, God is shouting, "No, No! You are my beloved child! I chose and redeemed you at great cost. I am committed to you all the days of your life!"

As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, the table is the place where it becomes clear to us again *who we are, and whose we are.* The bread and the wine speak to us in the only voice that matters, the voice that assures us that we are loved, that our past does not determine our future, and that "if anyone be in Christ, behold he is a new creation."

So come with faith. Receive the grace he offers you. Then rise up, and answer to the only name that matters: *beloved child of God*.

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