

Me, My Brother, and God
Genesis 32 and 33, selected verses
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights
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So, do you have a brother? Do you know what it's like to be irritated, offended, misused, or let down by your brother? Maybe you heard the story of the pregnant woman who was in a car crash. She was in a coma for a week. When she woke up, the nurse told her, "Congratulations! Not only are you going to pull through from your injuries, but you've had twins!" The woman said, "But who's taking care of them? I'm not from around here." The nurse said, "Oh, that's no problem. Your brother has come, and he's here helping out. He's even named the babies." "Oh no!," the woman thought. "My brother is a moron! What are their names?" The nurse said, "Well, the girl is named Deniece." "Oh, I like that," said the new mother. "And the boy is named Da Nephew..."

As we continue to walk through the book of Genesis, this morning we're going to spend a little time talking about brothers and other people who are close to us – morons or not.

For some weeks, we've been listening to the saga of Jacob and his brother, Esau. We've watched as Jacob has taken advantage of Esau and has connived his way into receiving the blessing of the first-born son. We saw Jacob run for his life when Esau discovered the deception and set out to kill his brother. Last week, we went with Jacob to a place far away as he was not only hiding out from his family but also starting to raise children of his own. He is waiting for God to keep his promises: God has promised him many descendants, and that his descendants would be a blessing, and that his descendants would inherit the land that he had left behind whilst running away from Esau.

Look at how our story is set up: turn to Genesis 32:1. In chapter 31, Jacob hears from God that it's time for him to go home and claim the land. He leaves his father in law and begins the journey of 500 miles or so. As Jacob and his wives and his children pack up, he encounters messengers:

Genesis 32:1 Jacob went on his way and the angels of God met him; 2 and when Jacob saw them he said, "This is God's camp!" So he called that place Mahanaim.

Our story starts with messengers from God to Jacob. Look at what's next:

Gen. 32: 3 Jacob sent messengers before him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom, 4 instructing them, "Thus you shall say to my lord Esau: Thus says your servant Jacob, 'I have lived with Laban as an alien, and stayed until now; 5 and I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, male and female slaves; and I have sent to tell my lord, in order that I may find favor in your sight.' "

6 The messengers returned to Jacob, saying, "We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him."

7 Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed; and he divided the people that were with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two companies, 8 thinking, “If Esau comes to the one company and destroys it, then the company that is left will escape.”

Immediately after the message from God, Jacob sends a messenger to Esau, who replies with a messenger of his own. Do you see? Already, eight verses in, and we are seeing an interconnectedness between me, my brother, and God.

What happens next is unique. Genesis 32:9-12 is the longest prayer recorded in Genesis. Think about all of the things that happen in this book: The Garden of Eden. The Flood. The tower of Babel. The call of Abram. Joseph’s journey into Egypt. Yet for some reason, this encounter between Jacob and Esau is the occasion for the longest prayer recorded in the book. I’d say that’s significant.

Genesis 32:9 And Jacob said, “O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O LORD who said to me, ‘Return to your country and to your kindred, and I will do you good,’ 10 I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan; and now I have become two companies. 11 Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children. 12 Yet you have said, ‘I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted because of their number.’ ”

Did you hear what Jacob does in this prayer? He owns the covenant – that is, he puts himself in the midst of God’s promises. As he does so, he remembers that he is an unlikely recipient of God’s grace – as the second-born, he knows he is not worthy, that he is the “least”. He asks for God’s help and protection, and announces that he will hold God to the promises that he’s already made to Jacob. That’s a great prayer!

Next, Jacob stops praying and starts doing what we’ve come to expect from him: he plots and strategizes. He’s just prayed indicating that it’s all up to God, but now he’s planning as if it’s all up to him. He splits up his flocks and his family and thinks that if Esau is really angry, at least he won’t be able to destroy everything. And, having prayed and planned, he continues to walk towards his brother.

A funny thing happens, though, before he gets there. When he got to the Jabbok river, he was overcome by the desire to be alone.

Genesis 32: 22 The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. 23 He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. 24 Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. 25 When 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. 26 Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." 27 So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." 28 Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." 29 Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. 30 So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." 31 The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

Jacob, on his way to reconcile with his brother, first wrestles with God. Although he isn't named as God in the text, when Jacob names the place "Peniel", he says, "I have seen the face of God." Before Jacob gets to Esau, there's some business that he has with the Lord.

This is a crucial theme in the book of Genesis – the idea of how our relationship to the brother (or the sister) influences our relationship with the Lord. We can see this as we look back at Cain and Abel, or at Noah and his sons, and we can look ahead at the ways that Joseph and his brothers treat each other. Somehow, the writer of Genesis wants us to know that we cannot separate the ways that we relate to each other from the ways that we relate to the Lord.

So all night, Jacob and the Lord wrestle with each other. In the midst of that, what happens?

First, Jacob is re-named. All his life, he has been known as "Jacob", which means "the grabber" or "the trickster". Now, he's told that his name is "Israel", which means "God strives" or "God rules" or "God protects". His identity is changing – no longer is he known as the one who relies on his own wits; instead, he is known as the one who demonstrates the presence of God.

Another thing that happens that night is that Jacob receives a wound. For the rest of his life, he is different somehow. I think you know something about being changed as you are wounded, don't you? You have encountered the Holy in a death or through a surgery or at some other part of your life and you are different. Some of you cry more easily now than you ever did before. Some of you give more freely. Some of you find it easier to let things roll off your back. Whatever it is, you know what it means to have been changed by an encounter with the Holy One.

And almost as an afterthought, Jacob receives a blessing from God. He has been blessed before, of course, but here at Peniel he finds that blessing strengthened and renewed as he revives himself by the banks of the Jabbok.

And in the morning, we find Jacob/Israel, limping along, finally ready to meet his brother after having been worked over by God all night long.

Gen. 33: 1 Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two maids. 2 He put the maids with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. 3 He himself went on

ahead of them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother.

4 But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.

What are these passages in Genesis about? Are they about the long-awaited reconciliation between two brothers? Yes, partially. Are they about the terror and power of God, the mystical being who has the power to heal and to bless and to wound and to re-name? Yes, partially. But mostly, I would suggest, they are about the fact that you cannot separate the reconciliation between brothers from the encounter with the holiness of God.

Professor Walter Brueggemann puts it this way in his comments on the passages at hand:

The narrator knows this interrelatedness by the way he has arranged the statements on the motif of *face*: (a) "Afterwards I shall see his [that is, Esau's] *face*... (32:20). (b) "For I have seen God *face to face* and yet my life is preserved" (32:30). [and Jacob's comment to Esau when they meet] "For truly to see *your face* is like seeing the *face of God*" (33:10). It is hard to identify the players. In the *holy God*, there is something of the *estranged brother*. And in the *forgiving brother*, there is something of the *blessing God*. Jacob has seen the face of God. Now he knows that seeing the face of Esau is like that. We are not told in what ways it is like the face of God. Perhaps in both it is the experience of relief that one does not die...the crippling is not to death. The forgiving is not unqualified.¹

Jacob, in his attempt to be faithful to God, has got to reconcile with Esau. And Jacob, in his efforts to reconcile with Esau, has got to encounter God.

So what is the point? Bluntly stated, it would seem that we cannot divorce our pursuit of God and our care for those who are around us.

Who are we, brothers and sisters? Aren't we the heirs of Israel? Aren't we here to worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? We have been called, and blessed, and changed, and wounded. We are on our way towards an encounter with our brother or sister. This is a story about us, my friends.

How can we do this? How can we be this Word of the Lord? It depends on where you are in the story.

Some of us don't know what it is to encounter the Holy One – to wrestle with God about something huge. Oh, we've got problems all right. We sense them nagging at us, weighing us down – but we're reluctant to spend time alone with God. Maybe you need to camp out on the Jabbok for a few days. I'm not suggesting that you need to relax. I'm not suggesting that you need a day off, or

¹ The *Interpretation* Commentary series on Genesis (John Knox, 1982) p. 272-273.

that you should send the kids someplace and pamper yourself. I'm saying that you might be in a place where you need to engage in the presence of God. Spend a day or two in fasting and in prayer. Take some time away and disengage yourself from the details of your everyday life. Maybe you need to rent a room at the Holiday Inn for a night. Maybe you need to call me and ask me to spend the day with you. Maybe you need some ideas as to where you can go to be alone in the presence of God. If that's the case, I hope that you'll do that – that you will make space for the wrestling to begin.

Some of us are in the midst of that struggle right now. God is trying to give us a new identity, and we don't want it. God is telling us that we have a calling, that we have a giftedness, that we have responsibility, and we don't want to hear it. Frankly, it's a lot easier to think of myself as an untalented loser who can't get anything right than it is to think of myself as a person who has been called and equipped for a certain time and place. Do you need to see yourself differently? Do you need to allow God to give you a new identity?

And some of us simply need to get on the road. The one constant in these chapters is that Jacob AND Esau are walking slowly and deliberately towards each other. Think about that. They didn't "need" each other at all. They both had a fistful of wives and children; they were both financially well off. They had what they needed to get by...except, somehow, they needed each other – and so they walked the road of reconciliation, because they knew that the only way to experience the fullness of God's call and presence was in a healed relationship.

From whom are you estranged? With whom do you need to be reconciled? And what does it look like for you to walk towards that reconciliation? Do you, like Jacob, need to lower your head and swallow your pride? Do you need to write a letter – or two – or twelve? Do you need to make a phone call? Think right now of a relationship that is not the way that God wants it to be...What will you do to move towards wholeness in that relationship?

It's not just about you and your brother (or sister), you know. It's you, your brother, and God. You can't escape it. May God bless you. May God make you limp. May God bring you home. Amen.