

## **Genesis 32:22-31**

*The same night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. 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. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." 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." 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. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.*

Here is a question for us to think about this morning, and for the week to come, and for all of your life. Do you know your story?

Now, I know that most of us, if we were asked that question would probably say, "Of course, I know my story. It's my story. I lived it. The ups and the downs and all the in-betweens." You would probably go on to say that you were born on this date in this particular place. You might even know the name of the hospital. You could tell us the names of your parents, how many people there are in your immediate family, and what your favorite hobbies are. You could tell us where you grew up, where you went to school, and what jobs you have held. You might share with us that you like chocolate, movies with fast cars, and that you post cat videos on Facebook. And that is what we call our story. But the reality is that all of that is a just a personal snapshot. What I'm wondering this morning is whether you know your full story? Where did your story really begin? Where is your story eventually heading? Where do you fit into the big picture?

So, think big for a moment! Let's not get trapped in the small details. Where did you come from? Where did YOUR story begin? Are you thinking about grandparents and great-grandparents? Maybe your family came over on the Mayflower. That's nice, but we have to think bigger. How about this? Genesis 1:26 & 27, Day Six - Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. So, God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." How about this one? "...therefore the LORD God sent [the man] out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken."

I know, that takes it way back, but, since we're looking at the big picture, that is where it all began. Now, I'm trying to get to something here, so please don't start to get caught up in a debate in your head about whether God was taking about six literal days of creation or not, or whether there really is a place called the Garden of Eden. Let's leave that for another time. The point is that God brought the human race into existence and from that moment, or through that process, and following that story of humanity, you, we, became.

That is our story in the big picture. It is a story with two basic dimensions. It has a physical, social, and cultural component. And it has a spiritual component. But they both started at the same time. God created physical beings in the spiritual image of God. God created an animal called humanity with a spiritual core. So, on one side, our story is one of a physical animal being fruitful and multiplying, growing in numbers, and diversifying in features. And on the other side, we are a spiritual creature, created to be in communion with our Creator, but turned away from that spiritual anchor for our lives, which required God to set in place a plan to bring us back into our original created state. The rest of the story, our story, are the chapters between then and now leading up to you and to us.

OK, so what is the point? The point is that we heard about part of our story this morning in the passage from Genesis. Jacob's story is a part of our story. Through Jacob, we are who we are.

Now most of us get caught up in the drama of the human story like the story of Jacob and Esau. They were born twins, Esau first with Jacob coming right after, holding on to Esau's foot. A declaration from God before their birth said that the older will serve the younger. Jacob bought from Esau his birthright at a weak moment for a bowl of stew. And finally, Jacob tricking his father Isaac so that he would give him his soul's blessing instead of Esau. Which made Esau so mad that Jacob fled to live with uncle Laban for safety.

Now, in Chapter 32, Jacob and Esau, who are now older and established in their lives, are going to meet again and fireworks are expected. It is like a made for TV miniseries and it is our story. Sibling rivalry, division, confrontation, and finally, reconciliation.

But here is the thing to make note of. While the human social side of the equation captures our interest, it is the spiritual story where things get significant. Within that part of our story, it is also confrontation time, but not just between Jacob and Esau. It is also confrontation time between Jacob and God. Actually, that is not it either. Really, it's between Jacob and his past and Jacob and the path that God has laid out for him.

It starts in verse 24. Jacob has separated himself from everyone else and all his possessions. It is almost like a shedding of the world for what he has to do. And back on this side of the river he wrestled with a man. Some say it was an angel. Some say it was God, himself. Either way, it was spiritual struggle that Jacob had to engage at some point and that time was now.

I see it something like this. Jacob had this call from God hanging on him for his entire life. He was the third leg of God's developing plan. And it was now time for Jacob to risk it all. It was time for him to step up to his faith, to the faith of his father Isaac and his grandfather Abraham. He had decided that he was going to go into the presence of God, grab onto him for dear life, and embrace his rightful path. It was the time, and this is important, for his spiritual life to take rule over his physical life. A choice had to be made.

You see it in the breaking light of the new day. You see that Jacob is not trying to defeat the angel. Instead, he is frantically holding on to God. Throughout the night the angel had pushed Jacob to his physical limit, with hip out of joint and all that, and yet Jacob persevered in faith, holding on, never giving up, even demanding that God bless him for what was to come.

It was similar to the parable we heard in our Gospel passage this morning. The widow perseveres with her pursuit of justice and Jesus promises that through such perseverance, through such faith, God will bring justice.

And here is why both their stories are important parts of ours. Jacob's struggle in faith and the widow's struggle in faith provide us with very important examples of how persistent faith brings blessing, purpose, and even justice. Dedicated faith brings us closer to God and through that closer to the life that we were made for.

For the widow, it was true justice. She knew what was right and so did the judge. You never heard the judge saying that he was going to give her something that she didn't deserve. He simply granted her something that was rightfully hers from creation.

For Jacob, it was even more. Jacob was in the narrow line of the descendants promised to be greater than the stars in the sky. But it was a mission that had not yet been embraced. Life had gotten in the way. It was a call to a particular life for Jacob that had to be recognized and struggled with and eventually accepted. It was an identity that had to be embraced. And, once embraced, Jacob became something even more. Did you hear it? He became Israel. He became the father of twelve different tribes with twelve different gifts that made up a nation. Through his faithful struggle and his willingness to persevere, Jacob became the father of the nation through which salvation would be delivered to all people in the world.

And here is the critical part that we need to know. Jacob's story is our story. We should never forget that. We are like Jacob. We are placed here with a purpose. We can let the world distract us or we can draw up, face to face with God, grab hold of Him for our lives and show that we are here to accept the call for our part of the ongoing mission of bringing Christ to the world. We are to become Israel for our time so that Christ has a continuing path through which to bring salvation to all people.

But take a second to hear again the question that Jesus asked at the end of the parable about the widow. It is sobering. "And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

That is why it is critically important that we know our story, that we know our full story. And that is why it is critically important, through perseverance and faith, that we hold on to God so that we too can live into our ongoing story that we are right in the middle of. We are part of how God planned it so that when the Son of Man comes, faith will indeed be found.

Amen