

13th Sunday after Pentecost (Year B)

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*Genesis 32:22-32*

*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. 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 Penuel, limping because of his hip. Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle.*

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*Recently, Pastor Stephen's dog, Elsie, was digging in the sand at Hay Beach on Shelter Island and she unearthed what many historians have confirmed to be an authentic record of the private diary of Jacob which chronicles his accounts of the events of Genesis. Below are excerpts from this incredible find...*

So it's been quite awhile since that trippy dream I had with the ladder and the angels going up and down it and God covenanting to be with me. I've had some time to think and process what happened and today I had another crazy experience that, to be quite honest with you, I just now beginning to catch my breath. I also have this crazy pain on my hip but, alas, let us not put the cart before the horse!

Perhaps I should catch you up on some important goings on since we last met...

So, basically, I fell in love. I was traveling on after my dreamy encounter with God and ran into this woman named Rachel. Now, have you ever found someone so incredibly beautiful that it makes you want to cry? Well, *that's* how I responded to her! I walked right up to her, kissed her on the lips, and wept because my love for her hurt so much. What can I say? I may be a cunning, sly, manipulative son-of-a-gun but I'm also a hopeless romantic! I had to have her! So I walked right up to her father, Laban, and asked for her hand in marriage.

Now, when you've spent your entire life being cunning and clever and opportunistic, you tend to become pretty good at identifying those traits in other people as well. And as soon as I met Laban, I knew that he and I were cut from the same cloth. He said I could marry his daughter Rachel but only after seven years of indentured servitude. So I did. It seemed a small price to pay for the woman of my dreams. And, truth be told, the seven years flew by because of my love for her.

So, after seven years the time came for me to marry Rachel and she looked even more beautiful than the day I met her! Laban threw us a huge party and he was rather pushy on the wine. In fact, he got me so drunk that he had Leah sneak into my bedroom that night and I actually consecrated my love with the wrong woman! Now, don't get me wrong, Leah was lovely and everything but she wasn't Rachel.

I woke up with the hangover from hell and I realized that Laban had tricked me into marrying his younger daughter! I could marry Rachel after all but *only* after seven *more* years of service!

Now, I must share with you two confessions.

The first is this: this one really hurt, and I'm not talking about the hangover! To this point in my life, I have been the trickster. I had tricked my stupid, hairy brother Esau out of his birthright and I also tricked my father Isaac into giving me his final blessing. I've always been able to get the better out of other people but now, *now* I have gone from being the trickster to being the *tricked*. I have been duped. I've been given a taste of my own medicine and, I'll be honest, it doesn't taste very good.

The second confession is this: you know how I said that that first seven years went by like a breeze because of my love for Rachel. Well, I can't say the same about the *second* set of seven years. The first seven years were filled with butterflies in my stomach because I was about to marry the woman of my dreams. The second set of seven years, however, was mixed with shame and resentment for being the butt of Laban's joke and letting him get the better of me.

But, after a long while, the second set of service years passed. It had been 14 years since I first met Rachel and her tricky father, Laban. Now that I finally had Rachel (and, for the record, Leah, as well as two maids and many cattle and sheep and wealth and, most importantly, many little children that would go on to be known as the twelve tribes of Israel), I was ready to head back home.

Now, as I was traveling back home, I couldn't help but think back to the covenant that God made with me on that night when I dreamed of that ladder with all the angels and stuff. God had promised to be with me and to keep me wherever I went and to bring me back to my home. God also said that I would have many offspring. So far, I have to admit, God has done pretty good with keeping up his end of the bargain. I have plenty of children, lots of wealth, and a lovely family. Now, admittedly, there have been some rather rocky portions to the last 14 years since God made that covenant with me but, to be fair, God never promised it would be easy. I've sure learned a lot since I left home.

But another thing I can't help but wonder about is my brother Esau. Is he still mad at me? He certainly would have every right to be! He was pretty murderous when I left him 14 years ago and, as far as I know, nothing has changed. As you may very well know, family disputes seldom die easily.

So, as I approached home, I divided up my camp and sent groups forward with many presents. Now, I love to be in control so I decided to do everything within my control to make this encounter go as smoothly as possible with a helpful backup plan should things go sour. I sent many presents to appease my older brother and hopefully quell any lingering rage that might be within him. But, ever the pragmatist, I decided that it would be best to hope for the best *and* prepare for the worst. Therefore, I sent my people in groups so that if Esau fell back into a murderous rage and killed one of the groups, the others would have a chance to retreat and fall back.

Now, you're probably curious how I got this terrible pain in my hip.

It all happened this way.

I had sent my armies and my families ahead of me and I decided to stay on the far side of the river that divided us from our long-lost family.

I was having a great evening of “me time” when all of the sudden....BAM....this stranger comes out of nowhere in the darkness and begins to wrestle with me! And it was unrelenting! I mean I never even got the chance to catch my breath! This guy was insistent!

But you know what was the hardest part of this whole night-long wrestling match? It wasn't the physicality of it. It wasn't even that I didn't know what was going on. It was the fact that I was *not* in control of the situation or of this person who was picking this fight with me. You see, my clever ability to get the better of people so far has depended on my ability to *prepare* for an encounter and to foresee its outcome. But I had had no time to prepare for *this* encounter. Unfortunately, my cunning, my cleverness, my manipulative ways, all the things that had benefited me prior, did me no good in this wrestling match. This wrestling match was one thing: flesh versus flesh, bone versus bone, muscle versus muscle.

In fact, things got so nasty that my opponent slammed his fist down on my hip and a searing pain soared through my body. I yelled and grabbed my hip while fervently trying to hold him down with my other arm. That one was going to leave a mark. That one was going to leave a limp.

Now, all that being said, I did hold my own. In fact, once morning began to break, my opponent called for a ceasefire and told me to let him go.

But I quite emphatically said, “No!”

I may be tired, I may be confused, I may be frustrated, but I am still Jacob - I'm not going to emerge from this all-night wrestling match with nothing to show for it! I asked for a blessing and I received it. But this blessing was different from the one I stole from my father. This blessing was one that I earned. And what's more, this blessing was one that I earned through no deceitfulness whatsoever.

And the blessing was this: I got a new name. As both of us collapsed on the ground next to each other and caught our breath, my opponent gave me a new name. He said I would no longer be called Jacob, but instead I was to be called “Israel” which means “he who has wrestled with God.” Now, I could not name this person for the life of me but I had some feeling that this was no ordinary person. I had this feeling in my stomach, this little twinge, that I had only felt once before and that was the night God covenanted with me 14 years ago. 14 years ago, I had called that place Beth-el, which means “House of God.” I called *this* place Peni-el, that is, “Face of God” because I felt like I had looked into the face of God and had lived to tell the tale.

And so, here I am, limping. Here I am, blessed. Here I am, the artist formerly known as Jacob. Here I am, Israel. Here I am, God-wrestler.

And as I am here limping away I am just now realizing that I'm *not* the only one who has received the blessing of a name change this day. I am now Israel and my sons and daughter and their offspring are now *Israelites*. That is, those who have wrestled with God. You may know their names but, just in case you don't, here they are: my daughter's name is Dinah. My 12 sons' names are Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, and Benjamin. They will become known as the 12 tribes of Israel. They are now God-wrestlers and perhaps you who are reading this very diary are, too.