

First Presbyterian Church
Genesis 32:22-32 “The Spiritual Life of Jacob”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 9/10/2017

SERVICE INTRODUCTION

After spending the summer looking at how we are prepared in worship,
we now make the turn to being formed in silence,
which is simply a way to speak of personal spiritual formation
in a wide variety of forms.

What’s the difference between being prepared and being formed?
Doesn’t forming happen before preparing?
Can’t I be formed without being silent?

I don’t pretend to have water-tight answers to those questions.

What I will say is this:
both corporate worship and personal formation are important,
and they relate to each other in important ways we often overlook.

Our preparation in worship as a community
provides the large-scale framework for our personal spiritual formation.
Flipping that around, our personal spiritual formation
augments and enhances our worship as a community. REPEAT

So today we are exploring stories of people being formed in silence,
that is personally changed through their interactions with God.

We’ve invited Stephen Galvan to help shape this service in order to do that.
He’ll be joining us after the service for a seminar on the topic as well,
and we will close with our third communal Worship Examen prayer.

THE SPIRITUAL LIFE OF JACOB

Jacob was born into a rough spot. A twin, but the second twin.

Therefore he missed out on all the goodness of being the firstborn son in ancient times simply because Esau pulled off a last-moment in-utero somersault, and got out first.

That kind of thing will put a chip on your shoulder. Somewhat predictably, Jacob develops a reputation for being a trickster over the course of his life:

He begins by grabbing the heel of his slightly older brother on his way out of the womb.

(The name Jacob means “supplanter” or “holder of the heel”).

So we can say that Esau got Jacobed on the first day of his life.

The second time Esau got Jacobed came later on when Jacob took advantage of Esau’s hunger for red-stew, and convinced him to give up his birth-right as the first-born son in exchange for that delicious red-stuff.

Somehow this desire to be put first in the family was held not only by Jacob, but also by their mother, Rebecca.

And so, it came about that the third time that Esau got Jacobed was when their mother, Rebecca, decided the time was right for her favorite son, Jacob, to receive a special blessing from Isaac. Through a convoluted plan, Rebecca and Jacob succeed in convincing the elderly father Isaac to confer a spiritual blessing due to Esau to Jacob.

The question we are asking today is ... where has God been in the midst of all this?

What kind of spirituality does Jacob display?

Probably the kind that we don’t much want to emulate.

He’s not a sympathetic character on the first reading of things.

But(!)—he shows that he seeks hard after God.

He shows that he understands a sense of calling toward things that are bigger than him.

He shows that he desperately desires the blessing of God through his father.

Does he play fair in seeking God? Maybe not.

But he seeks hard after the blessing – it is not a careless thing
that he will trade out for a momentary need.

I think we can assume that were things the other way around,

Jacob would not have been tricked into losing his birthright
for a bowl of soup – no matter how tasty the seasonings.

And on the other side of things, it seems that

(Jacob's unsavory tactics notwithstanding)

God had in mind something for Jacob that entailed
a reversal of fortune.

A reversal similar (perhaps) to what we see in gospel of Jesus,

where the lowly are raised up, and the lofty are cast down,

where the second-born are blessed with the firstborn's blessings.

And so, when it comes to the spiritual life of Jacob ... it's complicated.

Isn't it with everyone?

I had a friend in college who used to talk about how complicated his life is,

how hard his relationships with girls were,

all the twists and turns of his life of being a competitive athlete,

and the call of God on his life.

And one time I said, "Yeah, I'm a pretty complicated person, too."

He gave me this incredulous look and said, "You? You're not complicated."

Well I'm here to tell you 20 years later, yes I am!

And so are you. There are no uncomplicated people.

No uncomplicated families. No uncomplicated churches.

And...there are no uncomplicated relationships with God.

None of our lives run on a predictable timetable.

So, getting back to Jacob, let's admit it without hesitation:

his relationship with God was complicated.

He desperately wanted the things of God,

but he also was willing to manipulate and deceive
and damage family relationships in order to (in his mind)
move himself forward.

Which brings us to the story of Jacob in Genesis 32.

Esau was furious upon realizing Jacob's latest trickery,
and so Jacob is afraid, on the run, looking for a way out.
Esau is angry, and chasing after him, though some ways behind.

In chapter 32, we learn that while traveling, Esau encounters angels.
Apparently inspired by this visitation, he devises a clever strategy
to appease Esau: A series of goat, sheep, camel, cattle,
and donkey herds with shepherds instructed to tell Esau
"These are gifts from Jacob for my lord Esau,
and Jacob is coming behind us."

Jacob's gifts go on ahead of him toward his rampaging brother,
but Jacob himself stays back to camp
at this place where he had seen the angels.

At night, we learn that he sends even his two wives,
his female servants, and sons across the Jabbok river without him.

Then v. 24 speaks a mystery into our story:
"So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak."

Who is this man?

Some think it could be Esau, sneaking in at night.
Some think it could be a foreigner wandering in the desert.
But the story as we have it
won't allow for such mundane explanations.

The wrestling continues all through the night.
At one point, it appears Jacob has the upper hand, for his opponent says,
"Let me go, for it is nearly daybreak."

Seeing the leverage he has, Jacob (being Jacob)
wants to see what he can get out of it.

He asks for a blessing before letting go.

The opponent doesn't immediately agree, but in v. 27 he does ask his name.

Jacob gives it.

V. 28, "Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with human beings and have overcome."

Walter Brueggeman remarks "He *had* been named Jacob – 'heel/trickster/over-reacher/supplanter.' Each of these is true, but not flattering. Now he is 'Israel.'

The etymology of 'Israel' is disputed. Perhaps it means 'God rules,' 'God preserves,' 'God protects.' But whatever the etymology, a new being has been called forth."

What was the spiritual life of Jacob like?

It was certainly not one of pretension, displays of religious zeal, or warm, loving, emotional uplift.

Jacob's spirituality was a slog. A frantic journey through the hot desert. A desperate search for something more.

An all-night wrestling match ... with God? ... in which he pretty well held his own simply by being Jacob.

But now there is a shift. Now he is Israel.

Now his identity isn't found in his scrap and grit (though that will no doubt remain).

Rather his identity is found in dependence upon God's rule, God's preservation, God's protection.

Consider the story of your own journey with God.

Because you're a human being, I guarantee you it's a complicated one.

As you reflect on your story, and the things that make you who you are before God,

don't merely rely on Sunday school and sermon quotations.

Those things have their place, but it's much more likely that your story with God
is better defined by family, a teacher, a friend, a tough job,
a failed relationship, a tragic disappointment,
an unmerited turn around,
the gift of love when you least expected it,
healing and forgiveness,
the revelation of a new name
that God has given you.

These are the things that mark your spiritual life.

Dare you seek them out with the raw, unapologetic drive of Jacob?
What would happen if you told God exactly what you wanted?
What is the name God has given you
in the midst of your own unique journey?