

“Struggle to be Seen”
October 16, 2022
Scripture: Genesis 32:22-31; Luke 18:1-8

The stories of Jacob are some of the most intriguing and challenging in the Bible. Jacob is an unlikely hero. We first meet him as he's being born, clutching his older twin brother Esau's heel as if to hold him back. He seems to have inherited all the opposite qualities of his brother: where Esau is dark and hairy, Jacob is fair and smooth; where Esau is a hunter and gamesman, Jacob is a homebody and thinker. By the time of this story in Jacob's life he has already cheated his brother out of the “birthright,” which I assume means his claim on the property of their father Isaac. And, with their mother Rebekah's help, even managed to fool their father on his deathbed to confer on Jacob the blessing meant for Esau. Jacob's not exactly a team player.

Jacob's a trickster and that last little trick forced him to run away from home to avoid being killed by Esau who finally seems to have caught on. Jacob ends up with his uncle, Laban, who is sort of a trickster, too. He tricks Jacob into working for him a number of years on the promise of being allowed to marry his daughter Rachel, but switches her with his older daughter Leah on the wedding night, which leads to another number of years working so he can finally also marry Rachel. But when it's all said and done, Jacob gets the last laugh as he makes off with most of Laban's herd of sheep and goats and a whole lot of his household to return to his home.

But on the way there is yet one more obstacle for Jacob: turns out Esau has not forgotten him over the years and is on his way to meet him. That's what Jacob is facing when he sends his household across the Jabbok. It's not clear why he sends them ahead. He could be trying to protect them, getting them out of the way of a battle. But with his track record he may actually be using them as a buffer against his brother's forces to protect himself. Again, never been a team player.

Why would God choose someone like Jacob to become the father of God's people? What does God see in Jacob that his story obscures? Those questions have no certain answer. What we have instead is an encounter, a conflict that unfolds on the riverbank as Jacob prepares himself to meet what he may have believed was his end. Through that struggle with God Jacob is given a new name, Israel, and a new direction for his life. God sees Jacob and through being seen Jacob is transformed and Israel, not just the person, but the nation, is born.

Jacob's life has been spent running away, hiding from his future. But in this encounter with God, when he is finally seen, Jacob becomes a new creation. I think Jacob embodies the struggle we are all in to be seen. Being seen has a transformative effect. The widow who goes to the judge for vengeance must be seen before she can get what she wants. The judge in Jesus' story has no regard for her. He doesn't feel any sense of obligation to God to carry out justice. All he wants is to be left alone, but she will not give up. She pesters and pesters him until he's forced to see her.

In her book *Short Stories by Jesus*, Amy-Jill Levine points out that neither character in this story is very sympathetic. The judge, of course, has no regard for God or anyone, so he's not

exactly a role model. But the widow is also negative. Our translation says she only wants justice, but the word in Greek is better translated “revenge.” She’s out for blood. Also, not a great role model. It could be Jesus is using these characters as a way of illustrating the importance of tenacity, of staying in the fight no matter what. I’m reminded of a scene from the movie *Biloxi Blues* based on the play by Neil Simon. The main character, Eugene Morris Jerome played by Matthew Broderick, aspires to be a writer, so he’s constantly observing the various struggles his bunk mates go through in boot camp and recording things in his diary. He’s confronted by one of the men, named Epstein, who has always seemed withdrawn and sickly, to stop watching things and get involved. After an altercation Epstein has with their drill sergeant, Eugene asks him why he would do that. Epstein tells him, “You’re a witness. You’re always standing around watching what’s happening.... You have to get in the middle of it; you have to take sides. Make a contribution to the fight!” When Eugene asks, “What fight?” Epstein answers, “Any fight. The one you believe in.” Eugene is hiding; he doesn’t want to be seen; he doesn’t want to struggle. But until he does, he’ll never be transformed.

Jesus insists his disciples struggle to be seen. He insists they not hide themselves away and refuse to get in the middle of it—to be like the widow...and like the judge, for that matter, who finally takes her side. Or like Jacob who holds onto his opponent rather than giving in. That’s the kind of tenacity it takes if we want to be transformed, and if we want to transform the world.

As I’ve said many times, Israel isn’t meant for itself alone. In the same way our relationship with Christ isn’t meant for us alone. Our faith may be personal, but it’s not meant to be private. Just as we are seen through whatever struggle we experience, we’re called to see the world around us. And that means coming face to face with some hard realities. The truth is there are many people and communities around us struggling to be seen, and we’re not paying attention. Look what had to happen before we could see the depth of disparity, the everyday inequities that exist on Buffalo’s east side. If we want to see a transformed world, then we have to face that reality and examine our role in it.

I don’t say this to be accusatory or condemning. I really believe we are at a crossroads in our society, a River Jabbok moment. If we don’t join the struggle to be seen, if we allow other forces in our society decide who’s acceptable, who’s valid and who isn’t, then I fear what we’ll become. There are so many around us who are struggling to be seen, to be taken seriously, to be looked on with compassion: undocumented immigrants, trans men and women, victims of abuse, people caught in a cycle of poverty that shuts them out of our economic and political system, the list goes on and on. Jesus invites his disciples to join that struggle, to be seen and to see others. Jesus invites us to be transformed and given a new name. We can make a difference in this world if we’re willing to join the fight.

God is counting on us, even though like Jacob we have many flaws and are unlikely heroes. God is counting on us to be tenacious, to struggle for all we’re worth and refuse to let go until we’re transformed, until the world is made new. God is counting on us because God sees us and knows who we are and who we have the capacity to become...to be God’s own in the world so through us the world can be made new.

Amen