

Sermon "Food for the Journey" Ruth McCowan July 31, 2011
Knox Presbyterian Church – Victoria, B. C.

Let us Pray: Breathe on us, O God, that we may be filled with your Spirit - and led by your living word. Bless the word of my lips and the meditations of our hearts in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

As anyone who has ever gone away on a holiday knows it is very important to pack everything you will need. The difficulty comes when certain things happen along the way that we have not anticipated. The same is true for our life journey. There were a lot of twists and turns in Jacob's journey before we encounter this portion of his journey in our reading today. Twenty years before the incident recorded in today's reading Jacob had fled his father's home; he left with the clothes on his back, a bartered birthright and a stolen blessing. He had lived up to his name which meant "heel catcher", or more simply, "one who deceives, or tricks another".

Jacob went to the land of Haran and there he practised his art on his father-in-law, a man who also was rather crafty and tricked Jacob into marrying the wrong woman.

After twenty years Jacob fled his father-in-law's home, taking with him the great wealth that he had earned a wealth measured in wives, livestock, and children and in fleeing the home of Laban he decided to return to his homeland for he has had dream in which an angel of the Lord had told him to return to his native land.

But there is a catch - as there so often is when we try to go home after leaving it under a cloud.

When Jacob returns he must face his brother Esau the very brother whom he had taken advantage of, the very brother whom he had cheated out of his birthright. And understandably Jacob is afraid.

So as Jacob approaches his homeland he sends a messenger to inform Esau that he is on his way and that he has become very wealthy and when the messenger returns he tells Jacob that Esau is coming out to meet him, and that there are 400 men with him. This news does not encourage Jacob at all but makes him more uneasy about the meeting with his brother.

So Jacob divides his herds, and his people and everything he has into two, thinking that just perhaps if Esau attacks him one group will escape.

And then he prays, and he sends five messengers to Esau, each a little after the other, each with a different gift of livestock. Hoping perhaps to impress and appease his brother.

And then night falls. It is at this point that today's reading occurs. Esau is a little way ahead of Jacob, so Jacob expects to meet his brother sometime the next day.

Can you imagine what it must have been like to be living in Jacob's shoes the night before meeting with his brother? He sends his two wives, his two maidservants, his eleven sons, and all the rest of his possessions across the stream called Jabbok. And he is left totally alone, in the dark, camped by a little stream wondering what will happen the next day. Our reading today puts it his way:

Jacob was left alone and a man wrestled with him till daybreak.

We hear that this man that he wrestles with could not overpower him, so he wounds Jacob in the hip, but Jacob still would not let go. Even as the sun begins to rise Jacob and this man are locked tightly together. Finally the man pleads with Jacob to release him but Jacob refuses to let go until he receives a blessing. And the man agrees to the condition and says to Jacob, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome." And at this point, Jacob asks the man his name but the man just says, "why do you ask me my name" And he blesses Jacob, and disappears from our story.

And again Jacob is left by himself. He gives the place where he camped a name - PENIEL saying "It is because I saw God face to face and yet my life was spared". Our reading ends here but the story does not end here. As we read further Jacob heads off to meet Esau and Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept. What an amazing journey for these two brothers.

The story of the encounter between Jacob and the struggle with God or the man is an interesting one. What we know for sure about this incident is that it was hard, and was draining, and it left Jacob with a mark, a distinguishing mark – a limp caused by an injured hip.

And we also know that Jacob believed that he had struggled with an angel and he was convinced that he had struggled with God, and that he had won something important - that he had won a blessing.

I believe that Jacob's struggle before he was reconciled with his brother was a struggle that he had to go through alone and it is a struggle that all of us experience at one point in our own journey. There comes a point in all of our lives when we experience our own dark night of the soul, a time when we must struggle and either win or lose a blessing.

In those times, there will be doubt, and confusion, often there will be anger and despair, mistakes we have made that have caught up to us, and things we did not anticipate, and do not know the name of and they seek to overwhelm us.

And like Jacob we are afraid. We are afraid because the struggle itself is painful, and afraid because deep down we know that if we give up, if we let go, we will be overwhelmed. And we are afraid that even if we manage to survive the struggle that nothing will come of it but another struggle and then another. Many of us, if not all of us, carry inside us some pain, some hurt, some issue, with which we must struggle.

The prophet Isaiah says: *Fear not, for I have redeemed you. I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.*

In every struggle we are given a choice. Our trials can become blessings to us. I remember one day not too long ago as I was heading back to work after being at the cancer clinic with my husband and a song came on the radio that I had not heard before called Blessings. It spoke to my fear that day and I'd like to share it with you today.

Song "Blessings" by Laura Story

I believe with the songwriter that our struggles in this life can be mercies in disguise and through our struggles we experience God's grace. Through our struggles we need to hold on like Jacob and receive the blessing.

As we turn to Matthew's account of the feeding of the 5000 it is easy to skip over the first part but I want to draw attention to verse 13, "when Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place." To put that verse into context we have to read ahead to find out what just happened. We discover that Jesus' cousin John the Baptist had been beheaded by King Herod. Imagine how Jesus must have felt when he heard that news. Imagine what it would be like to hear that a family member that you were very close to has been the victim of an atrocious crime. No wonder Matthew said that Jesus withdrew to a solitary place. Don't you think that maybe Jesus wanted to be alone to grieve the death of his cousin? But then Matthew adds, "Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns . . ."

Jesus can't even have a few moments to grieve. But we read, Jesus had compassion for the crowd. And he still views us with that same compassion today. He knows what our struggles are. He knows every step of our journey and he provides the food that we need to sustain us through whatever comes our way just as he did when he provided food to the people who came seeking him on the mountainside.

Let us pray:

Gracious God, Thank you for your presence and knowing each of us where we are in our journey. Fill us today O God with the spiritual food that will sustain and strengthen us that we might be a source of nourishment and support to others in Jesus name. Amen.