

“Face Turn”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

Genesis 32: 9-13, 22-30

September 15, 2019 - Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Last Sunday we heard the story of the birth of Isaac to Sarah and Abraham — a child named after laughter. By the time we get to this morning’s reading, Isaac is long dead. He has had two sons: twins named Esau and Jacob who, as our story begins, have not seen each other in quite awhile. They did not part on good terms. Jacob fled for his life after having swiped from Esau first the older brother’s birthright privileges and then a blessing from their dying father meant for Esau. We’ll talk more about those. Here Jacob is heading back to his homeland and he is about to cross the river and see his brother for the first time in twenty years. He is very scared of the reception he’ll get. Listen as Jacob prays, and then has a very odd encounter. Hear God’s Word to us from chapter 32 of the book of Genesis:

And Jacob said, “O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O Lord who said to me, ‘Return to your country and to your kindred, and I will do you good,’ I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan; and now I have become two companies. Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children. Yet you have said, ‘I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted because of their number.’”

So he spent that night there, and from what he had with him he took a present for his brother Esau, 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.”

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

A bowl of Fruit Loops for each of us and my brother and I would be ready. Saturday morning wrestling was on. Our TV would be filled with wild names and even more wild personas. As kids of the late 80s we had: Randy “Macho Man” Savage, Andre the Giant, Hacksaw Jim Duggan, The Iron Sheik, The Ultimate Warrior, Brutus “the Barber” Beefcake, “Bam Bam” Bigelow, Jake “the Snake” Roberts, the “Million Dollar Man” Ted DiBiase, and of course, the real American hero, Hulk Hogan.

We were completely transfixed by the athletic feats of these steroid-fueled real-life cartoon characters

and all the soap opera drama that unfolded each week and on the pay-per-view specials that we only got to see if we could persuade our mom to take us to our aunt's house with her illegal cable hookup.

We didn't know the jargon at the time, but the world of professional wrestling was completely binary, made up of clearly defined lists of what were called "faces" and "heels" in wrestling parlance.

The "faces" were the good guys, the white hats, the heroes who were sincere and honest. They never thought to cheat. They found literal physical strength from the cheers of their crowd. They could be rejuvenated by the screams of even the little *Hulkamaniacs* at home, watching from thousands of miles away an event that had occurred days ago.

The "heels" were the bad guys. They were constantly, boldly cheating. They would bring illegal objects into the ring and distract the referee and they fed off the boos and hisses of the audience.

Every once in a while to spice up the storyline, one of these larger-than-life characters would take what is known as a "turn." A good guy would come under the influence of a nefarious manager, or give in to the temptation of money or power and he'd suddenly — right there in the middle of a match — do something awful, like attacking a fellow "face," breaking the hearts of little Joey and Peter. A wrestler who "turned heel" was worse than a regular old villain, because he had spit on your trust. He'd used you. He'd fooled you.

And then there were the wrestlers who would take a "face turn." You'd watch in shock as a monster that you were convinced was worse than Stalin and Mussolini combined suddenly came to the rescue of one of your heroes. What's going on? He's seen the light! He's a good guy now! Anything is possible if you say your prayers and take your vitamins!

Enter Jacob. We've talked a lot about names here in Genesis. When Esau was born, he entered the world with Jacob grasping his foot by the heel, trying until the last second to be the older brother. Thus he was named Jacob, a name related to the word for "heel." Later, Esau gives this name a more metaphorical spin, seeing Jacob's heel grab as just the first of his attempts to supplant the older brother. In a very weird story, Jacob — usurper, supplanter, heel — found Esau desperately hungry one day and fed him in exchange for his birthright. Later, with the help of his mom, Jacob tricked his dying father Isaac into thinking Jacob was Esau, securing a sacred blessing by subterfuge.

Jacob the heel is quaking in his sandals at the thought of seeing his brother again. So he prays a prayer that starts out humble and ends with him saying, "Help me, *if* you're the kind of God who keeps promises." He sends a huge gift of animals with servants ahead, a peace offering to Esau. Then he gets his family across the river.

And then he is alone.

And suddenly the bell rings and it's time for a wrestling match. Jacob wrestles — a man? an angel? God? — and it's a draw. The holy one twists and turns cannot shake this troubled soul. Thanks be to God.

Jacob's opponent sees the day breaking and demands to call it a night. Jacob — supplanter, stealer of blessings — demands that the wrestler not cry "uncle," but "blessing."

Before he gets his blessing, the heel who entered the match as Jacob will leave the ring with a new

name: Israel. Jacob names the place Peniel, which means “face of God.” When he meets Esau in the next chapter, Esau will embrace him and kiss him and the brothers will weep together. Overwhelmed by the grace he receives, Jacob will tell Esau, “truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God.”

In this holy wrestling match, God gives the people of the covenant identity. Jacob’s new name, Israel, will carry down through the generations as the name of the kingdom. This name about striving, struggling, contending with God is how God identifies this people:

They will try to pin God down.

They will struggle.

They will not let God go.

They will not give up.

They will be God’s sparing partner, generation to generation.

And God seems to enjoy this relationship.

God is willing to tango.

God is willing to put it all on the line — to be vulnerable, to risk — in order to get close to them.

God has great love for a people who do not take promises for granted, who do not just accept their fate, who demand a blessing as they struggle.

So this is how it will be. It’s a new model for creator and created, in which God is not a dominant ruler, but a co-struggler, a co-author of the story.

Do note that Jacob demands the name of his combatant in addition to the blessing and he doesn’t get that. Wrestling to a draw, winning a blessing, but there are still mysteries for which Jacob-now-Israel is not prepared.

And do note that this experience and this blessing does not come without cost. Jacob exits the match limping. And tradition holds that this injury marked him the rest of his life.

On the front cover of your bulletin is a picture of one very small part of a larger sculpture which features two men and a woman each lifting their little finger. The city of Aachen in Germany is near the western borders with Belgium and the Netherlands. In the industrial age Aachen became one of the largest global producers of sewing needles. The factories would employ children to sort the needles and look for defective ones, and they would do so with their pinkies. Extended needle sorting left many young people in Aachen with permanently distorted little fingers. If you saw someone with a twisted pinky, you knew part of their story. The raised little finger eventually came to be a greeting between Aacheners, even long after the needle factories were gone. If you see an Aachen license plate on the autobahn, you might give them the ol’ pinky wave: I see you, we have something in common, we are of the same people.

I wonder if Jacob, after this encounter, was more apt to notice someone with a hitch in their gait, or a scar, or wrinkles, or eyes that had so obviously *seen something*. I wonder if he wondered as he noticed them, “Are they a wrestler too?”

The world is divided into good people and bad people. Heels and faces.

The good people are the ones that agree with me. The bad people must be demonized.

The first question must be: Are they on my side?

I fear this is much of what we have become — a pro-wrestling people.

Certainly for many who have been marginalized and had their wellbeing threatened, the first question

may need to be: Am I safe with this person? If physical and emotional safety is secured, I wonder how our world might be improved by asking not “Are they on my side?” but:

Have they been through something? Have they wrestled with hard questions?

Have they struggled with family and faith?

Have they been up all night, been brought to the brink, and seen the face of God?

Have they found blessing and pain in what they’ve been through?

We are the messy, the obstinate, the confused, the fearful, the fearfully made, beloved people of God. We are called to be co-strugglers with our God.

At times we will all be called to grapple with the long night and to demand a blessing and to find ourselves both wounded and in the presence of the holy.

The real heroes don’t wear capes and face paint and masks and tights.

As it seems the institutions we’ve relied on are at risk and as our planet is on fire, our job is to spend our time searching for heroes willing to tussle with big questions. We need to be people who push away easy answers in favor of sweating and straining. When we feel alone like Jacob, we seek people willing to put themselves at risk. We need to look for those struggling and say, “We see you. We see the mark of one who has striven with God.”

The heroes struggle. Step into the ring. There lies the face of God.

Amen.