

10th Sunday After Pentecost

[Genesis 32.22-31](#)

[Matthew 14.13-21](#)

Rev'd Jamee Callard

(Sermon taken from YouTube transcript)

A Healing Limp?

Let us pray. O Lord, who provides, who blesses us, we ask your blessings to come down upon us now, rest upon us as we wrestle with you and with the Word, and come away healed. Amen.

Very briefly, I'd like to acknowledge the gospel passage today, this wonderful, wonderful passage, which is a favourite of many, which tells the story of when Jesus fed over 5,000 people just using a few loaves and a few fish which his disciples had gathered together for their dinner.

It is when there is a lack that God's Providence is able to break through and make miracles. This is a fine example of Jesus doing just that, and the way that the kingdom of God breaking through to us in our lives is a miracle, but often one which is a bit unexpected.

It was certainly unexpected for the disciples. They were handing over their dinner; they didn't know what was going to happen.

So I say briefly because what I would really like to focus on today is the lesson from Genesis: this short excerpt of a much larger chapter where we encounter Jacob once again.

Last week, we had a snippet from Jacob just as he is marrying his two wives, Leah and then Rachel. In just revisiting that, we really did see the way that Jacob the deceiver, who had taken his brother's blessing from Esau before that, was deceived by his father-in-law.

In today's passage, we skip a couple of decades later. He now has 11 children, and he is what you could say a well-established man, but he has been well established not in the area or kingdom or province of his people, but in a neighbouring province where he was an alien.

It is now time for him to return and face the music, as it were, and the music that he is going to be facing is his very angry older brother, who for the last couple of decades has lived with the consequence of Jacob's deception.

That consequence, of course, was that although being the firstborn, he did not inherit the same blessing that he should have, which was a little bit extra than what all children were given in those days, and Esau had promised that the next time that he saw Jacob he would kill him.

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So this is what happens when Jacob is packing up all of his gear, all of his children, his wives, their servants, and taking them on a journey. He crosses the Jabbok ford and tells them to go on ahead, so in a sense he sends them on to safety while he prepares for this meeting with his brother when he expects to die.

But something happens overnight as he is getting ready to see big brother Esau. He is left alone, but then someone comes to him, and this someone wrestles with him all night long.

At one point in this wrestling match, it is said that Jacob was not giving in, and so this figure that we know was a messenger, or God's presence in angel form, popped the hip socket of Jacob out so that there was an advantage, maybe to get him to listen. Maybe it is also something else.

At that point, Jacob says, "I will not let you go until you bless me." Then there is a little bit more of a revelation that happens. There is this conversation about Jacob's name. "What are you called?" the angel asks Jacob.

"Well, you are not going to be called Jacob anymore, because Jacob is the name that belonged to the deceiver. Jacob is the name that belonged to the person who never trusted anything other than his own abilities. Jacob was the name that was given to the man who stole his brother's birthright."

You are going to have a new name, and that name is Israel, and the reason that your name is Israel is because you have striven with God all night and you have not let go. You have held on.

This is amazing. This is incredible. This is a new start, a transformation. This is a change that happens within Jacob himself, and it is an essential change which leads him not to face his brother as Jacob the deceiver, but as Jacob as he is to become and as he is becoming: the leader of a nation, the patriarch who will then have a line that leads to the Messiah, to Jesus.

But he is also one who was humble enough to meet his brother and say sorry and to acknowledge that his brother also has that same leadership in his life, and for them to meet in a more equal way. We know that when that meeting happened, Jacob did not lose his life. Esau did not kill him. There was some form of reconciliation. It was never going to be perfect, but Jacob did go on to keep being a leader of this new nation, this new people Israel.

So let's get back to that other part: the limp that was gifted to Jacob in this interaction. This is where I would love for us to focus on that idea of God's Providence again: the idea that when something is lacking, that is when God turns up and does a miracle of some kind.

This particular story can really rework all of our ideas about what it means to live with a body that perhaps has a disability, or an illness, or something going on with it that the world says is wrong. Here, the blessing that is gifted to the newly named Israel, who used to be Jacob, is a limp.

Okay, it is a limp. This limp is not one that just happens for this wrestling match and then he recovers from it and goes on. In fact, in Hebrews, we know that for the rest of his life he walked

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with a limp, and that was the sign of God's covenant with him, of his blessing, and of his promises that were fulfilled in the people of Israel through the generations when Jesus turned up.

We know that Jacob used a cane, a walking stick, and this became a sign for all of those who did not know him yet, who were perhaps visitors or those who were coming to a faith, who then came to see the leader of the nation. "Ah, this is him. We know that this is him because he has a limp and he is walking with a cane."

So, a new name and a limp: signs of a transformation and a blessing. How can this rework ideas that we might have, or the world might give us, about ability and what it means to be blessed and to walk with God, not having a perfect body? Because guess what? Who does?

In this life, if we suffer and we have difficulty with mobility or wellness or energy levels, these are not a sign of separation from God. In fact, they can sometimes be the avenue towards blessing.

Vulnerability in and of itself is what Jesus came to teach us was the true meaning of life and life in abundance. He came not as a conquering hero who saved the day, as it were, but as a suffering servant whose body was broken on the cross. He became disabled in order to save us and to show us that vulnerability, not power, is the true avenue to eternity and to life.

So if we are really beginning to allow this idea of vulnerability into our lives, it also teaches us that we need one another, just as there had to be a lack for the five thousand to be fed and the disciples were the ones that showed up and gave their dinner away so that it could be multiplied and transformed.

So too can we show up with our vulnerabilities and maybe see how God meets those needs in the hands and faces and deeds of others around us.

Sometimes I do think that I myself am very wrapped up in my own disabilities. It can be really difficult to see any sort of light shining through it when the body is in pain and the brain is fatigued and I cannot make sense of anything around me.

But actually, sometimes in hindsight, it is that I see the way that God was companioning me through the dark night, when I am wrestling the hardest, when it seems like it is so difficult. Maybe that is when the blessings are being prepared: a new name and a limp.

Maybe it could be that the transformation we seek is not one that we need to work hard for in becoming some sort of invulnerable human who can do everything and achieve and strive, but maybe it is in being vulnerable and recognizing that at some stage in every person's life they will be disabled.

Whether that be through injury, which then heals and recovers, but the body is never the same again; maybe that is through age, when getting to that place when things start to slow down; maybe it is in a condition that a person has been given and blessed with at different points in their life, which is really difficult to sit with when it is a pain.

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But these are the ways, maybe, that the light breaks through, and that others around us are given opportunities to come and be with us in that and also receive blessing through us, just as Jacob, then named Israel, was able to keep blessing others while he continued with his limp.

There is a fantastic book which goes into great detail around all of this: the blessing of disability. It is written by Amy Kenny, and it is called *My Body Is Not a Prayer Request*. It is quite confronting. It is a book which I certainly recommend. In it, she writes about this story of Jacob wrestling all night with an angel and receiving a new name and a limp:

"This story is about the ways God shows up willing to wrestle and transform Jacob into a generous and humble version of himself, liberated from manufacturing malicious schemes. Jacob learns to trust God. Faith then looks like wrestling all night long and emerging with a healing limp."

So whether the disability that we travel with is a visible one like Jacob's was, maybe it is an invisible one, maybe it is one that comes and goes, or maybe it is even a disability of the mind where we cannot allow ourselves to be vulnerable but continue to strive the way that the world encourages us to achieve, to be strong, to need no one.

The truth of the Gospel is that this is not the way the kingdom of God works. Jesus came as a vulnerable person. Jesus then was broken and disabled on the cross, and he rose to new life through this lack. It was through lack of life that the resurrection was able to happen.

So I ask God's blessings on us and God's Providence for us in those times when we feel like we are in a dark night, but perhaps transformation is happening under the surface for us to go on and be blessed or be a blessing to others.

May we bravely struggle and wrestle with God, for that is what faith is all about. Amen.