



TAKE A LESSON FROM A CROOK **Genesis 32:22-31**

I want to make a disclaimer at the very beginning of this sermon. There is no known correlation between your pastor's character and today's sermon title. In the words of a famous American "I am not a crook."

Today's story is about Jacob. The good news is that God holds onto Jacob - even when Jacob does not hold onto God. This is a story about **THE PREVENIENT GRACE OF GOD**. This simply means that God is at work in our lives - even when we do not know it. It means that God is at work in our lives - even when we do not cooperate with God. It means that God is at work in our lives turning events to his purposes - despite all the evidence to the contrary.

My wife often gets upset with me when I watch movies like **DANCES WITH WOLVES**- because I fast forward through all the bad parts. However, the Bible does not do that with its characters - especially the one we are studying about today - **Jacob**.

To be quite honest with you - I might have been tempted to do that with Jacob. I might have cleaned up Jacob's image. That is the reason we know that the Bible is real and true. Martin Luther once said, "God carves the rotten wood and rides the lame horse." That is certainly true with Jacob.

This biblical text is filled with suspense and intrigue. This is the story of a devious and deceptive man who winds up receiving a divine blessing from God. The writer, Frederick Buechner, shares: "Far from suffering for his dishonesty - Jacob clearly profited from it. For anyone trying to find an easy moral lesson in this story you are in for a big surprise and great despair."¹ However, in my opinion this story is not about morality - but the magnificent purposes of God which cannot be ignored or defeated.

This story is about Jacob coming face to face with God - and discovering a God who could not have loved and cared for his soul more.

I remember seeing the movie "The Apostle" starring Robert Duvall. The character he plays is Sonny. "The Apostle EF" is a Jacob type character. When he did the will of God he was a great force for God. However, there is a shadowy side to this character portrayed in the film.

I am glad that the Bible does not fast forward through all the shadowy and dark parts of Jacob's life. We can relate to this story - because Jacob is so much like us. This story endures - because it is so believable. When I think of modern day Jacobs I think of people like Oscar Schindler in the movie **SCHINDLER'S LIST** or Adam Chandler in my favorite soap opera **ALL MY CHILDREN**. Maybe even Donald Trump - who wrote the book **THE ART OF THE DEAL**. Someone with Jacob's shrewdness would probably get elected as a Senator - even President. However, when we read our scripture lesson today - we find out that God - is the greatest - in the cutting of a deal. God's deal is called **THE COVENANT**. Let me set the stage for our story for today.

In our story we see the image of a wrestler. Well, Jacob spends his entire life wrestling with someone or something. According to **Genesis 25:21-27** Jacob begins to wrestle with his older brother Esau - right in his mother's womb. To me - this symbolizes that Jacob struggles and wrestles with his identity from the very get-go. The name 'Jacob' means deceiver - supplanter - heel-grabber - conniver. He tries to pull Esau back into his mother's womb - so he can be born first and receive the blessing. Talk about a type "**A**" personality.

My mentor Eugene Peterson shares how this biblical story of Jacob and how God uses him as one of its charter members shocks us. Jacob hasn't even cleared the birth canal when he does anything necessary to get ahead in life.² Now you can see why this story can be clearly set in the year 2008.

A good wrestler does not overpower his opponent as much as he sets them up for a lightning fast take-down. Jacob is so good at creating the opportunity to take advantage of someone else. It is this shrewdness that God needs to transform and re-direct in the life of Jacob.

Now turn to **Genesis 27:1-9**. Here we see Jacob wrestle the birthright blessing from his Father Isaac - with his mother's help. However, the wrestling match continues between Jacob and Esau - because Esau set his heart on killing Jacob. Jacob, warned by his mother of Esau's plans, becomes a modern-day Harrison Ford in the movie **THE FUGITIVE**. Jacob runs away - in the hope that Esau's anger will someday cool down - unlike the desert he finds himself in. Here we see a dysfunctional family - right in the Bible. However, this does not stop the purpose of God from being worked out in human history.

Now, this is the hard part of the story to stomach. Guess what Jacob receives as punishment for all his deception? **He becomes a success!** God uses a scoundrel to continue his community of faith.³ At least it looks like success! However, he is still without a homeland - and still wrestling for his identity - and still seeking reconciliation with his brother. So why does God allow this story in sacred scripture? Eugene Peterson believes that "God uses Jacob to make sure that we don't disqualify ourselves from getting in on the Christian faith by saying that we aren't good enough."⁴

I first remember singing our middle hymn **WE ARE CLIMBING JACOB'S LADDER** as a youngster in Vacation Bible School. For a long time I thought, "How nice that Jacob

wants to be with God." However, if you read the story closely God was not the first thing on Jacob's mind. Jacob is more concerned about finding a wife and not running into his brother who he has swindled.

It was only later that I realized that the real meaning of this story is that God is trying to reach Jacob - not the other way around. Jacob might have been acting as if he did not believe in God - **but God still believed in him**. God does not break the covenant - even when we do. God does not give up on any of us. God is at work in the vineyard even at the eleventh hour.

Now Jacob - despite all his success - and the fact he had been shrewd enough to outwit Esau, Isaac and Laban - there was the fact he was playing hide and seek with God. It is tough to play hide and seek with a God who's omnipresent.

When Jacob stole Esau's birthright - he received more than he bargained for. This blessing or touch by his father I believe - instilled into his spirit - a spiritual consciousness that he could not shake as a fugitive. Jacob discovered what we all have found out the hard way - we cannot live fully without the presence and purposes of God.

So Jacob is haunted all of his days with the promise of a homeland - and an identity that squares with the purposes of God. It is obvious that Jacob's planning and scheming has not ushered deep meaning and eternal purpose into his life. He has listened to the wrong call upon his life. He is haunted by the dreams and promises of something greater. Jacob learns that greatness is never found in a man - but in God working through the man to accomplish his purposes.

So that brings us to our lesson today in **Genesis 32**. This passage is really the story of a new Jacob in the making. Jacob might have acted as if he had no real interest in God - but God acts at this place by the river because he has a great interest in Jacob. For a little insurance against Esau gaining an advantage over him in verse 23 - Jacob sends his family across the river - ahead of him. Jacob is scheming right up to the decisive wrestling match. You have never wrestled - until you have wrestled with God. It is a wrestling match that you will never forget.

So as we pick up our story today, we see that it is night. Jacob is alone. Then out of the deep darkness - Jacob is assaulted by a stranger. He is wrestling again. However, this time - all of his moves seem to be of no avail. They struggle until the sun rises. Jacob realizes that he is wrestling with something greater than himself - and refuses to let go. His strength and schemings are no match for this stranger.

All of a sudden this mysterious antagonist touches Jacob's hip - and it is dislocated. He is crippled. He cannot escape the presence and power of his opponent. Jacob's opponent is clearly superior. This is why I believe his opponent is God or a heavenly messenger of God. His opponent not only has the power to overpower Jacob, but to bless him as well. Only God can do both those things at the same time.

However, Jacob is a determined man - and still refuses to let go - until the stranger blesses him. I don't know when Jacob realizes he has wrestled with God - but he DOES. **HE DOES.**

Notice how in his losing - Jacob wins a new identity. It was a magnificent defeat. When the stranger asked him his name, he rightfully replied, “**Jacob.**” It was as though he was making a good and right confession. ‘Yes, I am a deceiver. Yes, I am a scoundrel. However, I surrender it all to you now.’ He now receives the name **Israel**. Even his limp is now a sign of the grace of God. It is a sign that he is marked and claimed by something greater than himself. His real identity now comes from God and not man.

Sometimes God must be more than a good friend - God must wrestle with us on the mat - until we surrender - and become marked - now by the sign of the cross.

I wonder how many of us here today stand at the river. What a blessing and identity we could have - if we only would travel the journey and follow the way that God in Christ would have us follow. It is important to keep the horizon of God's promise always before us. It can make a great difference.

Like Jacob - we find that all our human plans and well-thought-out schemings have not granted us any real peace or satisfaction. Our hearts are restless and empty - until they are filled with the purposes of God. Charles Wesley wrote perhaps his finest hymn and poetry on this story of Jacob wrestling with this unknown traveler. You cannot write words like this - unless there has been such a wrestling match and struggle in one's own life as well. That is why this story can be squarely set in the midst of human life in 2008. This story speaks with enormous power to us - because we have all made deals and wrestled with God's will for our lives until we have yielded and surrendered to him.

As in Jacob's life, God can take the raw materials of our lives - and fashion something greater out of them.

As a sign of Jacob's new identity and transformation he is given a new name. It was not easy for Jacob to come before God. The presence and power of God can cripple our egos - our plans - our goals. It is not always easy to come before God - but it sure beats being a fugitive without a homeland. It is difficult to live life devoid of God's presence.

Take a lesson from a crook - your arms are too short to box or wrestle with God. Fall down at the river Jabbok and limp into the presence and arms of God.

Yes, “Jacob was easily the most thoroughly crooked man portrayed in scripture. There doesn't seem to have been a single redeeming feature in his life until that night when God wrestled with him and changed him. But it was precisely this man – this man in whom we can find nothing good – who was changed and became the namesake of God's people: Israel.”⁵ So much so that in **Psalm 46** it declares, “The God of Jacob is our refuge.”

Why do we take refuge in the God of Jacob? Because it is the God of Jacob who never gives up on us – even when we have tried to give up on Him.

This God who calls Jacob does not deal with us on the basis of our righteousness – but on the basis of his boundless grace. He blesses us because of who he is – not who we are.⁶

Only by the grace of God can we learn a lesson from a crook and find ourselves as citizens of the kingdom of God.

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz

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ENDNOTES

1. Frederick Buechner, **THE MAGNIFICENT DEFEAT**, Seabury Paperback, third edition, The Seabury Press: New York, page 14.

² Eugene H. Peterson, **CONVERSATIONS: The Message with its translator**, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO, 2007, page 56.

³ Ibid, Peterson, page 56.

⁴ Ibid, Peterson, page 56.

⁵ Ibid, Peterson, page 68.

⁶ Charles F. Stanley, **LIFE PRINCIPLES BIBLE**, NKJV, Thomas Nelson Incorporated, Nashville, TN, 2005, page 42.