

Jesus Comes to Us From a People

Scriptures: 1 John 4:13-21; Genesis 32:22-30 (22-24, 28)

The Human Jesus

Last week we talked about Advent being the Christian New Year, a time of anticipation of Jesus' coming at the manger of Bethlehem and a time of eager expectation of His pending return to make all things right. We started to talk about families, because when we start thinking about Advent and Christmas, we think of family. We think about family gatherings on Christmases past. We think about seeing family and friends who are still with us here below. And we talked about Jesus having a human family from which He was descended.

We're going to explore that human side of Jesus Christ a little bit more this morning, by looking at one of His ancestors, but before we do, we also have to keep in mind that we've been grafted into His family. When we follow Jesus, we're brought into His family – His body, the Church – and that provides us with more than just a spiritual lineage or heritage. He gives us a new family, bound together by love and faith in the covenant-keeping God of the Universe. Being part of the Body of Christ gives us a sense of enduring connections to the people and the land of Israel. It gives us a sense of our place in God's covenant story with humanity – weaving relentlessly through our personal and corporate histories – a story that reached its height in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. So today, we'll consider the "someone" from whom Jesus comes to us – His earthly family – the people of Israel. If you have a Bible or Bible app handy, turn with me to Genesis 32:22-30. **Read Genesis 32:22-30.**

Swindling Jacob

The story of Jacob, who came to be renamed Israel, is one of the most fascinating characters in the Old Testament. If you don't know much about him, he was a swindler and a manipulator from the time he was born. His life is marked by behaviors which would make our modern-day heads spin if someone did them to us. Remember last week when we talked about Jesus' family line? Jacob, or Israel, was in that list in Matthew 1. He led a colorful life!

Jacob cheated his brother Esau out of his birthright. You can read about that in Genesis 25. Here's how that happened, in a nutshell. Esau had been out hunting, came back home starving, and Jacob had made a pot of lentil soup. "Esau said to Jacob, 'Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!' (Therefore he was called Edom.)," (Gen. 25:30), to which Jacob set a high price – Esau's birthright. His rights as the firstborn son of their father, Isaac, and Esau agreed.

Now you might not consider that cheating his brother, but most people I know, if they have a sibling and the sibling has a need, they do what they can to help. Jacob's

pretty calloused towards his older brother. Later, when Isaac was old, and about to die, Jacob dressed up as his older brother Esau, put goat hair on his arms and face, and took food to his dad, and lied. You can read about that in Genesis 27. Jacob said, “I am Esau your firstborn. I have done as you told me; now sit up and eat of my game, so that you may bless me,” (Gen. 27:19). So while Esau’s out, doing what his father had told him to do, Jacob lies, and gets Esau’s blessing from their dad. Esau was furious, and threatened to kill his brother.

As a result, Jacob was sent away to live with his mom’s brother, Laban, who was also a tricky guy. Jacob works for him for seven years to be married to Laban’s younger daughter, Rachel, but on the wedding night, Laban switches his daughters, and gives his older daughter, Leah, to Jacob as a wife. Realizing he got the wrong girl in the morning, Jacob goes fuming to his father-in-law, who works out an agreement to let Jacob work for him for another seven years in exchange for the woman he originally wanted to marry. See how dysfunctional the family is? It’s a mess! The two sisters end up having an on-going rivalry because of Jacob’s favoritism towards Rachel, but Leah’s able to have more children, and they both end up giving him women servants to try to balance the other sister out.

World Wrestling Federation

So that’s how we get to the Scripture we read today. “That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maidservants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions,” (Gen. 32:22-23). That’s something people did in those days – they would send their family on ahead of them. Sometimes, depending on family dynamics, you might still see that, sending various family members ahead of the main leaders in the family. Softening the blow, so to speak.

When I was in the traditional brick and mortar school systems I saw this play out. At parent-teacher conference time, the kids would come down to my room and be chatting with me, and then eventually Mom, Dad, or some other adult would come moseying in. It’s a way to kind-of soften people up. See friends, Jacob is on his way back to see his brother, Esau – the guy who wanted to kill him – for cheating him out of his inheritance. So Jacob sent his immediate family, and all his possessions on ahead.

“So Jacob was left alone, and a Man wrestled with him till daybreak,” (Gen. 32:24). Have you ever watched wrestling? As a kid, we used to watch the WWF – World Wrestling Federation – on TV on Saturday afternoons. It was fun to watch Hulk Hogan, Andre the Giant, The Macho Man Randy Savage, The Iron Sheik, and so many of those other guys in the ring. Watching their moves, and then deciding to practice them, got me and Ben into a lot of trouble! In reality, all that was fake – those guys are actors putting on a show.

Silver-Tongued Jacob Meets His Match

What we read in the Bible, though, is real. Jacob had wrestled his whole life. He wrestled with his brother coming out of the womb, wrestled a birthright and blessing from him, psychologically wrestles with his dad out of the gift of Esau's inheritance, and wrestled with his father-in-law on issues of fairness. Jacob was a master at knowing how to have it his way. He could be the spokesman for Burger King – "Have it your way," and he was so smooth at what he did, he'd have you thinking his way was your way.

He's silver-tongued. He knows how to get what he wants, and how to get people to hand stuff over to him. He's persistent. And now, Jacob's wrestling with Someone all through the night, and he still hasn't whipped Him. "When the Man saw that He could not overpower Jacob, He touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the Man. Then the Man said, 'Let Me go, for it is daybreak.' But Jacob replied, 'I will not let You go unless You bless me,'" (verses 25-26).

Think this through with me. God shows up that night in a tangible, physical body. Jacob could put his hands on Him and wrestle with Him, and physically, they were pretty even, strength-wise. Silver-tongued Jacob had finally met his match. Like Hulk Hogan and The Macho Man. Between the two of them, if they were wrestling each other for the World Championship Belt, it was a toss-up, you didn't know who was going to win. One thing was certain, watching those Wrestlemania's – if Hulk Hogan won this year against The Macho Man, something would happen, and next year, somehow, someone else would steal the belt from him, and then The Macho Man would end up getting it.

To put it another way, it's like Ohio State and Michigan football. Usually Ohio State wins, but occasionally, we have these couple year spurts where Michigan squeezes out a couple minor victories. It's good to root for our team, with the family! Despite Jacob's ability to put hands on God, God still shows He's more than capable of controlling the situation – He shows He's able to disable Jacob at will. I want to make sure you're clear on this – after this wrestling with God, Jacob was permanently disabled. He walked away with a limp – a visible mark that he had eaten a big piece of humble pie on a journey marked by grace.

What's In a Name?

"The Man asked him, 'What is your name?' 'Jacob,' he answered. Then the Man said, 'Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome.' Jacob said, 'Please tell me Your name.' But He replied, 'Why do you ask My name?' Then He blessed him there. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, 'It is because I saw God face-to-face, and yet my life was spared.'" (verses 27-30). Jacob's name became Israel after that encounter, and an entire group of people – the group from whom Jesus comes to us, and the one that

continues to thrive today took on that name. What's in a name? The fact that God's people are named, "One who wrestles [or struggles] with God," should give us a great, abiding hope – because it means we have personal, tangible contact with the One who formed humanity from the dust of the earth.

Time and time again in Holy Scripture we find that even in our complete foolishness and unawareness of God's presence, He allows us to wrestle with Him and leads us to humility through the encounter. He gets physical with us, to draw us back to Himself – and shows us this most profoundly at the cross on Good Friday. We hear of something called "repentance" throughout the Bible – the gift of God to people who resist grace even in our best moments.

He's the God who changes us. We get the opportunity to change. To have a second-chance. When Jesus comes to us in our resistance – when we've been wrestling with Him, and then we allow Him to have His way in us when we've reached the ends of ourselves, that's a beautiful, transformative thing. He empowers us, through the indwelling presence of His own Holy Spirit, to change us into His exact likenesses here on earth.

People Are Imperfect

If the family story of Jesus tells us anything, it's that people are imperfect. Covenant people do fall and fail. And when they do, they get back up again. Jesus' family story tells us that by grace, people can change. Jesus comes from a people who change, and reveals to us the "God who opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble," (James 4:6), for the purpose of change. We can become like Christ, but it's going to take a few wrestling matches through the challenges of life to get us there.

In the New Testament Scriptures, we see God take the initiative – the extra step – of pouring out grace on humanity. He comes to us as a Person. The writer of Hebrews tells us, "For we do not have a High Priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have One who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin," (Heb. 4:15). Emmanuel, "God with us," perfectly understands us. And then, by the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ becomes God in us, "the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory," (Col. 1:26-27).

Jacob was full of fear because he had a past, and an equally dark present. He was sure it was catching up to him – you can read all about it in Genesis 32. The only remedy for fear, according to 1 John 4:18, is love. Jacob feared because, like us, he struggled with love. He must have found it hard to love himself knowing all he had done. He must have found it hard to love others because he felt unloved and unfavored. He was looking for something that only God could give. Jacob's past wasn't

his future. He had a life-changing experience with God-in-the-flesh one night by the Jabbok River. Our pasts are not our futures, either, when we humble ourselves before God. We can be people who are being transformed in the presence of God.

Living Testimonies

Transformed people are living testimonies. Their lives bear evidence that prove “God can,” to a world that says, “we can’t, you can’t.” Friends, if you’re letting Jesus lead you, you are a person who’s being transformed. You’re being transformed – made into a new person – for your own benefit, and for the benefit of many others, some of whom you won’t even meet until we all stand together at the throne of Jesus Christ.

Even Jesus wrestled. Late on the night before His execution, He went to the garden to pray. He said, “Father, if You are willing, take this cup from Me. Yet not My will, but Yours be done,” (Luke 22:42). Jesus knew He was beloved. He was able to stay the course, to do the Father’s will because of His great love for us, and His own inner contentment with the relationship He has within the Trinity.

The people of Israel – the very human “someone” from whom Jesus comes to us, knew both great faith and great fear throughout their story of walking with God. As we recognize that Jesus comes to us from a people who are equal parts faithful and faithless, I hope that you take great courage from knowing that Jesus is intimately familiar with our stumbling hearts. As we prepare to receive the Sacrament of Holy Communion, the body and blood of Christ, I want to leave you with a few things to think about.

How has the love of Jesus met you in your fear and dissolved its power? Are there areas of fear you’re holding onto that you could surrender to Jesus without resistance? What do you want God to do in you through your own seasons of wrestling this past year?

Prayer: Lord of the Humbled Heart, You know us, and You always have. May our fear be broken by Your love, casting it out, day by day, from our hearts. Give us the humility that comes from having been overcome by love, and we’ll take any limp that comes with it to remind us of love’s strength for the journey. In Jesus’ name, Amen.