

August 16, 2020
From Faker to Faith
Genesis 32: 22 – 31
Faye Reynolds

Have you ever felt like you are not really qualified for a job or task you have been assigned and feel like you are faking your way through it? I confess to that feeling often. Am I faking being a musician because I know that I am not musically trained like Kathy, Matt and Jodi? I often tell people that I am not a musician – just musical as a qualifier. I have never pastored a church, but I am presently mentoring a pastor. I've been the director of women's ministries for the CBWC for 20 years, while never previously having participated much in "women's stuff" before I accepted the job. And I've never preached to a camera before so feeling out of my depth with this, hoping to rise to the challenge as well as our pastors have. There are all kinds of things we are called upon to do in life, and often we feel very unqualified for the task and yet by faith and grace and sometimes great risk, we take the step and God's often blesses the result.

Jacob is known by his name and his character as the trickster or "He who supplants", but he probably saw himself more as the faker. Just a quick recap of his story: Esau and Jacob are the twin sons of Isaac and Rebecca and by luck or chance or the hand of God, Esau is born first, earning the title of "first born son" and heir to the family estate and its blessings. Jacob comes from the womb grasping Esau's heel and ever after grasping after Esau's title and grasping for his father's approval.

Jacob tricks Esau into trading his birthright for a bowl of stew and later tricks his father Isaac into blessing him over Esau, and in doing makes an enemy of his brother, a liar out of his mother and alters the relationship of his brother and father forever as Esau marries a Cannanite woman just to spite Isaac. In all of this deceit and family disruption, what did Jacob gain with this birthright? His life threatened, so he must leave the family homestead to go and find a wife and live among his mother's relatives which turns into quite the saga of more trickery and family disfunction. If it "takes one to know one", then Laban recognizes a kindred spirit in Jacob and tricks him into marrying the elder daughter Leah over the beloved, younger Rachel and the match is on of who will out-manuever whom to win the final prize! All in all, it is a mess.

When we view Jacob's story with the lens of "merit" – that everyone should get what they deserve, we might arrive at these kinds of conclusions:

1. If Esau was silly enough to give up his birthright for a bowl of stew, he deserved to lose it
2. Jacob met his match with Laban and now knows what it is like to be cheated.

3. Jacob did not deserve to be blessed by God because he cheated the system OR he did deserve the blessing because he showed more gumption and went after the prize.

As I read through the stories around Jacob's life – my moral high ground takes a blow because I cannot figure who's the good guy. Before we dive into our primary passage of Scripture today, I want to touch upon Jacob's other encounter with angels. Right after he has cheated Esau and received Isaac's begrudging blessing, he flees his family home upon threat of his life and on the first night, with a stone for a pillow, has this fantastic dream of a ladder extending into the heavens with angels ascending and descending and in this dream God speaks these words found in *Genesis 28: 13 - 15*: *"I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."*

This bothers me! Jacob does not deserve to receive such affirmation from God after the stunt he has just pulled on his dad and brother. Why is God rewarding such abhorrent behaviour? Jacob is of course thrilled with the dream "Surely the Lord is in this place! This is the gateway to heaven!" But the next morning when he is fully awake, Jacob is not quite so confident, so he establishes a test: "If God will be with me and keep me, and clothe and feed me, and allow me to return to my father's house in peace – THEN the Lord shall be my God." Jacob loved the dream, but in his waking hours, is not sure that he trusts that it was fully from God, but rather than taking a posture of humility, he sets up criteria for God to prove worthy of being Jacob's God. IF you look after my every need of food and clothing and IF I can one day return to my family in peace – THEN I will make you Lord. What a guy! Well he heads off to Laban and things do not go so smoothly – but he does have bread to eat and clothing to wear; in fact, he becomes quite wealthy. Now 20 years later comes the final piece of his test for God – "Will I be able to go back to my family and find peace? How will Esau greet me?"

Right away in verse 1 of chapter 32 as Jacob sets off on his way, he is met by angels. That is all that is said – no message, no vision or great encounter – just angels. But for Jacob it is an encouragement and a sign of hope as he makes his way to encounter Esau. Jacob devises his plan of sending his flocks and herds and servants in groups – risking first what he can most afford to lose if Esau is violent. He sends part as gift in hopes of appeasing Esau and to soften Esau's heart. Jacob is really afraid. He fears for his life even though God promised "the land on which you lie I will give to you and your offspring . . . and all the earth will be blessed by you and your offspring . . .". And here is where we see Jacob the faker. He steals the birthright and

blessing but has never been able to live into it. He has not played the role of the elder son because he ran away. He has not been able to trust the God of his grandfather and father because he knows who he is – Jacob the trickster, the supplanter – the faker. He is a fraud. Of everything that he has acquired – what is rightfully his?

Thus, as Jacob sends his family ahead, he stays alone to reflect on his past and prepare for his future. Our text today is cryptic, simply saying that “a man wrestled with Jacob until the break of dawn”. Who is this man? Is he a figurative character representing all of Jacob’s fears and remorse – his inner demons? We do not really know who or what is this strange encounter but at the end of it, Jacob has no doubt that it was God. This is important for us as well. When things happen in our lives, some might chalk it up to coincidence, or a helpful stranger at just the right time, but in our heart of hearts, we know that God has placed his hand on our lives. **Is it so unusual that God might come to us in flesh and blood? Is that not the story of incarnation?** Yes, Jesus is the penultimate revelation of God in flesh, but I have to believe that this is not an uncommon *modus operandi* for God. God comes to us in other people; in friend and stranger and we just know it to be true. God is with us and God is willing to wrestle with us if that is what it takes for transformation.

And this is a story of transformation. Jacob has another name now - the wrestler. There is actually a play on words with Jacob’s name from the Hebrew Y’KV (Yakov) to “Y’VK (Yavok) – wrestler. So, this is the first transformation. Where the trickster was always scheming around things, manipulating the situation to get what he wanted, he now confronts his opponent head on. He foregoes the sly and indirect forms of aggression of his usual behavior with this direct confrontation. Wrestling is actually a very intimate thing – full of physical contact as one embraces the other, attaching their arms and legs. It is this fantastic image of intimacy and struggle intertwined as Jacob chooses to cling to this other and refuses to disengage (not fleeing as he has done so often in the past). This is also a stark contrast to that initial dream of angels ascending and descending the ladder, uninvolved with Jacob and totally oblivious to his presence. In that dream God gave Jacob a blessing that he cannot truly believe is real so he made this conditional attachment to God without full commitment or complete trust. But now, the faker is done with pretending – he needs now to know if God is real and if God is with him and if he is somehow worthy to face the brother that he deceived. Jacob will not let go until he has received the true blessing – not the one manipulated out of his father; not the one that seemed like a crazy dream – he wants this to be real – for the real Jacob.

The man asks Jacob’s name – which is a way of asking Jacob to be honest with his character. Who are you? I am Jacob – the one who supplants – yes that is my name and that has been my character. And the man bestows upon Jacob a new identity in the name Israel – *one who*

strives with God. The second transformation begins; for Jacob will no longer be the one who runs away, but the one who will dig in and persevere to the end. This becomes the name of the offspring who will be like the dust of the earth and spread north and south and east and west – the Israelites will continue to strive and wrestle with God for a land and a blessing.

Jacob is now ready to face Esau. He has received a true blessing from God of its own merit – not the stolen one. Jacob has finally seen God face to face, though he comes away from it limping. When God works in our lives, something always has to give way – whether a hip or our pride or independence – or even our poor self-esteem. God leaves us leaning upon him as we limp into our future.

There is another angel encounter in this story. When Jacob finally faces Esau, he does not face anger but forgiveness. He is embraced by his brother, not to wrestle but to weep. And then these most beautiful words from the lips of Jacob in Chapter 33:10 – “if I find favor with you, then accept my present from my hand; for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God . . . God has dealt graciously with me, because I have everything I want”.

Transformations do not happen quickly but in this we see Jacob take some amazing first steps toward wholeness with God. Where before he did not recognize God or trust in God’s presence, Jacob now sees God in the face of his brother. Where he thought he had to scheme to find his place, he finally recognizes that it is **all** about God’s grace. God has dealt graciously with me – I deserve nothing but now I have everything I want – and that everything is actually peace with his twin brother. This is the truth about blessing. It is never earned – it does not come **after** you have done well but **comes before** you have done anything. Gordon Smith, President of Ambrose College taught a wonderful lesson on blessing our children – that we must bless before we teach. We do not bless for what our child does, but we bless them by pointing out who they are – that they are kind, generous, God’s beautiful creation full of amazing potential. We do not praise them for being an artist or musician or sports star – that is just stuff kids do – **but we bless in them the character that God has created them to be.** In that blessing, we draw out of them that very best. That is what God did for Jacob – he gave the dream and blessing before Jacob ever deserved it – and finally Jacob became that person.

As we close our time together, I have asked Stephen to sing the prayer “Search Me O God” that I invite you to enter into as you reflect upon these six questions:

SERMON REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1) Are there times that you have felt like you've been faking your faith, trusting but not really trusting?
- 2) Where have you felt undeserving of the blessings you have known – or where has life been so difficult you've had to wrestle God to the ground to believe?
- 3) When has an angel met you on the journey and you knew beyond a doubt that it was God's hand of protection or guidance?
- 4) In what areas of your life is God working a transformation, gradually reworking your character into a new name and identity?
- 5) Who might you need to embrace because in them, you see the face of God and you find his grace and you find his forgiveness and you find his presence and his love?
- 6) How has God blessed you by naming and calling out from you all that God created you to be?