

October 16, 2022
Genesis 32:22-31

Pentecost 19
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Marks of Change”

“You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.”

For people who were not born and raised in Middletown, Dan Parker was a kind man and good neighbour who did not allow his profound limp to slow him down. But for long-time residents, Dan’s limp was a physical reminder of the transformation he experienced years earlier. Dan was a gifted athlete and popular student at Middletown High School, voted “Most Likely to Succeed” by his classmates. But Dan was also known as a brash, arrogant, egotistical young man who thought little of others and could be very selfish and even cruel. But that all changed one April afternoon when Dan came upon a serious car accident; without hesitation, Dan ran toward the burning vehicle and pulled a woman from the wreckage seconds before the car exploded, severely injuring his leg in the process. While doctors were able to save the leg, Dan remained in hospitals and rehabilitation centers for several months; when he was finally released, he walked with a severe limp that ended his athletic career and made even simple tasks difficult. But more than Dan’s ability to walk and play sports changed that day; it transformed Dan into a kinder, gentler, more caring person who went out of his way to support his neighbours and community. Gone was the arrogant, self-centered young man who thought the world revolved around him; Dan’s limp became a physical mark of the change in his life and the way he related to others.

Many of us bear the marks of moments of profound change that altered the course of our lives. They may be a physical scar or limitation that was the result of a life-altering incident; they may be emotional or psychological scars from traumatic events that still inform our daily lives. They may be scars that bring back painful memories, but these scars may also be physical signs of a transformation in our lives and in the way we look upon ourselves and others. The marks we bear may remind us of the persons we were once and how the moments we received them led our lives in different directions.

The limp with which Jacob walked throughout the second chapter of his life was a physical reminder of the profound transformation he experienced on the banks of the Jabbok River. The story in today’s First Lesson appears between God’s two

appearances at Bethel, one of the primary pillars of the story of Jacob:

- “And he was afraid, and said, ‘How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.’” – Genesis 28:17.
- “‘This land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you.’ Then God when up from him at the place where he had spoken with him.” – Genesis 35:12-13.

As God encountered Jacob when he fled the promised land because of his brother’s anger, so also God now encounters Jacob at the point of re-entry, with his brother’s anger once again focusing his energies. In both cases, Jacob appears deeply vulnerable and alone, in need of divine care: “*God’s second appearance at Bethel brings Jacob’s return home full circle and clarifies the scope of his future.*” (Terence E. Fretheim). This confrontation with God will shape Jacob’s final encounter with his brother Esau, from whom he had stolen the inheritance that was rightfully Esau’s by virtue of his being the first-born, even if it were only by a few minutes:

- “Esau was born first, but Jacob emerges from the womb linked to his brother’s body. A man by birth, he lives in the women’s tents and cooks, eschewing traditional gender roles. He is the second-born child, but he acquires both his brother’s birthright and his brother’s blessing ... He rises to success but in a foreign land. Even his marriages bear the mark of liminality, with one wife beloved but barren, the other unloved but powerful in birth. And the list goes on.” – Rachel Wrenn.

Having sent a large gift to Esau “*in order that I may find favour in your sight*” (32:5), Jacob receives word that his brother is coming to meet him with four hundred men. This news distresses Jacob, since he believes that his brother is still intent on killing him, so that night he sends his family and entire caravan across the Jabbok River, an eastern tributary of the Jordan River about twenty miles north of the Dead Sea, a frontier point for the promised land:

- “And to the Reubenites and the Gadites I gave the territory from Gilead as far as the Wadi Arnon, with the middle of the wadi as a boundary, and up to the Jabbok, the wadi being the boundary of the Ammonites” – Deuteronomy 3:16.

For reasons that are not explained, Jacob stays behind, filled with fear over what his brother might do to him when they meet (“*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.” – 32:11). The narrative stresses that Jacob is alone; he will not be able to call for help should trouble come – and trouble does arrive when “*a man wrestled with him until daybreak.*” (32:24). Nothing is known about this assailant; the author provides neither a name nor a motivation for this sudden wrestling match. What we do know is that Jacob proves a worthy opponent, wrestling with this adversary until dawn. When the man sees that he will not be able to prevail against Jacob with straightforward wrestling, “*he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.*” (32:25). The blow has a crippling effect and brings the bout to its climactic moment, but it does not dictate the terms of the outcome. Jacob retains such a tenacious hold on his opponent that the man cannot escape from him; when he cries out “*let me go, for the day is breaking,*” Jacob insists that “*I will not let you go, unless you bless me.*” (32:26). It is here that the reader realizes that this is no ordinary opponent; the one with whom Jacob wrestles on the banks of the Jabbok is the very God he had encountered at Bethel. After asking Jacob to state his name, the Lord announces that “*you shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed*” (32:28). Name changes indicate a change in a person’s very character and identity (as when God announces that the one with whom he first made the covenant will no longer be called Abram (“exalted father”) but Abraham (“father of a multitude”). The one who as “Jacob” was known as a usurper and swindler is not identified as “Israel,” one who strived with God and proved himself to be the one with whom the covenant would continue.

- “God gives Jacob a new name: Israel. And this is the truth of who Jacob is becoming, a new man, the father of a new nation. Traces of the old Jacob will remain, but he has matured from the callow youth he once was. The once self-centered youth will become the patriarch, the man who, in his old age, leads his family down to Egypt and blesses Pharaoh himself . . . God gives Jacob a new name, and a new identity, and he is changed ever after.” – Kathryn M. Schifferdecker.

The change in Jacob’s name is accompanied by a change in the way he walks as he leaves the Jabbok; he is forever marked by the struggle as he limps away toward the promised land, but “*his mark attests to success and not defeat.*” (Fretheim). Before he departs from his divine opponent, Jacob respectfully asks that God “*please tell me your name*” (32:29). Like Moses at the burning bush, Jacob wants to know the name of the Lord with whom he has wrestled and who has given him a new name (“*But Moses said to God, ‘If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall*

I say to them?’” (Exodus 3:13). Jacob wants neither the generic name for “God” (*el*), nor the names God has already given him (“*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*” – 28:13). As with Moses, Jacob requests a divine name commensurate with this new development in his relationship with God, a new name for God to go with the new name for Jacob (“*Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beer-sheba, and called there the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God.*” – 21:33). God replies to Jacob’s request with a question: “*Why is it that you ask my name?*” (similar to God’s response to Manoah’s request that God reveal God’s name “*so that we may honour you when your words come true?*” *But the angel of the LORD said to him, ‘Why do you ask my name? It is too wonderful.’*” – Judges 13:17-18). The fact that the question is followed by a blessing suggests the latter is an indirect answer, that “*God is the God of blessing, a deity positively disposed toward Jacob*” (Fretheim). God’s giving Jacob the name “Israel” has implications for God as well as for Jacob; it affirms a divine commitment to stay with Jacob in the struggle. God’s promise that “*I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you*” (28:15) involves not a passive presence but one that is active and engaged. From Jacob’s side, the new name attests to and affirms the strength he has exhibited in his encounter with God and throughout his lifetime. The name change does not necessarily signal a change in character; God gives the name “Israel” to Jacob in recognition of who he has been and presently is, not what he becomes in this moment. The name change immediately follows Jacob’s refusal to let go and his demand for a blessing from God; these responses prompt God’s response. If Jacob can hold his own even with God, certainly he should be able to live up to his name with Esau. “*Jacob is about to embark on a life-or-death struggle, and he now knows that God the wrestler will be at his side.*” (Fretheim).

Before he departs from the banks of the Jabbok, Jacob names the place where he encountered God “Peniel” (“the face of God”), “*for I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved*” (32:30). Unlike at Bethel, no altar is built, nor are issues of holiness raised. He gives the name to this place not out of historical significance, but because he had a life-changing experience in this place, seeing God face-to-face and living to tell the tale (“*With him I speak face to face – clearly, not in riddles; and he beholds the form of the LORD.*” – Numbers 12:8). The sun rises upon Jacob as he passes Peniel, bearing the mark of his struggle with God “*limping because of his hip.*” (32:31). The mark attests to God’s graciousness; Jacob has wrestled with God to the break of day, yet his life is preserved. The mark symbolizes “*both who Jacob is and who God is.*” (Fretheim).

Jacob has been transformed by his encounter with God, but he still must face his brother and the wrath that Esau may still bear because of Jacob's past deception and betrayal. No sooner does he leave Peniel than "*Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming, and four hundred men with him ... He himself went on ahead of them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother*" (33:1-3). Jacob approaches his brother contritely, knowing how grievously he has wronged Esau, while preparing himself for the impact of his brother's wrath. But to his great surprise, "*Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept*" (33:4). Not only has Jacob experienced a transformation; now the relationship with his brother that had been marked by hatred, fear, and revenge is now one of restoration and reconciliation. Jacob urges his brother to accept his gift as a sign of what God has done for them in restoring what had been broken as a sign of God's gracious love:

- "Jacob said, 'No, please; if I find favour with you, then accept my present from my hand; for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God – since you have received me with such favour. Please accept my gift that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have everything I want.' So he urged him, and he took it." – 33:10-11.

While the story of Jacob's encounter with God may appear strange in many ways, it sheds light on some perennial aspects of the human condition such as fear, dishonesty, destiny, and integrity. Jacob is a foundational figure, but that does not mean that he is a great leader or role model. Jacob is a follower, a usurper, one who looks for the easy way rather than the right way. He lies to his father Jacob, is manipulated by his mother Rebekah, and steals his brother Esau's identity. He runs for his life and ends up under the thumb of Laban, his father-in-law, for two decades. It is only when he is confronted by God and must struggle for his very life that he is transformed and walks with the mark of this transformation as he fulfills his calling to be the patriarch of the people through whom God will bless all peoples.

- "Jacob's struggle is so intensely human that his identity must evolve as our own should. Jacob has plenty of material possessions, but something is missing. He is still really not his own person. He lacks legitimacy and integrity. He needs his identity to evolve the same way I need my identity to evolve. Over time and through struggle." – Rabbi Shmuel Klitsner.

Through his encounter and struggle with God, Jacob the shallow youth becomes Israel, the father of the nation that bears his name. His struggles become a parable

for the nation that will often find itself wrestling with God as she *“holds on to God fiercely, even when God seems absent or uncaring ... because she is the nation that bears the great responsibility of being chosen, and blessed, by God”* (Shifferdecker). Like her namesake, Israel bore the scars that marked her struggles with being faithful to God’s promises and calling to be the people through whom salvation would come to all. The marks were borne by the one who came to fulfill God’s promises, who was *“wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.”* (Isaiah 53:5). When our Lord Jesus Christ appeared to his disciples following his resurrection, he bore the scars of his crucifixion that marked that moment when he suffered and died so that *“death shall be no more, mourning and crying and pain shall be no more, for the first things have passed away”* (Revelation 21:4). The Risen Lord offers Thomas the proof he needs to be an apostle when he invites the one who had doubted to *“put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.”* (John 20:27). Jesus’ scars were the marks of change for all who believe that *“if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection life like his.”* (Romans 6:5).

The wounds that Jacob and Jesus bore were more than reminders of past ordeals; they were also marks of the change that each had experienced, changes that impacted the lives of the people of Israel and all who would be marked as children of God by the Cross of Christ. They are marks of the human condition, the wounds that all of us bear through ordeals we endure during our lives. While these wounds can remind us of painful experiences that can still be traumatic, they can also be the source of healing and transformation for others as we are called to the “wounded healers” who continue to fulfill God’s Will in the tasks our Lord places before us.

- “Making one’s own wounds a source of healing does not call for a sharing of superficial personal pains but a constant willingness to see one’s own pain and suffering as rising from the depth of the human condition which all men share ... If indeed we listen to the voice and believe that ministry is a sign of hope, because it makes visible the first rays of light of the coming Messiah, we can make ourselves and others understand that we already carry in us the source of our own search. Thus ministry can indeed be a witness to the living truth that the wound, which causes us to suffer now, will be revealed to us later as the place where God intimated his new creation.” – Henri Nouwen.

Dan Parker’s limp could often make the simplest tasks very challenging for him, but he never complained about it or lamented what he had lost in the accident. He knew

that this physical reality was a mark of how his life was profoundly changed, and how the once arrogant young man he was became a person who devoted his life to caring for anyone in need or who was suffering. The marks and wounds we bear can be reminders of painful experiences, but they can also be the means through which we can reach out in love to others in the name of our Lord who bore the scars of the world's hatred and yet used those wounds to transform our lives from despair to hope with the promise of everlasting life for all who bear the Cross that became the means of transformation and liberation. As Jacob's limp was a sign of the man whose descendants would bear his name, may our wounds be the means through which we might share the love of our Wounded Healer, marks of change as we live as the people of God, *"sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the Cross of Christ forever."*

Amen.