

Older and Wiser

Genesis 33:1-4 (CEB) Jacob looked up and saw Esau approaching with four hundred men. Jacob divided the children among Leah, Rachel, and the two women servants. ² He put the servants and their children first, Leah and her children after them, and Rachel and Joseph last. ³ He himself went in front of them and bowed to the ground seven times as he was approaching his brother. ⁴ But Esau ran to meet him, threw his arms around his neck, kissed him, and they wept.

Older and Wiser

After living with his Uncle Laban for twenty years, Jacob had all of the fun he could stand. He'd worked fourteen years to get the wife he wanted - and one he didn't want. For six years he'd worked to build up his own flocks, despite his uncle's best efforts to keep him from prospering. Rather than just telling his family to pack up and leave, Jacob consulted with his two wives who were Laban's daughters. It turned out that they were fed up with their father – due to the way he had treated them. They felt that he'd squandered all of the bride price paid for them, he lied and connived, and treated them like property and foreigners. Jacob told his wives that he'd once had a dream in which God had told him to leave and return to Canaan. And so, while Laban was gone to shear his sheep, Jacob and all of his household and flocks left for Canaan.

Three days later, Laban found out. He and his men set out in pursuit and caught up with Jacob after seven days. Laban played the part of the mistreated and offended party. "Why did you deceive me and carry my daughters off like captives? I didn't get to even kiss them goodbye! I would've sent you off with a big party." Laban is still the oily and conniving deceiver! Then he continued by asking, "And even if you were homesick, why did you steal my gods?" Jacob replied, "I left secretly because I was afraid you would take your daughters away by force. But if you find your gods in anybody's possession, they will die." We aren't certain what the household gods were. One possibility is that they were human shaped images that were symbols of Laban's authority and family inheritance. When, in advance, Jacob sentenced the thief to death if they were found, he didn't know that his wife Rachel had stolen them.

Laban went poking around in all of the tents, trying to find his household gods. By the time he reached Rachel's tent, Rachel, just as clever as her father, had put the images inside her camel's saddle. Then she sat on them and said, "Please excuse me for not getting up but it's that time of the month for me." When Laban couldn't find his gods, Jacob went on the attack. He said, I worked hard for you for 20 years. I watched and protected your flocks in searing heat and bitter cold. I did more than was required of me. Yet you changed my wages ten times to make my life even more difficult. Laban kept up a good façade and claimed that his daughters, his grandchildren, and all of the flocks belonged to him. "But," he said, "I'm willing to be generous and set up a nonaggression pact with you."

What followed is the famous Mizpah "blessing." "The LORD watch between you and me, when we are absent one from the other." (Gen 31:49 RSV) Down through the years, that text has been used as a blessing at the end of worship, when missionaries have been sent to foreign lands, and when folks in the congregation moved to other places. But we have misused the text. It doesn't say, "The Lord watch over you and me – it says, "The Lord watch between you and me. Laban and Jacob erected a stone pillar and named it Mizpah, which means "watch post." The Mizpah prayer calls for God to keep an eye on each of them - when they can't do it themselves. What's more, this watch post is a boundary marker and they both vow not to go past it into the other man's territory and do him harm.

This event brings a significant change in the story of the patriarchs. Leah and Rachel have renounced the family of their birth. What's more, the ties between the family branch in Haran and the

family branch in Canaan are completely severed. From now on, marriages will be made outside the family.

Jacob had burned his bridges behind him. Now, he had to face his brother Esau who had promised to kill him. Jacob sent messengers ahead to Esau. The message they carried called Esau "my lord" and referred to Jacob as "your servant." Jacob was showing that he was willing to reverse the blessing he had received from their father Isaac through deception. The messengers returned and told Jacob that his brother Esau was coming - with four hundred men. Jacob was caught in a vise. The pillar of Mizpah prevented retreat; ahead was his brother who had promised to kill him and there were 400 men coming with him.

Scared spitless, Jacob split his herds and servants into two groups, hoping that if Esau attacked, perhaps one group might escape. He prayed fervently for God to protect and save him and went to bed. In near Eastern custom, a thief is required to make restitution. The next morning Jacob rose and sent gifts of animals to Esau. There was a flock of goats, a flock of sheep, a herd of camels, a herd of cattle, and a herd of donkeys – over 550 animals in all. Each flock or herd was sent on its way to Esau with some distance between them. As each reached Esau, the shepherd or herdsman was to say, "These animals belong to your servant Jacob and are a gift to my lord Esau." (Genesis 32:14-18)

Jacob sent his wives and children and all of his possessions across the River Jabbok. He remained on the other side of the river, alone and unprotected, through the night. It seemed like things couldn't get any worse than the fix he was in. But they did. During the night, in a surprise attack, a man wrestled Jacob to the ground. They struggled for a long time. So far as Jacob knew, it might well be Esau. As dawn approached, the man said, "Let me go, because it is daybreak." Jacob, replied, "Not unless you bless me." "What is your name?" "My name is Jacob." The name Jacob means one who grasps, seizes, takes possession. That's what Jacob had done with Esau. The man replied, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome." (Gen 32:28) And then the man left. "Jacob named the place Peniel (which means "face of God"), for he said, "I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been spared." (Gen 32:30 NLT)

In Hebrew, the two letters "el" indicate god, both any god and the God of Israel. Laban complained that someone had stolen his household gods, his *elohim*. Jacob named this place *peniel* which means "face of God." And Jacob has a new name, *Israel*, which means "strives with God." Eventually this name is applied to more than just Jacob. The land that was Canaan came to be known as Israel and the people were known as Israelites. It seems a little odd that the land and the people weren't called Abraham and Abrahamites.

In the early morning light, Jacob saw Esau and his 400 men approaching. Jacob went out by himself to meet Esau, alone, vulnerable, and weak before Esau and his 400 men. Jacob called Esau "lord" and he referred to himself as "servant." Jacob bowed seven times like a servant before his master. Jacob had changed, but so had Esau. Esau ran to meet Jacob, embraced him, kissed him and wept with him. Then Jacob's family began to arrive. First were the handmaidens and their children, then Leah and her children, and finally Rachel and her son Joseph. As each part of the family arrived where Jacob and Esau stood, the women and the children bowed toward Esau five times.

Esau turned down Jacob's gifts of all of those animals. "I have plenty. Keep what is yours," he said. But Jacob gave a new reason for offering the gift. Don't view it as repayment from all I cheated you out of. I give it in gratitude because you have received me as God received me, so please accept my gift. Jacob offered the gift out of gratitude to both and God. And Esau accepted the gift on those terms.

The two brothers who struggled in their mother's womb like two nations at war, these twins, who competed throughout their childhood and young adulthood, had at last been reconciled. The last words we had heard from Esau's mouth twenty years earlier were, "I will kill my brother Jacob." Here, forgiveness broke the cycle of revenge, and reconciliation was substituted for murder.

There are some parallels between the encounter during the night and the encounter with Esau. Jacob went from seeing the face of God in the early dawn to seeing the face of Esau, and he says that

seeing Esau's face is like seeing God's face. Jacob expected to die from seeing God's face. Jacob expected hostility and possibly death from Esau, but what he got was graciousness. We never know when God will interfere and force a new direction in our life. We never know when meeting old enemies can lead to reconciliation.

Esau offered for Jacob and his family to come to where he lived - and Jacob hesitated. Then he seemed to say that really we shouldn't merge our families. I trust that we're reconciled, but our families and our futures should remain separate. With Laban, the best relationship they could come to was a separation enforced by God. You stay on your side of the boundary post, the Mizpah, and I'll stay on my side. And we'll ask God to keep an eye on each of us to prevent mischief! With Esau, there was tearful forgiveness and reconciliation. Here, too, Jacob decided to live a bit separated from kinfolk. But it wasn't because of distrust and fear of greed on the part of his brother Esau. Rather, I think Jacob had learned that families need a little breathing room, a little space so that they don't trip over each other and rub each other the wrong way. Whereas Laban never seemed to learn from the events in his life, Esau and Jacob had grown both older and wiser. Esau had learned to forgive -- and Jacob had learned to ask for forgiveness. Life hadn't been easy for Jacob. He'd suffered the consequences of his actions. In so doing, he'd wrestled with life and with God - and he had come away wiser. He was truly Israel. He had struggled with God.

We can be like Laban: focused on winning, looking for a position of advantage in every interaction, stuck in our own wants. Or, we can be like Esau, moving on with life despite unfair treatment, learning to let old wounds heal and be left in the past. We can be like Jacob, renamed Israel. We can be on the journey of faith, letting ourselves be challenged by God to change, challenged to admit our faults and seek reconciliation with those whom we have had troubles in the past. We're called to wrestle with God, to always examine our relationship with God and neighbor, to change instead of rusting away, to take risks instead of pulling into a cocoon of presumed security. It is time to accept the risks of the challenges of God. It's time to be older and wiser. Amen.

Sisters and Brothers,
Don't let old wrongs go unresolved, whether you gave or received the hurt.
Go forward, knowing that you do not go alone.
We don't have to be afraid,
for the Word of God strengthens us
and the Holy Spirit sustains us.