

Last time we ended with Jacob who had always succeeded over others at everything he did, being changed by wrestling with God, he now limped with a sore hip, and his name was changed as if in Baptism to Israel. Diane and I spoke as friends and colleagues about the NAME we would chose for ourselves. I would share with you that I HAD BEEN A JACOB, striving for success, who began to wrestle with God as a stranger. Even as a pastor there is “a Ladder of Success”, doubling membership, financial reserves, building programs, paying off mortgages, creating missions to change the world. After decades of success, someone decided I was no longer “young”. Job, Church, Responsibilities, Missions, Friends, all were taken away. Taking out a mortgage before we had actually begun employment here, the Lender assessed: you cannot prove employment and do not have enough resources on the table, so we invaded our retirement assets to demonstrate greater commitment to this future. As with Laban’s “Mizpah”, we could not go back. As in the reunion with Esau, giving up all we possessed, I came to recognize, my core identity was relationship with God by being your pastor. This is why I smiled so much when beginning here with you, and why I have tried to push the envelope to be innovative in preaching.

Our scripture this day, continues 17 years after Jacob’s Wrestling and ReUnion with his brother. Abraham’s grandson Jacob, now called Israel, has again brought the family to Canaan and settled there. Children do not come with a “Parenting Instruction Manual”. Given: Isaac and Rebekah, having played favorites between Jacob and Esau, we question why Jacob would choose a favorite among his children? But even though he has two wives and two mistresses, twelve sons and a daughter, his 11th son “Joseph” was the first-born of the woman he loved, and in the birth of her second child, his beloved Rachel died. The first-born is often unintentionally groomed to continue the family name and career. In the Ancient Middle east, the first-born was destined to inherit everything, and other brothers and sisters nothing, except we always remember the caution of God to Rebekah, that among her children the ELDER WILL SERVE THE YOUNGER. Jacob-Israel so adores Joseph, he gives to him a spectacular coat / robe, with long-sleeves, the kind of cloak only a ruler would wear. Growing up, as the youngest and the pride of his father, Joseph becomes a tattletale against his brothers, attempting to make them look worse compared to Joseph. Compounding this, Joseph has dreams. Not Nightmares or delusions, Joseph envisions these as revelations. In the first dream, he and his brothers are STALKS OF CORN growing healthy in the field, but Joseph is so much stronger and healthier, his brother’s stalks all bow down to his. In another dream, Joseph and his brothers are STARS in Heaven, their father the sun and mother the moon, and all the stars the sun and moon worship Joseph’s star.

One day, the siblings are away caring for sheep, and Joseph stayed home, repeating what Jacob had done when his Brother Esau was hunting, HWOEVER their father sends Joseph to find them. Joseph looks where they were supposed to be, but they are not there. Instead of returning home, Joseph ventures further and further away from home, traveling through what today is the West Bank, approaching the City of Dothan on the Trade Routes, when 17 year old Joseph finds his older brothers, far away from the Promised Land. If you have not caught on by this point, ANY TIME the people of Israel are away from the Promised Land, away from home, EXILED from where we want to be, is not a good thing. The first response of the brothers to seeing Joseph is the usual response of brothers “Let’s Kill him!” As sibling torment they throw him into a Pit while they eat their lunch. Then, brother Judah suggests they not kill him, but eliminate his power, and authority, shame him by selling the favored son as a slave for pieces of Silver to those going to Egypt; except they turn sell Joseph to Potiphar. When Potiphar’s Wife tries seduce Joseph, Potiphar has Joseph put into Pharaoh’s Dungeon for a life sentence.

There are similarities from this story with so many others. Cain and Abel were brothers, both made offerings, but Cain becomes jealous of preference shown to his brother and Cain kills Abel. David who

would be King was the 7th son of Jesse, who was sent by their father to bring lunch to David's brothers. Little David shows up his older brothers by taking on Goliath by himself. When Jesus was betrayed, he was sold for 30 pieces of silver by Judas (The Aramaic version of Judah), Jesus is thrown into a pit before being sent to Pilate who would do more than kill him, shame him and remove all his authority and power.

There were four reasons, Joseph's brothers were jealous:

- 1) Their father Israel loved Joseph more.
- 2) Their father gave to Joseph the long-sleeved many-colored coat, a symbol of his future power.
- 3) Joseph was a Tattler, trying to make himself look better by making the brothers look worse.
- 4) Joseph had dreams of his own future.

Can you identify with any of these four? As children, my brothers and I spent every summer at our grandparent's farm. The older brothers had grand adventures exploring, while as the youngest I often tried to tag along. When they wanted to have a Tire-Swing, being the lightest, I was always the Test-pilot to determine if the rope and knots were strong enough, and they never were. Among their favorite exercises was to dangle me by my ankles from the Hayloft through the Chute as if over a Pit. Afterwards, running to tattle, the elder brothers would plead innocence describing "What a strange child would make up such stories as they had never harmed him."

Different from earlier stories which had been about a couple, the single child of a couple, or even twins or two individuals in competition; after Jacob wrestled with the stranger and received the name ISRAEL, the stories operate on two levels because this is a family with 1 brother contrasted to all the rest; but also the names of each of the children become the Tribes of Israel. What is obscure is that God is not named! So do we read into the story that God is an all-knowing circumstance-determining power who undermines human relationships? Do we believe God so malicious as to sell a child into slavery? Do we imagine God caused this pandemic? OR that God is so far distant and removed from reality that God is impotent to intervene? This is a series of stories about Free Will. No one in the story is completely innocent! However, what the brothers attempted to do was to eliminate Joseph from the family. Many people have been introduced only to be eliminated from the family. Whatever happened to Lot Abram's nephew? What happened to Ishmael? What happened to Laban after Jacob left? But sold, discarded, sent away, imprisoned, still the Biblical story does not let go of Joseph.

What does it mean to you to lose something? to sell a possession... to Die? One of the circumstance I have been getting used to, is that moving we purged a great deal of stuff that would not fit into the POD, suddenly I have been searching for tools or belongings I was certain we were saving, only to discover they are lost. A regular theme of the Bible (Old and New) is about REDEMPTION: Finding the Lost, Returning the Prodigal, the Diaspora redeemed, returning to the Promised Land, Exile and rebuilding. God is the CREATOR, but also in both Testaments, God is the Redeemer, the Savior. But when someone or something is restored, redeemed, found, it is not simply a continuation for before, the other individuals in our circle grow, experience and change.

Several years ago we had sponsored four LOST BOYS from South Sudan. These African children had lost everything in Civil War and after walking for thousands of miles through the desert lived in a Refugee Camp before starting life over in small groups in America. The irony was that they were named THE LOST BOYS by a Journalist, who compared their experience to the children in Peter Pan's Neverland because they had been plucked out of their childhood. After living in America for two years, a refugee named John Doe came to worship one Sunday morning, grinning from ear to ear. He described that over the Internet,

he had found his Mother at a refugee Camp in Uganda. But he had tried to telephone her, and reaching her, he said "This is John" and she said "No my son John died 20 years ago, and hung up the phone." He called another family member who explained his life to her, but what he wanted was for someone to go to Africa for him, because while they were called "The Lost Boys" actually it was their families who all were lost from one another, and none had ever been LOST from God.