

Change
Genesis 32:22–31
Sunday, August 2, 2020

I have always been drawn to the story of Jacob. Maybe it's because, like him, I was the second-born son who didn't always get along with his brother. Or maybe it's because I was a troublemaker who didn't always tell the truth. Whatever the reason, Jacob's story has resonated with me since I first *really* read it when I was in college. This story that we just heard today was the first sermon I ever preached, 19 years ago. I think there was something about the idea that if God could use this imperfect person and make him a part of God's story, then maybe God could do something with *me*.

If you asked the people I grew up with what I would be doing with my life, they might have said a lot of different things, but *pastor* would not have been one of them. I wasn't a *bad* kid. I was trying to find my way, and there were some times that I got pretty lost in the process. But it was when I was in college and first started understanding the story of Jacob that I came to understand that you don't have to be *perfect* to serve God. You just have to *trust*.

I remember when I was home from college for Christmas break my senior year, and I was hanging out with the friends I had grown up with through middle school and high school. These people had known me half my life. They had been *through* all the trouble with me. And we were talking about what we were going to do after graduation in a few months, and I said that I was going to go to seminary to become a pastor. I had been really hesitant to *tell* them that, because I knew what the reaction was going to be. And I was right. It was kind of like, "*You?*" They knew me as one person, but I had been changing in ways that they weren't there to see, so it didn't make *sense* to them. It was just all of a sudden I was a different person. It didn't help that they *weren't* people of faith, so this *really* didn't make sense to them. And that was kind of

it. With a couple of exceptions, we didn't really talk much after that. They went one way, and I went another, because "I had changed."

I wonder if Jacob had to deal with that. If, when he met up with his brother Esau again after 20 years, it was like, "Your name is *what* now? Israel? And you've been chosen by God to be the father of nations? No. No, you're still that kid who put fake hair on your arms and lied to our father and stole my birthright. You might say you've had some big spiritual awakening, but *I know you.*" And, you know, he would partially be right. We talked last week about how over the 14 years that Jacob had to serve Laban to marry Leah and Rachel, Jacob had changed from the selfish, impetuous young man who lied and cheated everyone around him into a more patient man, determined to work for what he wanted. And that was definitely happening. But right after the story we read last week where this transformation was taking place, we get a story about Jacob spending the next six years tricking Laban, playing this long con in which he swindled him out of his best livestock. And then one day, in the middle of the night, he packs up his wives and kids and all their possessions and runs away from Laban. He's back to his old ways again – lying, cheating, running away. He may have changed, but has he really changed?

I think it raises a question that a lot of us struggle with. Can people really change? We may be quick to say, "Well, of course people can change!" It's easy to answer that in *theory*. But in *practice* it can be a lot harder. When you are dealing with someone who has hurt you over and over again, and they're asking for another chance and telling you that they have changed. It's a little harder to trust that. When our children start asserting their independence and trying to figure out the person that they are going to be, there is a part of us that can be reluctant to *allow* them to change. There are all these situations in our lives where we can have this feeling of, "I have known you for a long time, and this is how I have always known you to be, and good or

bad, that understanding of you *makes sense* to me.” We either worry that we’re going to lose the person we love if they change too much, or we’ll get hurt if we *trust* their change too much. We want to hold on to the world that makes sense to us, and having to reassess our understandings of the people we know can be very difficult and confusing. So we hold on to the image and understanding that we have of people, and we don’t always allow them to change. We say, “A leopard can’t change his spots,” and, “An old dog can’t learn new tricks.”

*But...*as followers of Jesus Christ, the story of our faith is one of radical transformation – from old to new, from death to life, from lost to found, from sin to redemption. Half of the New Testament was written by a man who spent years terrorizing and persecuting Christians, only to *become* one after an encounter with the risen Christ in which his name was changed from Saul to Paul. Can you imagine how well *that* change went over with his fellow Pharisees? “Your name is *what* now? And you believe *what*?” Even the Christians were reticent to believe he had changed. God spoke to a disciple named Ananias and told him to go meet with Paul, and Ananias said, “Whoa, I *know* this man, and I do *not* want to go to him because he could *hurt* me.” But despite everyone’s skepticism, Paul *had* changed. And this man who had previously *persecuted* Christians became one of their greatest spokesmen, even though it cost him *everything*, even, eventually, his life. If *he* could change, then anyone *can* change. Transformation is at the heart of our faith.

The challenge, as evidenced in Jacob’s story, is that change can take place in ways that are not always *visible* to us. In the middle of the night, as he was preparing to meet his brother Esau, Jacob sends his entire family and all of their possessions across the river. It says that he was left alone, and he wrestled with God in the dark of the night. No one was there to see it. No one else saw the strike on Jacob’s hip that left him limping. No one else heard the blessing and the new

name that God gave him. No one else saw this transformation take place. They just saw the *results* and had to take his word for it.

The funny thing is, Esau has apparently changed, too. Remember, the last time these two saw each other was 20 years earlier, when Jacob stole his brother's birthright, stealing the privileges of the firstborn son, and effectively ruining Esau's life. Jacob ran away from home with Esau threatening to kill him, and now Esau is waiting on the other side of the river with an army of 400 men. But when they saw each other the next morning, it says that Esau ran to meet him, embraced him, fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. What happened to Esau to soften his heart toward his brother? We don't know that. We never get to hear that story. We just have to trust that, like Jacob, Esau has changed.

The most transformative experience of my life was when I was 17 years old, and I experienced the presence of God in a real, tangible, physical way. I've shared this story with you before. I had been going through a really difficult, scary time resulting from some bad decisions I had made. My whole life was falling apart, and I felt utterly alone. I was reading scripture and praying, when I became aware that God was *with* me, not just in *spirit*, but that God was right there, *physically* with me, and I was not alone. The only thing is, I *was* alone, in my room, in the dark of the night. No one else saw it happen, and I can't "prove" to you that it did. All I can do is show you the *results* and it's up to you to trust whether or not I changed.

People *can* change, but only when we wrestle with God and our fears and our failures and stop running from them and meet them face to face. That's what Jacob did. He was at a point where he had to stop running and face *God* and face his brother *Esau*, and it was *through* that that the most transformative experience of his life takes place. He becomes a new person with a new

name. His relationship with his brother is restored, and he becomes the father of a nation. It's like author James Baldwin once said, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced." People *can* change, but it takes doing the hard work of facing the things that we are running from.

And the hard part is, we may never *see* them do this. They may be doing some serious wrestling with God that we will never see. But it's like when Thomas didn't believe the transformation that had taken place with Jesus after his death. He says, "Unless I see proof, I will not believe." And Jesus says to him, "Blessed are those who have *not* seen and yet have come to believe." And we've talked before how that word "believe" is better understood as "trust." Belief is a matter of *trust*. We are called to *trust* that people *can* change, even if we never see that change take place. And that makes it really hard to trust them sometimes. But our faith is not in what *they* are able to do. Faith is an act of trust in what *God* is able to do. And scripture is filled with story after story of God transforming the most unlikely people in the most unbelievable ways.

People *can* change. If that were not true, we would not have a faith. The story would have stopped with Jacob. We are called to *hope for* and *trust in* the transforming power of God, because if God can change *Jacob*, then God can change *anyone*.