

CHUTZPAH AND THE COVENANT

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Text: Genesis 32:22-31

SCRIPTURE

The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had.

Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.

The Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God!

SERMON

I have used a Yiddish term in my sermon title, a term that has now become quite common in American English, the word "chutzpah." If you do not know what chutzpah is, the best way to explain it is with a story. There was once a poor, old Jewish widow living in New York City, who was having a hard time making ends meet. So she scraped together a few extra dollars and bought the ingredients and started making those big soft chewy pretzels. Every morning she would get up before dawn, make a few dozen pretzels, take an old battered card table, and sit out on the stoop of her apartment and sell them for a dollar a piece. Day after day she would sit, winter, spring, summer and fall, bundled up in her babushka, selling her pretzels.

A young Jewish man walked past her every morning on his way to work, and his heart went out to her. Maybe she reminded him of his own grandmother, or maybe it was just the way she seemed to accept her situation without any sense of regret or self-pity, but he decided he would do a mitzvah, a good deed. So he put a dollar on her table, but when she offered him his pretzel, he held up his hand and said, "It's okay. Sell it to someone else." The old woman nodded, but didn't say anything.

Well, this soon became a daily routine. He would walk up, put a dollar on the table, refuse to take a pretzel, the old women would nod and he would continue on to work. This went on week after week, month after month, until a year went by, then another, and another, until it was almost four years. The young man had given her around a thousand dollars, a dollar at a time, and had never taken a pretzel in return.

Finally, one morning, he puts his dollar on the table and starts to walk away, and she says, "Just a minute, young man." After four years, this is the first time she has spoken to him. What will she say. Will she thank him? Will she give him some ancient Hebrew blessing? He turns back with a smile. "Yes, Bubbe! Yes, Grandmother, what is it?"

"My price has gone up," she replies. "A pretzel is a dollar and quarter now."

That is chutzpah. There is not really an accurate English equivalent. It means nerve. It means audacity. It is described as a personal confidence or courage that allows someone to do or say things that may seem shocking to others. It is not caring what others might think or who might be offended. One classic definition of chutzpah is the man who murders both his mother and his father and when he is arrested and put on trial he begs for mercy because he is an orphan. That's chutzpah.

It is a Yiddish term but a very ancient Jewish concept. The Hebrew scriptures are full of chutzpah. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who refused to bow down to the golden idol and were thrown into the fiery furnace had chutzpah. A shepherd boy named David going out to fight a giant with stones and a sling had chutzpah. Gideon taking a squad of 300 men and attacking the entire Midianite army had chutzpah. Moses walking into the court of Pharaoh and saying, "Let my people go," Moses had chutzpah. Abraham who pushed back against God until God agreed that he would not destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah if ten righteous people could be found, Abraham had chutzpah. But absolute prince of chutzpah has to be the main character of our scripture lesson, Abraham's grandson, Jacob.

You might remember the story of the life of Jacob from Sunday School. Jacob was a twin, with his brother Esau, older by a few minutes. As the eldest, Esau was entitled to certain rights and blessings. But when the time came, Jacob deceived his blind father, Isaac, by pretending to be Esau, and Jacob was the one who received the inheritance. Chutzpah! Jacob lives up to his name, for in Hebrew the name Jacob sounds like the word for "deceiver" or "cheat" or "sneaky one." As you might expect, Esau was furious and threatened to kill Jacob. Esau was deadly serious, so Jacob ran off to hide with relatives and stayed in self-imposed exile for over twenty years.

During that time, through various means, most of them requiring a great deal of chutzpah and not a whole lot of scruples, Jacob did quite well for himself. He got married a couple times over, had a bunch of children, and became a wealthy man. Then the time came when God told him to return to his homeland, and this is where we pick up our story for today. For Jacob had not forgotten Esau, and it does not appear that Esau has forgotten Jacob. As he came closer to home, he receives a report that Esau is on his way to meet Jacob with a company of four hundred armed men. Naturally Jacob feared the worst.

Now we come to our scripture lesson. Night was falling. Jacob knew that in the morning he would meet Esau, and he had no idea what to expect. It was entirely possible that within twenty-four hours he and his family could be slaughtered and his wealth plundered. He tried to settle down and sleep, but couldn't. So finally he roused everyone, wives, concubines, children, servants, livestock. In a final defensive move he sends everyone across the river. Meanwhile, he stayed where he was, and the text says, "Jacob was alone..."

Have you ever felt alone and frightened in the night? Of course you have. We all have. We all have found ourselves lying awake wondering what is going to happen. We do what we can. We pray and plan and pull what strings we can. We try to protect the people and things we value, putting them in the safest position we can find. Yet we have no idea what the morning will bring and we feel alone in the night.

Now we come to the weird part of our story. With a surprising abruptness the text simply says "...and a man came and wrestled with him until daybreak." What? What man? Who was this guy and where did he come from? Did he show up in the darkness and just grab Jacob and start to wrestle? Did they talk first and get into some sort of argument? What is going on here? We don't really know. Centuries later the prophet Hosea would state that it was an angel who wrestled with Jacob, but in our text from Genesis it does not say that. All we are told is that Jacob was not left alone in peace to ponder what he might do and say when he met his brother Esau. No, in the dead of night, Jacob finds himself locked in a struggle.

When we feel like we are alone in the night, it would be nice if we could feel God's loving arms wrapped around us. Sometimes that does happen and we are comforted and reassured. Sometimes that happens, but not always. Sometimes God sends a challenge rather than comfort. Sometimes God knows that there are these critical moments when we can learn extremely important lessons. God uses such moments to help us grow and become stronger.

But back to our story; things get even weirder. The struggle seems to be at a draw until the stranger makes a move that injures Jacob's hip. It would appear that the fight is over, but Jacob refuses to give up. He holds on and won't let go. Then the stranger says, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." It is a bizarre thing to say and so some scholars believe that this story is the retelling of some ancient myth or fairy tale, one that is far older than the book of Genesis. In the original story they say this stranger is some sort of night demon, something like a vampire or a werewolf. So if sunlight shines on this creature it shrivels up or turns to stone or something like that. That is why the stranger says, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But I don't think this is the case. I think the wrestler is basically saying, "The night is over and now it is time to face what you are really afraid of. Now it is time to face your twin brother Esau. He will be here soon. So stop messing around, Jacob, and get on with it."

There may be other stories about heroes struggling with night demons, but in this story Jacob somehow knows that whoever this stranger might be he comes from God, and has the power of God with him. So Jacob replies with a sheer, unbelievable amount of chutzpah, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

It is really incredible when you pause and think about it. As Jacob will say after it is over, he realizes that he has come face to face with the power of God. Things are way out of his control. He is locked in a struggle in which it has become painfully obvious (literally painful) that he cannot win. Yet, he holds on. He does not cower or grovel. He does not beg that his life be spared. No, he has the nerve, the audacity, the arrogance to ask for a blessing. Where does he get off asking for such a thing? What makes him think he can possibly get away with something like this? He should think himself lucky to be able to get away with his skin intact, but he wants something more. He wants to come out ahead. He wants to get something out of this encounter. He wants a blessing. It is like the lady asking for a dollar twenty-five. It is pure unmitigated chutzpah.

Now, I mentioned how there are scholars who think this story is just a retelling of an ancient myth, told perhaps by the Egyptians or the Babylonians. And as you read the Bible, you do find stories similar to those found in other cultures. There are many ancient legends of a universal flood with one family being spared by building a boat. And the exploits of Samson can be compared with those of other legendary strong men like Hercules. But there is a striking difference between the Bible and all other ancient stories. In other mythologies, human beings fear the gods who have overwhelming supernatural powers. So humans make promises to the gods that they will serve them and worship them, and if they keep these promises, they hope the gods will leave them alone. However, in the Bible it is the other way around. In the Bible, God loves human beings, and God makes promises to them, hoping that humans will love God and keep their promises in return.

These promises are called a covenant. They set up a relationship, a connection, a permanent bond between God and God's people. God had made covenants with Noah and with Abraham and Isaac, and God had made a covenant with Jacob. God took the first step, reached out to Jacob, and agreed to be in a special relationship with him. It wasn't Jacob's idea; it was God's. Because of this connection, this relationship, Jacob had the boldness, the nerve, the chutzpah to take God at God's word, to hold God to these promises, to look for God's blessings rather than merely God's patience or tolerance.

So what is the blessing that Jacob receives? The wrestler asks, "What is your name?" Quickly and honestly he answers, "Jacob." I am Jacob; Jacob the sneaky one, the liar, the cheat, the deceiver, the one who cannot be trusted. I am too exhausted to come up with any excuses. I am who I am. I am Jacob."

The answer then comes back, “No! You are no longer Jacob the Cheat. You have a new name and a new identity. You are now Israel, the one who struggles with God, the one who hangs on and won’t let go of God.” Jacob’s blessing is another chance, a fresh start a brand new day with a new name, a new identity.

It is a great story, but what does it mean for us today? Well, first of all sometimes I am asked, as a pastor, if it is okay to have lots of questions when it comes to matters of faith. Is it okay to wonder about all these stories we read in the Bible? Is it okay to have some doubts? Is it okay to wonder at times even if there is a God? Is it okay to be mad at God and think that what God has done was not very loving and even rather cruel? Is it okay to be confused or upset or even a little resentful with what God is asking of us? Is it okay that when it comes to my faith it is not that great all the time, in fact, often it is a very difficult struggle in the dark of night?

To which I say, we are all the spiritual children of Israel. We are all descendants of those who struggle with God. No, it is not all sunshine and roses. Sometimes it is terrifying. Sometimes it is a matter of wrestling in the dark. Yes, it is okay to question. Yes, it is okay to have doubts. Yes, it is okay to wonder and even be angry and upset with God. It is all okay, because at times the best we can do is just to hold on and say, “I will not let you go until you bless me.”

It is all okay because we belong to a covenant making God. God loves us and has made promises to us. This morning we celebrate the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, and we remember what Jesus said on that last night with his disciples. He said “This cup is my blood of the new covenant poured out for the forgiveness of sins.” Through our Lord Jesus Christ, we enter into a new relationship with God, a relationship that God initiated. By this covenant, in this relationship God says to us, “You are no longer who you once were. You are no longer the cheat, the liar, the sneak or the thief. You are no longer the doubter, the frightened one, the loner, the forgotten, the ignored. I give you my fullest blessing. I give you a new identity, a new life, a new way of being. I give you a new name. I give you my name, for you belong to me. And I promise that we will always be connected, bound together no matter what.” God says, “You will belong to me no matter how much it hurts, no matter how much it costs, even if it means giving up my own Beloved Son. So, yes, it is okay to have your doubts and questions. It is okay to wrestle with things, and it is okay to ask for blessings, because I love you and you will always be mine. That is who you are.”

The blessing Jacob received was a new name, but our story ends with Jacob giving a name. He names the place Penuel, which means “Face of God.” He says, “I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved. And as he left that place it says the sun rose and shone upon him.

May we have the boldness, the courage, the chutzpah to hold on for a blessing. May we give up all our schemes and sneaky plans. May we be open, honest, admitting freely who we are. May we hold on until we are given a new name and encounter the Face of God. May we be like Jacob. And may the Son, the Son of God that is, rise and shine upon us. Thanks be to God! In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.