

Proper 13, Year A
Genesis 32: 22-31

Trinity Episcopal Church
Sonoma, California
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At the Ford of the River Jabbok:
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

Today, we hear the story of Jacob, son of Issac and grandson of Abraham. Today, we hear about Jacob wrestling with a stranger. Wrestling was not new to Jacob. It had been a part of him all his life. It was in his mother's womb that Jacob first wrestled with his twin brother Esau. And when Esau passed through the birth canal first, Jacob was holding tight to his heel. Jacob then wrestled Esau's birthright from him. When their father was dying and calling for his beloved son Esau, Jacob—ever the deceiver—pretended to be his brother and thus wrestled their father's blessing away from Esau.

You can imagine—Esau was mad. He wanted to kill Jacob. Fleeing from Esau's wrath, Jacob sought refuge in the home of his mother's brother—another wrestler, another deceiver. They wrestled over Jacob's choice of wife, over his wages, and even over his freedom.

Today we meet Jacob—that seasoned wrestler, that first class deceiver—at the ford of the river Jabbok. Hearing that his brother Esau and four hundred of Esau's best men are coming to meet him, Jacob sends Esau gifts, divides his party and property sending them on ahead in two separate groups along two separate paths, and finally sending his wives and mistresses and all their children ahead of him. Jacob stays back. All by himself. Alone at the ford of the river Jabbok.

I wonder why. I wonder why he stayed behind. Was it fear? Was he so afraid of Esau, that he sent the others on ahead to cushion the blow? Perhaps. It's not out of character.

Or was it dread? Did Jacob so dread his encounter with Esau that he stayed behind, putting it off until the last moment? That, too, is possible.

Or was it something else? Could it be that Jacob remembered another such crossing? Another such time? Another such passage from the known to the unknown?

Could it be that Jacob's mind was focused not on the future but on the past?

Imagine him at the ford of the river Jabbok—alone, afraid, dreading the inevitable encounter with his brother Esau and all the while anticipating what it would be like to return home.

He falls into a restless, fitful sleep. In the night, he wrestles with a stranger. All through the night Jacob wrestles with that stranger—first one on top and then the other. I can imagine Jacob was tempted to give up the fight. But he sticks with it, even though he's injured in the process. Finally the stranger says to Jacob, "Let me go, for it is dawn."

To that Jacob replies, "Not without a blessing." Then a most remarkable interchange takes place.

The stranger asks Jacob, "What is your name?" and he replies, "Jacob." You know it means deceiver. Then the stranger says, "Your name will no longer be Jacob. It will be Israel for you have struggled with God and men and have won."

Still we're left to wonder, "Who is this stranger? Who is the one who wrestles with Jacob at the ford of the River Jabbok?" Some say Jacob wrestles with his demons, others say Jacob wrestles with God. But I suspect he wrestles with himself. I suspect the stranger is his past—the past he has yet to face.

On that night, in his restless sleep, Jacob wrestles with his past. Perhaps he remembers how he treasured the quiet days he spent in his mother's home. Perhaps he remembers the way he cheated his brother out of his birthright and his blessing. Perhaps he remembers the struggles and deceptions that have become so much a part of him. And he longs for something more.

Remember what the stranger says as dawn is breaking, as a new day is beginning—he says, "Let me go." Jacob had wrestled with his past. It was time to let it go.

As I think about this story, about Jacob and his night spent wrestling with a stranger, I find myself thinking about relationships with the past—mine and ours—as individuals and as a country and as a communion. So often we let the past go unexamined. We shut it off. It's over. Done. Gone. We don't stop to look at how our past spills into our present. That was then. This is now. That's the end of it.

But I wonder. Is it that simple really? Can we slam the door on the past without first sorting through how the past affects our present? Will the door stay shut?

When I was a kid, I had small wall closet in my room. It was about three feet high, two feet deep, and five feet wide. I stuffed everything I didn't need or want in that closet. And when I left home, my Mom started stuffing things in that closet. Over the years, when I'd return home, I'd go through the house and find things I wanted to keep. In the closet they would go. After a while, we couldn't close that closet door. It kept springing open. So one day, a few years before she died, my Mom sat me down and said, "It's time, Susie—time to go through the closet." We did it together. We cried, we laughed, we cringed as we took things out, remembered their story, and made a decision—pitch, keep, hold for another day. And then we shut that closet door. It stayed shut until the time came to sell the house and open the closet once again.

It's that way with the past. You can't shut the door on it and pretend it doesn't exist. It needs to be examined, wrestled with, sorted out before you can go on. If that doesn't happen, the past spills through and shapes the present in all sorts of ways—bidden and unbidden, welcome and unwelcome.

I think we all need Jabbok River times in our lives—times when we wrestle with our past, times when we take on questions big and little and explore the ways they spill into the present. Times when we take a closer look at the ghosts of our shared past—the deep hurts and divisions that plague us as a people and as a communion. Times when we take out those ghosts, sort them out, toss some, keep others, and put the rest on hold. Times when we step into the river knowing that we, like Jacob are going on, marked by our past and living into our future—our future as children beloved of God and marked in our baptism as Christ's own forever.