

Stuck!

Reflection on Genesis 32:9-13, 32:22-30 – September 22, 2019

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You probably recognized this morning's children's story as one of the enduring Uncle Remus stories, set in America's South during the time of Black slavery. Brer Rabbit is the smart little rascal who prefers to use his quick wit over hard work; at first it seems to work, but more often than not it backfires, causing him more grief than was worth. The trickster gets tricked...

Other cultures have stories just like these, like the smooth talking Fox Reynard in early W. Europe,

or puckish Puck in Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, or the talkative spider Anansi in West Africa. In present-day N. American pop culture it would be Woody Woodpecker or Bugs Bunny.

They're all about the weak outsmarting the strong, the underdog besting the top dog. Stories like these are still being told, and interestingly, the people telling them almost always are the underdog in some way...

And then there is the story of Jacob that fits the same mold. He may not be big or strong, but boy is he clever! He maneuvers and tricks and manipulates very hard to make sure he gets what he wants. Jacob's priority in life is looking after number one. Which is ironic, because he is told by God that no matter what happens in his life, God will look after him, he is blessed. And Jacob *knows* he's blessed, so why then all the scheming and trickery?

That is the tension in which Jacob lived most of his life, his own version of the Tar Baby. First he cheats his older brother Esau out of his birthright, then he cheats his dying father Isaac into thinking he is Esau so he gets his father's final blessing *and* inherits the family fortune. Of course Esau goes ballistic and swears to kill Jacob. Jacob has to run for his life and claims refuge at his uncle Laban's.

In Laban, Jacob has found his match: here's someone just as cunning as Jacob is. Right from the start they try and outsmart each other. Laban cheats Jacob into marrying the wrong daughter, Leah, and makes him work another 7 years for Rachel, the woman Jacob really loves. Ultimately, though, Jacob turns out to be

the shrewder of the two, and winds up with the biggest portion of Laban's herd, which means: most of his uncle's wealth. Now it's Laban who swears to kill him, and God has to step in to save Jacob's skin.

Again Jacob has to run for his life. He heads back home, hoping that after 20 years things have calmed down a bit after all his trickeries. By this time, Jacob is a rich man with lots of servants, cattle and wealth. He also got four wives (so much for that discussion about what makes a "biblical marriage"), and out of those 4 women he has 11 sons, and oh yeah, one daughter. And, typical for Jacob, he doesn't leave his uncle openly but in secret; he sneaks out before Laban has a chance to find out.

There's just one problem, though: he has to travel through his brother Esau's territory. Of course knowing his brother Esau, Jacob suspects he might still be holding a bit of a grudge. So Jacob is nervous. But God tells him – again – don't worry; I'll take care of you. Yeah, right, Jacob thinks: you and what army? So he hatches an elaborate plan, trying to get back in Esau's favour. Of course the plan backfires, and Esau vows he'll come out with 400 warriors to kill him. Oops...

Now Jacob isn't just nervous anymore – he's scared. Scared as hell. And what does he do? Well, what would you do if you're scared and have run out of options? You pray. And for the first time in this story, Jacob really prays; it's the prayer that this morning's scripture reading started with. It's a prayer of despair, a cry for help when you have screwed up and have run out of options.

All alone, the night before he has to face Esau, with nowhere to turn, with his hands and feet and head stuck in the tar so to speak, Jacob has a mysterious and pretty intense encounter; it's a fight that would re-define his life...

This isn't any old scrap, but a fight of epic proportions lasting all night long. When dawn breaks, Jacob seems to have the upper hand and asks the stranger (we don't really know who it is, by the way, but Jacob seems to believe it is God), to bless him.

Of course God has *always* been willing to bless Jacob. All Jacob had to do was ask, ask with a trusting, dependent heart. But it took a crisis and a long and painful struggle with God before Jacob finally finds the guts to ask, finally works up the courage to let God take over. And Jacob becomes a new man with a new name (Israel), a new life and a new future. He had to lose himself in order to find himself, a whole *new* self... The recurring paradox of our faith.

That morning he drops his elaborate, self-protective plan and instead decides to lead his tribe ahead of everyone to meet Esau directly, this time trusting God's promise to look after him. And he discovers that Esau has forgiven him.

Jacob as you probably know is one of Israel's three "patriarchs", or forefathers, together with Abraham and Isaac. It's also the longest story in Genesis: 15 pages

in my Bible, longer than Abraham's and Isaac's stories combined. Clearly, the Jewish people identify with Jacob the underdog, the pariah – just like the black slaves in America's South identified with Brer Rabbit, and European peasants identified with the clever Fox Reynard.

Just let that sink in for a moment: the Jewish people have a stubborn, self-serving, ego-centered loser as their forefather – and are proud of it! What does that say about them...? I think it says a lot: it says how for centuries the Jews were looked down on as pariahs. Yet just like Jacob, they refused to accept being a mere second-best. And also just like Jacob, they didn't have the physical strength or wealth to get what they wanted. They got it by trying to outsmart, out-bargain and out-maneuvre the surrounding more powerful nations. The story of Jacob acknowledges that not-so noble part of Jewish history, and we have to respect that. It takes courage to claim the unheroic-parts of your past and not brush them under the carpet, pretending it never happened.

But there's more. What sets this story apart from any other underdog story is the constant tension, the struggle even, that can be involved in trying to live life the way God intends life to be lived. It takes guts to let God take over and to trust it will work out okay somehow. That makes the story of Jacob human and timeless, a story we can identify with it, thousands of years later.

Jacob is not a holy forefather on a pedestal, some distant saintly hero we can only revere but will never be. This is a man of flesh and blood, with some good qualities – and a lot of questionable qualities. He's someone like you and me.

Jacob's story started out as the quick-witted champ who outsmarts everybody else, but gets caught in the tar. Short term gain for long term pain, to coin a different phrase. But by the time the story ends, it's about someone who finally recognizes he has to let go of his ego, and confesses: it's not about me but about you, God. You take it from here, please, because I'm getting nowhere.

In the end, it's a story about finding moral courage and standing tall in the eyes of humanity and God. It can be the story of each and every one of us, if we so choose. Now that in itself is a powerful teaching any time. But how does it translate within the context of the Season of Creation we're in? How does it translate to the climate crisis that we have gotten ourselves stuck in?

How do we stand tall and find moral courage in the face of global extinction that is happening right now? Is that the good stewardship God asked us to live out?

How do we respond when our youth challenges us, the older generation, to take a stand and to make drastic changes so next generations can have a life?

When we vote in the upcoming election, what decides how we cast our ballot? Our

bottom-line-economy of short term gain and long-term pain – or God’s economy, where life is restored and thrives, where the weak shall be strong and the poor rich? These are not hypothetical questions or theoretical issues, this is what’s happening right now. We’re stuck in a desperate situation and our window of opportunity is closing. Do we have the courage *and* the faith to confess, as Jacob did, that we have screwed up and are running out of options fast? Do we have the guts to take a chance on God, who has already blessed us and through Christ promised us to save us (uncomfortable as it might be)?

Like Jacob, all we have to do is... ask; and stop fighting it.

Amen.

Genesis 32:9-13, 32:22-30

⁹ Then Jacob prayed, “O God of my grandfather Abraham, and God of my father, Isaac— O LORD, you told me, ‘Return to your own land and to your relatives.’ And you promised me, ‘I will treat you kindly.’” ¹⁰ I am not worthy of all the unfailing love and faithfulness you have shown to me, your servant. When I left home and crossed the Jordan River, I owned nothing except a walking stick. Now my household fills two large camps! ¹¹ O LORD, please rescue me from the hand of my brother, Esau. I am afraid that he is coming to attack me, along with my wives and children. ¹² But you promised me, ‘I will surely treat you kindly, and I will multiply your descendants until they become as numerous as the sands along the seashore—too many to count.’”

¹³ Jacob stayed where he was for the night.

²² During the night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two servant wives, and his eleven sons and crossed the Jabbok River with them. ²³ After taking them to the other side, he sent over all his possessions.

²⁴ This left Jacob all alone in the camp, and a man came and wrestled with him until the dawn began to break. ²⁵ When the man saw that he would not win the match, he touched Jacob’s hip and wrenched it out of its socket. ²⁶ Then the man said, “Let me go, for the dawn is breaking!” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.”

²⁷ “What is your name?” the man asked. He replied, “Jacob.”

²⁸ “Your name will no longer be Jacob,” the man told him. “From now on you will be called Israel, because you have fought with God and with men and have won.”

²⁹ “Please tell me your name,” Jacob said.

“Why do you want to know my name?” the man replied. Then he blessed Jacob there.

³⁰ 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.”