

## Limping Past Penuel

### First Reading Genesis 32:22-33:4

<sup>22</sup>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. <sup>23</sup>He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. <sup>24</sup>Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. <sup>25</sup>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. <sup>26</sup>Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." <sup>27</sup>So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." <sup>28</sup>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." <sup>29</sup>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. <sup>30</sup>So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." <sup>31</sup>The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.

Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two maids. He put the maids with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. He himself went on ahead of them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother. But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.

The letter came on Monday morning. It was a thick envelope- big enough it had to be mailed using two stamps. My stomach lurched when I saw who it was from- it was from "Carol", a member at my former congregation.

"Carol" was in her late sixties- a quiet woman, but a powerful woman who had very strong feelings about how things should be done. She was wealthy, having married a man who had been extremely successful in life- they had an enormous, beautiful home on the lake. They had their own dock and boat moored to it; they had an in home theater with sloped seating and actual theater seats; he built for himself a little house on the property just for his hobby- wood turning. This little house was air conditioned and about as big as the home Melis and I lived in

at the time. All this is to say that these were people used to getting what they wanted in life- and when they didn't they weren't afraid to express their feelings of disappointment.

I learned this the hard way with Carol. A couple of weeks before the letter arrived Carol asked to meet with me. I didn't think much of it, but it turned out she didn't just want to shoot the breeze- she had some things to say to me. We met in the church office- just an ordinary office in a business park off the highway. After she settled in she said she had some things she needed to say, and that they were "hard". And I said to her the most foolish words I believe I have ever uttered in pastoral ministry, I encouraged her saying: "Go ahead, you can't hurt my feelings."

What a dumb thing to say.

She proceeded to list off her disappointments with me- how the church hadn't just taken off like she thought it would, how I wasn't doing all of the things she thought I would and how she disagreed with some of the decisions I had made- and all of that, well all of that was fine. I don't mind people disagreeing with me. And as far as the church not just exploding immediately- well I didn't think it would, so I didn't feel bad about that. But then towards the end- it was the last thing she said. She looked me right in the eyes and told me she was most disappointed in my preaching- that I wasn't creative, inspiring, and that she left without anything to think about during the week.

Now friends, I'll just say it- my feelings were hurt. Now preaching is a very subjective thing- one person can just love a particular preacher, and somebody sitting right next to them is sleeping or working on their grocery list. But I mean of all the gazillion things I didn't think I was doing all that well, preaching was one of the few things that I felt remotely positive about.

And to hear that from her, well it just hit me hard- when she had said everything she needed to say and left, I just sat there feeling like I had been kicked in the stomach.

And even though it had been a few months since all that had transpired, when I saw that letter, that PACKAGE was more like it, and I saw her name on it- I was like, “Seriously?” It wasn’t enough to completely shred my sense of self-worth and confidence face to face- you have to write it down in letter form, too? I was overcome by that same feeling, that same punched-in-the-gut kind of sick feeling. And I lay the envelope on my desk, and I just stared at it, dreading what was inside.



Dread. Dread. This is what Jacob was feeling as he lay there that night, all alone, on the riverbanks of the Jabbok. It was dread- that fearful anticipation of what was to come.

Oh, he had done it again- he had pulled another “Jacob”. Last week we reminisced about how Jacob pulled trick after trick on his brother Esau- until Esau literally wanted to kill him and Jacob had to flee. And then Jacob wound up living with his uncle and marrying into the family in one of the more...um...unusual weddings in the history of the world. And then, well Jacob did pretty ok for a while. It was probably because he was so busy- with all this kids and all those wives. But you know, with some people- well some people just never change.

One day Jacob was out in the fields, and he’s looking at all of Laban’s flocks and he’s thinking: “Why should Laban have so many sheep and goats when I hardly have any?” And all at once it hits him- this scheme to literally fleece his uncle/father-in-law Laban. Jacob figured out a way to hustle Laban out of his sheep and goats. But as you can imagine Laban was not pleased. And Jacob had done it again- Jacob had made everyone at home so mad, that there was nothing left to do but to run. Only this time he wasn’t alone- and his family had learned from

him. When they fled, Rachel also took a few things for herself- she took the family gods, a set of statues that meant more to Laban than anything.

So Laban actually chased the family down. And when he caught up with them he realized because they were family he couldn't kill them. So, Laban did something I've only seen done on TV sitcoms. He set up a pile of rocks, and he told Jacob that the land wasn't big enough for the both of them- so Jacob would have to stay on that side of the line, and he would stay on this side of line. And after this moment, if Jacob ever crossed it- well Laban wouldn't be responsible for what happened.

(Honestly, I've only seen this done on TV- where someone gets mad and paints a stripe down the middle of the house or something. It never works out, but it's always good for an episode or two.)

So Jacob had done it again. He had worn out another welcome. So what to do? He couldn't go back to Laban's. And they couldn't stay there in the wilderness. There was only one place he could go- home. Only Jacob couldn't help but remember that the last time he saw his brother Esau, Esau was seriously planning to shorten Jacob's life.

And this is why Jacob sends a huge gift party ahead of him with a ton of animals and things- hoping to dampen some of his brother's rage. This is why he picked the Jabbok to cross back into the land- it was way up north and kind of a back door. And this, this is why he sent his family across the river, but then he himself, couldn't bring himself just yet to step foot into the land- he was terrified of his brother. This is what dread does- it paralyzes us, it freezes us. This is the worst thing about it, I think.

And this is why on that dark night, when God drew near, God took the form of an assailant. One of the wisest scholars of our day, Walter Brueggemann writes: "For in the night

the divine antagonist tends to take on the features of others with whom we struggle in the day.”

(Interpretation) It was dread- it was Jacob’s fearful, anticipation of what was going to happen to him.



We know what this is like right now, don’t we? We know what dread is like in our country. Our leaders in Washington are being even less helpful than usual. And if our country defaults- well they aren’t the ones who are going to feel it most; we are. And if you aren’t dreading learning Chinese when our creditors repossess our country, I took two years of Mandarin in college, and you’ll just have to take my word for it that you should be. You should be.

But it’s not just as a nation that we have dread- so many of us in our own lives, we’ve got people we know we need to talk to, but we just can’t bring ourselves to do it. We keep putting it off. And we’ve got things we know we need to do, but we’re having the hardest time motivating ourselves. Or for some of us, we’ve got a nagging pain, or we noticed a lump, and we know we need to go in and see someone about it- but what if it really is something?

That’s the worst thing about fear and dread- it paralyzes us. It freezes us. And we get stuck in a kind of hell- knowing what we need to do, but too scared to do it.



And this, for all of Jacob’s rough edges- this is what makes him a hero of faith. Because when God confronts Jacob with his greatest fear, his brother Esau attacking him in the middle of the night- Jacob doesn’t shrink or run away. He fights back. He wrestles. Even when his hip is put out of joint, he holds on. And in the morning, when he wakes up, and he has to decide whether to face Esau and follow his family or whether to keep hiding and avoiding- he crosses

that river. To be sure he limps past Penuel to face his brother- it isn't pretty. But he makes it. He does it.

And here's the kicker- when he finally meets Esau, Esau who shows up with 400 men, this moment his dread has so built up in his mind, what happens? Does his brother pull out a sword? Does he punch him in the face? Does he tell him he's going to kill him? No. Esau throws his arms around his brother and picks him up off the ground in the biggest bear hug you ever did see. His fears didn't even turn out to be true. All of that dread was for nothing.



Well I don't know how long I sat there staring at that letter from "Carol". All I can tell you is I didn't open it that day. Or the next. I embarrassed to say I just left it there lying on my desk, my sense of foreboding and dread growing day by day. Why did she write to me? And why so much? Wasn't it just enough to destroy my sense of confidence, my sense of self in person? Now she needed to commit it to paper?

Finally, it was eating me up so badly there was nothing left to do. I had to open it. So, sighing heavily I prepared myself for the worst. I opened it. Inside was a large card- not a letter. It was a thank you card. On the inside "Carol" had filled it out from top to bottom with her cursive script thanking me for our time together and telling me that had been really depressed of late and that a lot of what she said had more to do with her than me- that she was sorry and that she hoped I could understand. And what made the envelope so thick were pictures- pictures she had taken of people at the church and pictures of her family. She was always telling me about her grandchildren, she said, and she thought I might like to see them.

All of that fear. All of that dread. All over a thank you note.



You know, the most common expression in the Bible is “do not be afraid”. Do not be afraid. Well here’s what I know- you can’t actually control whether you are afraid or not. Fear is something comes upon us. But whether we are afraid or not- we can control how we respond to it.

If there’s something you’re afraid of doing and you’ve been putting it off- face it this week. Just face it.

If there’s something you’ve been needing to say to someone- an apology or something you need. Spit it out this week.

If the worst happens then call me. That’s what I’m here for. And if you absolutely have to then write me a letter. It may take me a few days to open it- but I will. I promise. **Amen.**