In a Boat, On a Train, Beside a River
A Sermon on Genesis 32 by the Rev. Philip Major
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Where will you go to find, and be found, by God?

Jesus withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself. I’ve done this more than a few times, so it’s easy for me to imagine the scene. Jesus is exhausted. It is time for him to rest and to pray, so he heads across the lake in an old rowboat. He sees a grassy bay and aims the front of his boat into quiet waters. Jesus’ boat glides among the marsh plants. He watches frogs swimming in the water. His boat comes to rest in shallow water, surrounded by water lilies. Jesus sits in silence and remembers. He remembers his purpose. He remembers his baptism into a life of ministry. He remembers God’s love for him.

Where will you find, and be found, by God? Jacob found God at Peniel. The story for Jacob started many chapters before this passage in the book of Genesis.

In Genesis 27 Rebekah and Jacob deceived Isaac. They tricked Isaac to give his blessing to Jacob instead of his older brother Esau. Esau swore he would kill Jacob, so Jacob fled to the land of his mother, to the East, and lived with his uncle, Laban. Jacob served Laban as a shepherd for twenty years. He was extremely skilled as a shepherd and grew very wealthy. Jacob married two of Laban’s daughters, Rachel and Leah.

Now it is time for Jacob to return home, to the land of his father, to Canaan. So Jacob gives orders to his servants and his children, and they gather his flocks, hundreds of animals: sheep and camels and donkeys and goats. Dozens of people and hundreds of animals travel in a great caravan, across the Euphrates river, across the desert and into the hill country of Gilead, led by Jacob.

The Lord has promised Jacob that he will prosper, that Jacob’s descendants will be as the sand of the sea, but Jacob is afraid. As they approach the land of Canaan, a messenger tells Jacob that his brother Esau and a company of four hundred men are marching to intercept them. Jacob is terrified that Esau will kill him and his family and his slaves and flocks of animals.

In today’s passage Jacob and his caravan are just a few days walk from his childhood home in Canaan. Jacob sends the caravan ahead of him, across the Jabbok river. It was late in the evening when Jacob helped his family cross the river. The adults set up camp and made a fire. The children went to sleep. One or two servants kept watch in the dark. Then Jacob crossed back over to the other side to be alone.

Why did Jacob cross back to the other side? Why didn’t he stay with his family?

We can only guess that Jacob was looking for God. Jacob needed to be in a place where he would be found by God.

So Jacob is alone, by the river, where he encounters a most unusual visitor. An unknown person appeared and wrestled with him for many hours. When the stranger saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he grew more desperate. With an enormous blow the stranger struck Jacob on the hip socket; and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint.

Then the stranger said, “Let me go, for the day is breaking.” This is our clue that Jacob has been wrestling, not with a man, but with God. God knows Jacob will not survive if he sees God in the light of day.

Jacob said, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” So the stranger said to Jacob, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” Then the stranger said, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.” Jacob’s new name confirms that he has been found with God, because Israel is a combination of
two words: Isra means ‘wrestles’ and el is the most common name for God in the ancient world. Jacob is now Israel, or ‘One who wrestles with God’. Jacob left his family in the middle of the night, and went back across the river, and was found by God.

Where will you go, what will you do, to find, and be found, by God? I don’t have a simple answer for you, but here are a few ideas about finding God.

Notice Jacob was found by God in a time of fear. Sometimes we have the false impression that we have to get everything in order first, and then we will have more time and energy to devote to finding God, to being with God, to listening for God. It never seems to work that way. The story of Jacob and the story of Mary, the mother of Jesus, attest to the reality that God comes to us, as we are, in our times of fear and uncertainty.

Notice Jacob found God and sustained a significant injury in the process. I hope you are not being injured by the struggle of your life, but you should know that this journey we are on is not free of pain or injury. Life is never pain-free. That reality doesn’t change when we are actively seeking to find and be found by God.

Notice Jacob did not give up, even after hours of struggle in the dark. Recall that the outcome of the struggle was far from certain. This is vitally important for me right now. For the past twenty weeks we have been struggling with one of the great challenges of our lives. For twenty weeks we have not had any gatherings for worship in the buildings of our church. It has been a struggle.

Most of our members find it difficult to worship through an internet connection. I find it difficult to worship through an internet connection! Jesus did not say, “Whenever you have a stable internet connection, I will be there.” Jesus said, “Whenever two or three of you are gathered together in my name, I will be there.” It is often difficult for us to worship and seek the presence of God when we are alone.

This time of separation, this time of a deadly epidemic and uncertainty in our nation, is a time of terrible struggle. After twenty weeks, the outcome of the struggle is far from certain. The question in the center of our worship today is, in the midst of the struggle, are we getting ourselves to a place where we may find, and be found by God?

As we seek to find, and be found by God, notice Jacob was found by God in a time when everything was changing. That’s a hopeful clue for us, because many parts of our lives seem to be changing very quickly right now. Don’t give up hope; especially in this time when many parts of life have been upended, we are on a mission to find and be found by God.

Notice Jacob found God and he was changed by the experience. When you and I find, and are found by, God, we are changed by the experience. This means letting go of some part of our lives that is keeping us from journeying forward with God.

Finally, notice Jacob was found by God and, after all of the struggle, he was blessed.

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After all of these years, are you still searching for God? I hope so. After all of these and months and years, are you continuing the struggle? I hope you are, and I hope your struggle is a struggle with God. After all of the changes in your life, after all of the weeks separated from the people you love, are you still finding God? I pray that you are.

I pray that, after weeks and weeks of uncertainty, in times of fear and anger, you are still pursuing the place where you will find, and be found by God. I pray that, in spite of the injuries and the grief, you are still wrestling, that you are willing to endure some more change. I pray that in the heat of the struggle, in a way or at a time you may not expect, you will be receiving God’s blessing in your life.