

JOURNEY'S ENDING - JACOB'S RETURN (*revised edition*)

Eastertide

Genesis 32:1-33:17

A Sermon Preached by
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University Congregational United Church of Christ
Seattle, Washington 98125
April 8, 2018

Time of Reflection

Spoken by lay readers and Pastor Peter Ilgenfritz.

The time that my journey takes is long and the way of it long.

Travelers have to knock at every alien door to come to their own...

[O]ne has to wander through all the outer worlds to reach the innermost shrine at the end.

...

The question and the cry 'Oh, where?' melt into tears of a thousand streams and deluge the world
with the flood of the assurance 'I am!'¹

Pastor Catherine Foote

The time that my journey takes is long and the way of it long.

The story we will hear this morning is the story of a long journey. And it really begins for two brothers in the womb, as Rebecca their mother has finally become pregnant and their father finally will have a child. Mom notices some trouble and wonders what's going on with this pregnancy. And she has a dream. And she's told two nations are at war within you. There's something in Scripture about the story of two siblings. It always tells us something of an adventure, something of a contrast.

So these twins are born. The first one comes out hairy, red, ruddy, and his mother names him Esau. The name itself means "Hairy One." But holding right onto his heel is the second son, the twin, smooth and fair, and his mother names him Jacob which means "Usurper," the one who takes the place of another.

Well, the two kids grow up. And Esau is a hunter. He goes out and *he* gets game for his father. He prepares meals. It's his father's favorite food. Esau is his father's favorite.

Jacob grows up and he is a stay-at-home kind of guy and he becomes his mother's favorite. But you know in Scripture the firstborn is the one who gets the inheritance, the birthright, the blessing. The second born has to get whatever is left over.

One day Esau is out hunting and he comes home famished. And Jacob has been cooking stew. Esau looks at his brother's stew and says, "Brother, I am starving. Could I have a bowl of food. And his brother says ... "

¹ Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). Excerpt from "Journey Home." In 1913, for works including this poem, Tagore became the first non-European to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature. (Notes from UCUCS Sunday bulletin 5/13/2018.)

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I have to, have to just stop right here. My twin sister is right here. She was the firstborn. So she's, she's -- yeah -- she's relating to this story.

Jacob says, "Well sure, you can have a bowl of stew. Just give me your birthright." "Brother, I am starving. I will die. What good is a birthright to me if I'm not even alive! You can have it. Just let me eat." "Here you go." And Esau eats the stew and Jacob has birthright. Still not enough.

When Isaac is old and about to die, he calls his sons for a blessing. And he says to Esau, "Go hunt me some game. Make me my favorite stew. And when you bring it back to me I'll give you my blessing." Esau heads out for the hunt.

In the meantime, Rebecca pulls Jacob aside and says, "Hey, let's make some stew for Dad and send you in with it and you'll get the blessing." Isaac by now can't see, so his wife Rebecca dresses Jacob in Esau's clothes. They kill a goat to make goat stew. They flavor it just the way Isaac likes it. And they put the goatskin on Jacob's hands and on his neck so is dad will feel that rough skin of Esau. Yeah. And Jacob walks in. "Father here's your stew. I've come for my blessing." And Isaac says, "Well, you sound like Jacob, but you feel like Esau; you smell like Esau; you must be Esau. He eats the stew. And he gives Jacob the blessing of the firstborn, "Everything I have is yours. All of my descendents will serve you. Blessed are you, my son." And Jacob, receiving the blessing, leaves.

You know, if you haven't read this story, it's in Genesis 28, 29, 30. It's a great read. It's one of the best reads in the Bible, because our author says, right on the heels of that ...

Esau comes in with his game, with *his* stew and says, "Dad! Here's your stew!" And Dad says, "What? I've already given you my blessing!" "No. It was Jacob you gave the blessing to."

"Have you no blessing left for me, Father?" Esau asks. And Isaac says, "I have nothing; I've already given everything to Jacob. So you will labor and you will struggle and you will eat from the land. And that's all I can offer." Esau is so furious that he vows that he will kill Jacob. And Rebecca when she hears that says to Jacob, "You have to go. You have to go." So Jacob heads out.

And as the story goes, he's expected to be gone for just a few days till Esau calms down and forgets. But in fact Jacob is gone for decades.

Hear the story of his coming home.

Scripture – Read by Liturgists

Listen for the word of God.

Genesis 32:1-13-33:17, selected verses²

Jacob went on his way and the angels of God met him; and when Jacob saw them he said, "This is God's camp!" So he called that place Mahanaim.

Jacob sent messengers before him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom, instructing them, "Thus you shall say to my lord Esau: Thus says your servant Jacob, 'I have lived

² The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), Old Testament. ©1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. .

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with Laban as an alien, and stayed until now; and I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, male and female slaves; and I have sent to tell my lord, in order that I may find favor in your sight.”

The messengers returned to Jacob, saying, “We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him.” Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed; and he divided the people that were with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two companies, thinking, “If Esau comes to the one company and destroys it, then the company that is left will escape.”

...

So he spent that night there, and from what he had with him he took a present for his brother Esau. ... So the present passed ahead of him; and he himself spent that night in the camp.

...

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 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.” ... 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 embrace him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. When Esau looked up and saw the women and children, he said, “Who are these with you?” Jacob said, “The children whom God has graciously given your servant.”

...

So Esau returned that day on his way to Seir. But Jacob journeyed to Succoth, and built himself a house, and made booths for his cattle; therefore the place is called Succoth.

Rev. Catherine Foote

As Amy reminded us all year, we have been taking a journey. And in the fall we considered what we would take with us and what we would leave behind. You might remember heavy suitcases. In Advent we simply -- whatever our preparation was -- decided to go. And since then we have been journeying, staying in strangers’ houses, maybe making our camp outdoors, until we found our way home on Easter Sunday, Easter being our home as people of faith. So, during this season we're going to share stories of how people find their way home, because every story of leaving eventually becomes a story of coming home. Maybe you can remember a time that you left home: for college, for adventure. Maybe you *had to leave. Maybe home never was home or home had broken apart. But that journey of leaving, don't we all know it? Don't we all know that.

I mentioned earlier that my twin sister is here; and some of you might also know that I happen to have twin brothers. My twin brothers are Roy and Frank. Many of you walked the journey with me three years ago when my brother Roy passed away. Roy was born first. Five minutes later Frankie came along. And the thing about Frankie was mom didn't even expect him! She thought she was

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having one. So there was Frankie and he is named after my grandmother. And when Roy and Frankie grew up, I will tell you that Roy was the stable one and Frankie was the crazy one.

Roy grew up and bought a home about a mile from where my folks lived and where he had grown up. It was in the same tract housing. It was a very similar floor plans plan to the plan our next door neighbor had. He got married young. He was the first in our family to provide my parents with grandkids. He went to work for a little corporation called Douglas Aircraft in Long Beach California when he was still in college. He went there is an intern. And as Douglas Aircraft became Boeing as Boeing purchased the Douglas Company my brother ended up working for Boeing. He retired from there 50 years later as the vice president of financial operations. He never left the job he had when he was 17 years old. He never moved further than one mile from my parents. And he raised a son and a daughter in that little tract home not far from where he was raised himself. That was Roy.

In the meantime my brother Frankie came home one day when he was about 18 and announced to our family that he had joined the Air Force and he was heading off for adventure. He went to Minot, North Dakota. He spent time in Thailand during the Vietnam War. He spent time in Germany. He went back to school and got a degree and then another degree. We wondered whether he would ever settle down. About 20 years after his brother Roy had married, Frankie married. And I will never forget when Frankie's firstborn came into the world, because Roy, who by then had raised two children and was watching his youngest go away, sat in the hospital room and just laughed. Here was Frankie with a 20-year journey ahead of him, holding this little baby and not knowing what was in store for him.

There is something about the story of two siblings isn't there? Those two choices. Those two ways we leave home, sometimes not going far at all, sometimes spinning and spinning until we find our place. There is something about that story of two siblings: Esau and Jacob.

I would venture to guess when Jesus sat down with the multitudes who would come to him and started the story of the prodigal son most of his audience thought immediately of Esau and Jacob. How do you come home when you've wandered like Jacob?

You know I've had my own leavings from home just like all of us have. And my leaving of my faith journey was indeed a long journey, the way of it long. When I discovered I could no longer stay in the congregation I was a part of, the faith that was there just did not have the expansiveness that I needed. Leaving was not easy. But for every story of leaving, there's a story coming home. Whatever your story of leaving is, think now of your story of coming home. Jacob came home in deepest fear. His leaving was so hard, what would he find when he returned? Couldn't you just feel it in the story. "What will I find when I get home?" I don't know we don't know what happened to Esau in that time that Jacob was away, because if you read the story we stay with the story of Jacob and we don't really hear the story of Esau. Esau was like my brother Roy. He just stayed home. He never moved very far from his parents' home. He did what the oldest son was supposed to do. And he raised his own family. But something must have happened to Esau! Isn't he the invisible character in the story? We hear so much about Jacob. But Esau changed, too.

Jacob had to wrestle with God. Oh, he spent his time wrestling. You know when my brother Frankie went out, I think he was wrestling. He was wrestling with something. *He* was searching for his name.

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When my brother Frankie finally settled into his life, his name changed. We don't call him Frankie anymore. We call him Frank.

When I found my home here in the United Church of Christ, a sense of faith that was so expansive that you welcomed everything about me, I changed my name. And many of you know that if you meet someone who knew me before I came to the United Church of Christ, they'll call me Kathy. They'll call me Kathy. If you hear that out there, it's either some salesperson who has felt the privilege of diminutiving my name or it's someone who knew me before 1989 when I found the United Church of Christ and I became Catherine.

Jacob spent decades searching for his name. And the night before he came home, that search culminated in a wrestling match. And when the match was over and Jacob had finally been defeated, he held on to the one he had wrestled with and he said, "I won't let you go until you bless me" and that stranger gave him a new name "one who wrestles with God." As one who wrestles with God -- Israel -- he could finally go home.

Here we are, a community of stories. You have your stories, too. Some of you have not gone more than one mile from home. Maybe can still reach out and touch the place you were born. Some of you have gone halfway around the world and know two homes, and in that journey perhaps have found your own name. But here are the two gifts of God that are available for every one of us today: Every one of us is invited to find our true name and to own it, to live into it, to claim it. And every one of us, no matter how far we have wandered, no matter how long the journey has been, each one of us is invited home. Each one of us is invited to that welcome. May you find your name. May you know that here you are home."

– Amen!

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Prepared by Beth Bartholomew from www.universityucc.org/Sermons

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~~05/31/2018~~ 07/05/2018