

Highland Presbyterian Church
19th Sunday After Pentecost – October 16, 2022
“The Space Between”
A sermon by Megan McCarty

Psalm 121

Genesis 32:22-31

The fraught story of Jacob takes up a good portion of the book of Genesis. Up until this point, throughout the stories of chapters 25-31, we have seen Jacob con, cheat, deceive, and manipulate virtually every member of his family and then run off when the tension was about to explode into full conflict. So, to understand this pivotal moment in Jacob’s life that we just read about, we must start at the beginning. Jacob’s story has always been one of separation and division and ambiguity.

He was born a twin with his brother Esau. Esau is born first, but Jacob emerges from the womb holding onto his brother’s foot. A male by birth, Jacob lives in the women’s tents and cooks, which rejects traditional gender roles. He is the second-born child, but he tricks his father and acquires both his brother’s birthright and his brother’s blessing, essentially severing the relationship with his twin and making it impossible to stay in his own home.

After he flees, he rises to success but in a foreign land. Even his marriages bear the mark of separation. His wives are two sisters who are divided against one another as they vie for his affection. One wife is beloved but barren, the other is unloved but powerful in birth. And now, in the chapter we just read, Jacob is on his way back home to engage in a reunion with Esau.

As he gets closer to Canaan, Jacob sends gifts and then sends messengers to his estranged brother Esau. The messengers return saying Esau is riding to meet his brother with 400 men. Jacob is anxious in how his brother will react, so he desperately divides his property into two camps, hoping Esau and his men will attack one camp and not the other. He then divides his tribute to his brother among not just two but into three different groups of his servants. Jacob keeps dividing his property and household into smaller and smaller camps until he ends up alone on the bank of the river.

He has no place else to go. Things feel tense and uncomfortable for Jacob, but this time, he can’t escape these feelings; he can’t run away from the tension. He has to face all of the choices he has made and most importantly, he has to face himself and the situation he finds himself in. Genesis 32 depicts liminality in all its pain and all of its potential. Liminality, or liminal space, can have several different meanings. It comes from the Latin, *limen*, which means “threshold.” Liminal space can refer to a physical place. Architects have to deal with liminal spaces when they are designing buildings, because those are the spaces that get you from one place to another, the hallways, corridors, entryways, thresholds.

But it can also refer to a metaphysical space. The terrible and wonderful in-between stage of limbo. You know the times and the feelings that I am talking about. The times in

which you are in the midst of transition, and it is both uncomfortable and hopeful. You know the past will never be your reality again, but you also don't know what the future holds. These liminal spaces can be difficult; they can occur following the death of a loved one, or the birth of a new baby, they show up when you end a job or start a new one, when you move, transition life stages, or embark on a new endeavor.

Church in itself is designed to be a sacred liminal space. You enter into worship in one space or state of mind and if we are open to the ways in which the spirit is moving and breathing, we can be transformed and then sent back out into the world to serve in a different state of mind or being. In our particular church right now, some people might be feeling this uncomfortable state of limbo since we have a transitional pastor and have been in a transitional time for the last two years. Interim times have a way of alienating some; those folks who would rather just stay away until the difficult stage of liminality is over. They might think, why would someone work hard to invest in a relationship that they know would be temporary? The answer, I think, is in this text. We engage deeply in the space of liminality because it can change us. We can walk away a new and different person.

Liminal spaces have the ability to challenge hierarchies and reimagine connections between individuals. Jacob spends the night wrestling "a man." The text is very mysterious in not telling us who this man is, but Jacob is certain that he is encountering the Divine. In his liminal night, Jacob turns topsy-turvy the hierarchy between mortal and immortal. His wrestling reimagines the abilities and limits of both the human and the Divine. To cross the threshold into liminal space is to confront all of these possibilities, and to emerge—if at all—with shifted bodily boundaries.

In the liminal space of one evening, Jacob confronts a myriad of possibilities, including losing everything he has; losing everyone he loves; and losing his own life at the hand of his God. He emerges from this confrontation with his physical identity shifted—a limp—and with his internal identity changed, thanks to a new name: Israel, or, the One Who Wrestles with God.

Jacob-Israel's experience of his liminal night may not have contained all that he had hoped: he asked for the name of God, but he was denied, and his body will forever bear the brunt of his encounter. And yet, the final, gorgeous image of this text suggests that perhaps, somehow Jacob has learned to embrace the transient world he inhabits: "The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip" (Genesis 32:31). The sun rose upon him, as he stepped off the liminal threshold. The sun rose upon him, as he limped toward the final encounter with his brother, who – spoiler alert – forgives him. In spite of whatever struggles, wrestlings, or weepings the liminal night contained, the sun rose upon him in the morning taking him into a new space as a new person.

It's a beautiful image. But it's not where we are as a church yet. And it's possibly not where a lot of you all are in your lives currently. And it's not what the majority of this story and text are about. We are still in the space between. We are still wrestling with our doubts, fears, uncertainties, hopes, dreams, and our grief.

We live in a culture that celebrates winners, those that can defeat the other. As they do this, they appear to also defeat their doubts and previous losses. We want to cheer for Jacob who emerges seemingly as the winner in this story. But if we are truthful, these wins are a deception.

In life, often all we can do is hang on. We cannot defeat grief or heartbreak; they will leave a mark. We must be like Jacob and refuse to let go until a blessing provides new insights that will once again transform us. Just as God fights for us, sometimes we must fight our questions and doubts and our pain and refuse to let go until we are blessed enough to continue on this journey with God.

Today if we dare, we can lift up and even celebrate our struggle for a relationship with God and the mysteries of life. Not as a platitude, but by remembering God does not give up on us, and it is our job not to give up on God. Whatever it is that you are struggling with today, this story gives us the reminder that there is a way forward. It might not be the way you planned, it might not look exactly how you want it to, and it probably will not come without struggle. Jacob was far from perfect, but he was faithful, and he eventually realized he had to stop running and face his challenges. In this text, he does become a role model, not of moral perfection, but as the one who wrestled in the night and did not give up. His new name "Israel" is a lesson worth learning.

Wrestling with our feelings, facing the hard and uncomfortable head on, and dealing with those parts that cause us pain and grief is necessary for growth. So let's live into the space between and become comfortable with being uncomfortable. Let's figure out how to get to the place of the sunrise together. Because the one thing that we have going for us that Jacob didn't is each other. It's so much easier to do this work in community. Think about how much less vulnerable Jacob would have been on the riverbank if he had not sent everyone away from him and been all alone. So, no matter what you are dealing with, lean on one another. Hold each other accountable. Wrestle with the pain and have the hard conversations because God is in the space between. Amen.