

Transformation on the Edge

Elizabeth Steel

Genesis 32:22-31

Lewinsville Presbyterian Church

August 2, 2020

Let us pray: God, Speak your words through me so that your message is proclaimed and declared. Speak your words through me so that the ears who hear it know that they are loved and called by you. Amen.

Good morning. My name is Elizabeth Steel. I am a rising third year student at Princeton Theological Seminary earning my master's in Divinity, and I am also a member of Lewinsville Presbyterian Church. I'm grateful to be with you this morning – I'm sure there are plenty of familiar faces out there, but I am also especially happy to be with any of you who may be worshipping with Lewinsville in a new way or from a new place. I'll start off by telling you what I told Pastor Scott when he asked me if I was interested in preaching a few weeks back...I passed Intro to Preaching this year. So that will hopefully make you feel better about the time we're about to spend together...

When I first started seminary a couple of years ago, my very first small discussion or precept was for the Introduction to the Old Testament class, a course that was notoriously difficult. Nevertheless, I was excited to take it because one of my main goals in attending seminary was to know the Bible better, something I was embarrassed to admit was lacking in my faith life. So there I was early on the first Friday morning of the fall semester – I walked the steep wooden, winding stairs of Stuart Hall to the third floor. I set my class binder out in front of me and hoped that the labels and colored dividers would make people think that I was actually supposed to be there. I think I also hoped they would make *me* think that I was supposed to be there, too. I nervously waited for class to start, as the table filled with students who probably didn't need to Google every other word in the syllabus like I did. Our preceptor opened the discussion by asking us to share our names and our favorite book of the Old Testament. I panicked. The first question I had to answer in seminary and I was sure I was going to get it wrong. Old Testament, Old Testament... Why didn't I think to actually look through the Bible before I started seminary? What if I say something that's actually in the New Testament? Where were all those letters again?

We started at the far side of the table – as we went around, there were lots of Psalms, an Esther and a Ruth here and there, an Exodus, and a few books that I am still convinced were made up. When the time finally came for me to share, I just blurted out "Genesis!" for one reason and one reason only: I was absolutely SURE that it had to be in the Old Testament. It seems that I spoke a prophetic word that day – Genesis has, in fact, turned out to be my favorite book in the entire Old Testament, maybe even the

entire Bible. So, all that to say, I am especially excited to be a part of this series on Genesis.

Genesis is a wild book and our scripture today is kind of a weird little nugget in the midst of the broad, sweeping narratives that tell the story of how God first created and related to humanity. This event of Jacob wrestling the angel is nestled between the larger story of Jacob's reconciliation with Esau. Here's a quick refresher about these two brothers: Esau and Jacob were at odds in their mother's womb, Esau was born moments before Jacob, Jacob has an inevitable chip on his shoulder and tricks Esau out of his birthright and father's blessing, and he ends up fleeing the wrath of his brother and the consequences of his deceptions. He is now about to reconcile with Esau while traveling back to his homeland with his wives and household, sending a menagerie of animals ahead as a peace offering to soften the blow. "Perhaps he will accept me...", Jacob wanders and hopes. Then we have our story of Jacob wrestling the angel, and after this, the reconciliation journey picks back up and the brothers reunite, Jacob lucky that his brother is more gracious than he gave him credit for.

So why this strange incident in the middle of the night? What does that mean? These verses that Cathy read raise a number of curious questions. Why is Jacob conveniently left alone, did he know something was going to happen? Who, exactly is this man that appears and starts to wrestle Jacob? Why won't he tell Jacob his name when he asks? Did this really happen, or could it be another one of Jacob's dreams? All we know is that at some point in the night, Jacob encounters a man, engages in some sort of physical altercation with him for a long time, receives a new name and a blessing, and now walks with a limp. There are still so many questions. Sometimes, and I can say this because I'm in seminary, the Bible just doesn't make sense. I can find this story frustrating. Doesn't God *want* us to know what God's trying to tell us? Why make it so difficult?

During my time here at Princeton, I've been particularly interested in how art can be used as a tool for theological reflection and exploration. This summer I've been interning with the Princeton University Art Museum and have been immersed in thinking about art in this theological way, so my mind immediately jumped to a particular painting when I read this scripture. Perhaps it can shed some light on this story...

This is *Vision after the Sermon*, painted by the artist Paul Gauguin in 1888. Don't worry, I'm not going to ask you to interpret the painting, and you don't even have to like it. I'll fill you in. We've got a sort of odd scene here. There are twelve Breton women and one priest lining the foreground and left side. Gauguin was living in the Brittany region of France when he painted this work, and the women are wearing the traditional dress of that region. There's an apple tree that dissects the painting in the middle and a cow in the upper left corner; neither of these appear in the scripture, but are added by Gauguin. The green areas at the top of the painting represent the river that Jacob is about to cross and his homeland toward which he is traveling. And then we've got Jacob and this angel. It's kind of odd that they're not at the center of the painting and it looks like the angel is in control at this point. Just like the story in Genesis, it's all a bit confusing.

Gauguin painted right after the time of the Impressionists, like Monet, so he is known as a Post-Impressionist artist. He's moving away from painting the world as it actually is, and moving toward something more abstract. For example, we know logically that the ground we stand on isn't bright red. But looking at this painting, we also know that the red spaces are meant to be the ground. So our minds allow Gauguin to play with reality a bit here, and also recall that red is usually associated with Esau, so it's not a coincidence that this color surrounds the scene. Notice how there aren't really any shadows in the painting, when we know there probably should be. Just like the story in the scripture, we're brought to a sort of dreamland where the questions are open-ended. We do have a letter that Gauguin wrote to his friend Vincent Van Gogh about this work. He writes that "the events only exist in the imaginations from the people praying – an after effect of the sermon." Remember the title of this painting--it's not Jacob Wrestling the Angel or something like that; it's *Vision after the Sermon*. The point here is not what happens to Jacob and the angel; the point is what happens to **us** because of Jacob and the angel. As one art historian puts it, "This is not a Biblical painting, the subject is not religious – the painting is about people having a religious *experience*."

I wonder then what sort of *experience* we're meant to have while reading Genesis 32:22-31. I'd like to offer a suggestion by way of a Franciscan priest. Richard Rohr is a friar, author, and the founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation in New Mexico. His work centers around humanity's evolving experience with God and focuses on "orthopraxis", that is, on what it actually means to practice your faith in real life. The Center he founded operates on a number of core principles, one of which is the concept of living on the edge of the inside. The edge of the inside. The principle reads: Practical truth is more likely found at the bottom and the edges than at the top or the center of most groups, institutions, and cultures. In other words, go to the edges to find truth. Imagine your various identities – gender, race, religion to name a few. Think of these each almost like a circle, and you are somewhere within that particular circle. The edges of these circles of identity, then as Rohr argues, are really where the good stuff happens. He says, "To take your position on the spiritual edge of things is to learn how to move safely in and out, back and forth, across and return ... When you are at the center of something, you usually confuse the essentials with the nonessentials, and get tied down by trivia, loyalty tests, and job security (here I'll also add church committees). He concludes, "Not much truth can happen there." The center is comfortable, the center is safe. Everybody agrees with you in the center. Everybody looks like you in the center. Everybody sits in the same pew in the center. Rohr is challenging us to move away from the center to the edges because this is what Jesus does. Jesus "was into a process of transformation more than a belonging system," he writes. "He wanted searchers more than settlers, prophets more than priests, honest journeyers more than gatherings of the so-called healthy." When you're at the edge, you can see the people on the other side. You can hear them. You can speak with them. You can love them. You can move between two worlds. As Rohr puts it, "if you are both inside and outside, you are an ultimate threat, a possible reformer, and a lasting invitation to the larger world."

I think Jacob lives on the edge of the inside. Think about it. He's always trying to push the boundaries. He doesn't settle. He spends most of his life trying to move away from the center, from his expected place in life, where it's safe. Isn't it ironic, then, that as he moves away from the center, he is also moving toward his true identity given by God as Israel. As I mentioned, this is kind of a strange place for this little story in scripture, it also makes perfect sense. Jacob has run his whole life on the edge, and now he's got nowhere else to hide. Esau and the consequences of his past are right on the other side of that river ford. *Then* it happens. He is transformed *right* in the moment when he's most vulnerable. He is no longer Jacob; he is now Israel. And Israel has an interesting meaning – it can mean both “the one who strives with God” and it can also be translated as “God strives”. This is amazing. This new identity, the one that has come about because of a transformation on the edge, tells us that God wants to get caught up in this relationship. God isn't sitting back and watching it happen. God is doing the work. God strives. And God wants us to do the same.

This is the experience I believe we're meant to have. God is not calling you to be Jacob. God is calling you to be Israel. I'll say it more time for the people in the back. I know you're all watching from home, but also know that some of you all are still sitting in the back. God is not calling you to be Jacob. God is calling you to be Israel.

Being Israel means that we strive, we do the work, we struggle. Being Israel means that we meet God at the edge and allow God to transform us so that, like Jacob, we can be an important player in God's redemptive mission for all. We can be a lasting invitation to the larger world.

I'm going to challenge you right now to identify your edges. Think about the circles in which you operate. Where do you find yourself? Which of those edges is God nudging you toward? I'll make a suggestion. I suggest that we get familiar, and uncomfortable, with the edges of our race. Remember a few weeks back when many, many Americans, probably many of us, realized for the first time, it seems, what it really means to be White in America? Well more so, what it really means if you are *not* White in America? There was so much energy and motivation for change. Where are we now? Did you find the work and weight of it all exhausting and move smidge by smidge back to the comfort of the center? Or maybe you **do** find yourself on the edge still, having left behind the safety net that was tethered by ignorance and an ability to ignore. Congratulations! Now get to work. There are people on the outside that you need to know and love. There are people on the inside that you already know and love that need a friend to show them the *way* to the edge. There is a transformation that needs to take place. You will not encounter a strange man in the night and wrestle him until day break and suddenly be a different person. It won't be as easy for you as it was for Jacob. But if you show up with a whole of courage and even more humility, the transformation **will** happen, bit by bit, conversation by conversation, prayer by prayer.

So go find your edges. Ask God to meet you there. Ask Jesus to show himself to you in the faces and the hearts of the people on the other side of that edge. Finally, ask the Spirit to be restless and relentless in you so that you are broken open and can't possibly think of living anywhere else *beside* the edge of the inside. If you can do these

things, really try and then try again when you inevitably fail, *you* will be transformed at the edge. We, *the church* will be transformed at the edge. This world, broken, and flawed, and messy, will be transformed at the edge to bring it closer to the world that God so wants it to be, where we love, and see, and value each other like God does. And *that* is worth the struggle. God is not calling you to be Jacob. God is calling you to be Israel. God *needs you* to be Israel.

Amen.