

## Crossing the Jabbok<sup>1</sup>

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At some point, we all leave home. In a sense, we become homeless. We leave behind the way life was; and move out of the familiar ways and places. Some run away, some are kicked out; but for most of us, it's part of the natural process of growing up. Sometimes it's good, and sometimes it's not so good. And, sometimes, circumstances beyond our control dictate the move. It's all a mixture: a hurricane, a death, a divorce, a job transfer, retirement, going off to school, a new baby...

Faithfulness led Abram to leave his home for a new land. Sinfulness caused Adam and Eve to leave their garden place.

Leaving home may involve physical or geographical change; or it may be a spiritual shift—a movement and change deep within our soul. But almost always, leaving home is a disruption to life. "I don't think we're in Kansas anymore, Toto!" Everyone wants to go home.

Some have said you can never go back home. I think that's right. After our boys moved out I remember how excited Jo Lynn and I would get when one of our boys would come back to visit. We had a such a good time with them—for about three days. It wasn't bad; it was just different. Once we leave home it's never like it was before. We can't undo the past or turn back the clock. We can't keep things or people the way they used to be. We never go back the same person as when we left. The journey home changes us.

And yet, we're not destined to be homeless. That's not God's intention.

Over and over throughout the Old Testament God promises to bring his people home, to a new land, the promised land. Jacob is an heir to that promise; a promise first made to his grandfather, Abram. Sometimes that promise may be all that sustains us in our homelessness.

Whether we understand this promised new home as a physical place or a spiritual condition, it's a place of wholeness, healing, and peace. It's a place of love where we are in union with God, neighbor, and self.

That doesn't mean the journey home is necessarily easy or without struggle. Somehow, it almost always brings us to the River Jabbok. That's where Jacob is in today's reading from Genesis 32.

<p><b>GENESIS 32:22-31(NRSV)</b> <i>The same night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything</i></p>	<p><i>that he had. 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</i></p>
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<sup>1</sup> Parts of this sermon are adapted from a sermon by the same title, preached by Michael K. Marsh; July 31, 2011.

*with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the 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." 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. So, Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.*

Jacob ran away from home because his twin brother, Esau, had sworn to kill him. Jacob was the second-born of the twins; but, he was born holding Esau's heel, which was a sign, in the superstitions of that time, that Jacob would supplant Esau—would overthrow him and take his place. The name, Jacob, means supplanter.

Esau was his father's favorite: a hunter, a man's man, ruddy complexion; with hair on his chest. Jacob was his mother's favorite: fair of complexion and gentle in his ways. With his mother's scheming and help, Jacob lived up to his name. He did cheat Esau out of his inheritance and the blessing that rightfully belonged to the firstborn son. And Esau swore he'd kill Jacob.

So, Jacob ran away to another land. There he worked fourteen years for his uncle Laban to get two wives, one of whom he didn't even really want. Always the schemer—the wheeler-dealer—Jacob was able to manipulate the relationship with Laban in a way that his flocks and herds were large and healthy. He became a wealthy man; but now, Jacob wants to go home. Now he stands at the Jabbok. The way home almost always brings us to the ford of the Jabbok.

Jacob sends his wives, his maids, and his sons on across the river, and he stays behind. Always the schemer, he sends messengers with gifts to Esau to pave the way home. The messengers return but the news is not good. Esau is coming, and he has four hundred men with him.

Jacob can't buy or scheme his way out this time. He's stuck. In front of him is Esau. Behind him is his past; the lies, the deception, the wheelin' and dealin', the stolen blessing; the home he left behind. It's night, and Jacob is alone on the banks of the Jabbok.

The Jabbok really is not much of a river, as rivers go; in fact, it was dry when I saw it. But, on the way home, the Jabbok is a lonely place, a dark place, a place of struggle and wrestling. All night long Jacob wrestled with a man. There are a lot of unanswered questions in this text: Who was that man? Was it God? Esau? Was it Jacob's uncle, Laban? Was it Isaac, his father? Was Jacob wrestling with himself? Was he wrestling with his past? His future? His identity? His faith? Maybe the only answer to those questions is, "Yes. Yes, that's who it was." Regardless, in Jacob's mind, it was a face-to-face meeting with God. He named the place "Piniel," because no one could see God's face and live to tell about it. But Jacob did.

In this nighttime wrestling Jacob is both wounded and blessed. The two seem to go together: blessings and wounds. His old life and identity as Jacob, the heel grabber, however, served him well. He held on to this man of the night long enough to receive a blessing—a real blessing, this time. Not a stolen blessing, but one through which the promises of God will be fulfilled and Jacob will be changed.

Daybreak comes and Jacob is no longer Jacob, the deceiver; the supplanter. He has been renamed. He is now Israel, the one who struggles with and prevails against God. He doesn't defeat God. He prevails. He stays in the struggle until a new day dawns and he receives the blessing that was his all along. That's faithfulness. That's the way home. That's our work at Jabbok.

Many of us know Jabbok very well: the struggle with an addiction; getting up every morning to a job you hate, or to physical pain, or to unbearable grief and loss; tossing and turning through the night trying to figure out what to do next; the slow work of rebuilding trust and putting back together a marriage or a friendship; sitting day after day at the bedside of a dying loved one. Jabbok is faithfulness in the routine ordinariness of life, work, family, and marriage. It's a week, a year, a lifetime of prayer and doing what's right without ever seeing any result.

Jabbok is experienced in a thousand different ways. It's been called the dark night of the soul; but it's the way home. Jabbok is the place where we're wounded, blessed, and renamed. It's a holy place. That's why Jacob renames it Peniel, the place where we see God, and our life is preserved.

We each have our own story of standing on the banks of the Jabbok. We can probably name quickly the wounds we received there and describe how we now limp through life. During struggle and pain, it's hard to see or trust the presence of a blessing. It's too dark. But whatever you do don't let go. Hold on. A new day is dawning and Jabbok will give way to Peniel.

It doesn't mean life magically is fixed, or that we go back to the way things used to be. It means God is faithful. It means we can now move forward. We are blessed and renamed; we can cross over, and go home. T.S. Eliot described that experience in his poem, "Little Gidding:"

"We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time."

And we all want to go home. After all, Toto, there's no place like home. There's no place like home.