

Unlikely Prospects, Unlikely Outcomes

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

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Genesis 32:22-32

Jacob's long sojourn in Haran was over. He was on his way home with a large family and with great wealth. And his brother Esau – the brother he had cheated all those years ago – his brother Esau was on his way to meet him. Not sure what to expect, Jacob sent three advance parties, laden with gifts for his brother, hoping to appease any long-smoldering anger. But before Jacob met Esau, there would be another meeting.

That same night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female slaves, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, along with all his possessions. Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until daybreak.

When the man saw that he could not prevail against him, he lightly touched his hip socket. And Jacob's hip socket was wrenched as he wrestled with him. The man said, "Let me go! It's daybreak." But Jacob said, "I won't let you go unless you bless me." So the man said to him, "What's your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "Your name won't be Jacob any more, but Israel, because you've struggled with divine and human beings and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please, tell me your name." But the man said, "Why do you ask my name?" And he blessed him there.

So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "Because I saw God face to face, yet my life was spared."

The sun rose above him as he passed Penuel. And he was limping because of his hip. That is why to this day the children of Israel do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he touched Jacob's hip socket at the thigh muscle.

Matthew 14:13-21

Wherever Jesus went, large crowds gathered to hear him. In his home town, however, he received a chilly reception. But John the Baptist received a worse reception in Herod's palace, where a dance and a promise cost him his head. John's disciples brought that news to Jesus.

After he heard, Jesus went away in a boat to a deserted place by himself. When the crowds heard, they followed him from the towns by land. When he got out [of the boat], he saw a big crowd. And he had pity on them, and he healed the sick among them.

When it was evening, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and it's already late. Send the crowds away, so they can go into the villages and buy food for themselves." But Jesus said to them, "They don't need to go away. You give them something to eat." They said to him, "We don't have anything here, except five small loaves and two fish." But he said, "Bring them here to me."

He instructed the crowds to sit down on the grass. After taking the five small loaves and the two fish and looking up toward heaven, he said the blessing. After breaking the bread, he gave it to his disciples. And the disciples gave it to the crowds. Everyone ate and was filled. And they picked up twelve baskets full of broken pieces that were left over. There were about five thousand men who ate, besides women and children.

Children's Story

Picture this: hundreds of squirrels and skunks, possums and woodchucks, beavers and raccoons, all of them riding bicycles. It's the Annual Circle-the-Great-Forest Bicycle Race, and it's a spectacle!

Some of the animals pedal as fast as they can, uphill and down. Others pedal slowly so they can take in the scenery.

I know most bicycle races are about racing hard and winning. But this race is different. It's not about winning. It's about pedaling, whether you pedal slow or fast, whether you go in a straight line or not. It's about pedaling all the way, whether it takes you half a day or three days, whether you do it all on your own or you need a little help from your friends. It's about pedaling all the way around the Great Forest, until you reach the party at the finish line.

And that party isn't just for the first one to finish. It's for everyone! Because everyone who pedals to the end wins.

Yes, the Annual Circle-the-Great-Forest Bicycle Race is a special kind of race. And it's quite a spectacle. So is the party!

Sermon

Jan and I went to Keeneland a few months ago. It's a race track in Kentucky. We've had horses for years, but this was the first time we'd ever been to the races. Unless I don't have a choice, it'll be the last time, too. A horse race is not very exciting, not if you don't have money riding on it – you or someone you know. If it's about anything, horse racing is about gambling. That's how it works for every race. You place your bet, you watch the race, and once in a while you win, but mostly you lose.

At the races, each bettor has a different method for deciding which horse to bet on. Occasional bettors may pick a horse with a name they like. Bettors with a fondness for medieval jousting tournaments may pick a horse based on the color and design of the jockey's silks.

More seasoned bettors, on the other hand, do their best to handicap a race. They look at the field carefully, racing form in hand. They assess how the horses have been running, both through their careers and in their last several starts. They look for the likely prospects to win, place, or show. They consider the odds. And they place their bets, balancing probabilities and payouts in an equation they probably couldn't explain even to themselves. Sometimes they win. Sometimes they win big. Sometimes it's a long-odds trifecta. Most of the time, however, they go home with less money than they came with, poorer, but probably no wiser. So it goes.

I wonder how a seasoned bettor would have handicapped the race that Jacob was running. I wonder if anyone would have bet on Jacob even to show, never mind to place or to win.

Jacob had lost his first race, against his brother Esau, when he broke late from the gate. After that he didn't race much, preferring to spend his time in the clubhouse. Later, in a critical race, Jacob relied on some sneaky moves to jump ahead of Esau. But then he had to keep running. And he ran without looking back, all the way to the home of his scheming uncle Laban. That's where Jacob found his stride, in race after race against his uncle.

Which brings us to this morning's reading. Jacob is racing once again with Esau. He's making the final turn and heading for home. Yes, this time he's running toward Esau instead of away from him. He's running toward Esau, and, at the same time, Esau is coming toward him with a small army! Jacob is running toward Esau, but first he will spend a long night alone.

Jacob had nothing when he went to his uncle's home in Haran. Nothing but his mother's love, his father's begrudging blessing, and his brother's boiling enmity. He also took with him an indomitable spirit and a knack for survival. He would call on these again and again for twenty years while he lived in Laban's household – Laban, who was more adversary than uncle.

When he arrived in Haran, Jacob was a poor man from a rich family, with little to his own name. By the time he made the turn for home, he was a wealthy man. Jacob himself put it best: "I crossed the Jordan with nothing, nothing but my staff, and now I can divide my household into two complete camps." Jacob was filthy rich. And wealth had its advantages. When Jacob knocked on Esau's door, he didn't do it empty-handed. He sent a caravan's worth of gifts, hoping to buy his brother's forgiveness.

Jacob had acquired his wealth through hard work, persistence, and cleverness, challenged as he was by his uncle's schemes. But there was a more significant factor at work in the change of Jacob's fortunes. There was the promise of God, the faithfulness of God, the persistence of God. For his whole life, Jacob had been running. Running against Esau, running from Esau. Running against Laban, running from Laban. But running with him always was God, running with him and wrestling with him.

And so by the ford of the Jabbok, Jacob wrestled with a divine stranger, wrestled apparently to a draw. Except the stranger wrenched Jacob's hip. And the stranger gave Jacob a new name: *Israel, the one who struggles with God*. Always with Jacob it was a contest, a struggle, a race. But behind it all was God, who struggled with Jacob and for Jacob, God, whose promises and faithfulness would bring the rascal Jacob home.

You noticed, I'm sure, that Jacob never ran across the finish line. Oh, he made it to the end of the race. He reconciled with his brother Esau. He returned home. He became the father of a great nation. But he never ran across the finish line. Instead he limped. But because he was the object of God's grace, he emerged a winner. And who would have figured that? Who would have bet on such an unlikely prospect, on such an unlikely recipient of divine favor as the scoundrel Jacob?

But that's how it is with God. And that's why Jacob's story is a gospel story. Because God's saving grace always writes a tale of surprises, a tale of unlikely prospects and unlikely outcomes.

Jesus made that perfectly clear, when he gathered around himself a group of disciples who were anything but first-tier. Fishermen. Toll collectors. Zealots. What a bunch! And the people who were attracted to him, by the thousands, were hardly different. No wonder the "better" sorts of people scoffed at Jesus and his following. The crowd around Jesus hardly seemed worthy of attention, never mind of blessing.

The other night, Jan and I stayed at a hotel in Ripley, West Virginia. We'd had a long day of packing, loading a truck, and driving. We were tired, and we were grimy. We looked forward to hot showers and a comfortable bed. Well, the bed was comfortable. But there were no hot showers. And a call to the front desk didn't help.

The next morning, we complained to the manager. But he scoffed that there was hot water available not long after midnight and besides people usually shower in the morning. I guess people who get dirty on the job and need to get cleaned up at the end of the day don't merit his consideration or his hotel's blessing.

It was something like that in the first century. Imagine! Jesus was gathering to himself, not the "better" sorts of people, but the people they might have called "the hairy unwashed"! But Jesus was enacting a Gospel story, a story full of surprises, a story of unlikely prospects and unlikely outcomes, a story of abundant blessing, blessing that overflows by the basketful to people who never get out of the cheap seats.

That's how it is with the Gospel. The Gospel starts with a handful of barley loaves and a few small fish and sets a table before thousands. The Gospel invites and embraces the most unlikely prospects to be part of the family of God, bypassing the "better" sorts of people who forget their need for mercy.

Jesus told them, "Prostitutes, toll collectors, and sinners are going into the kingdom ahead of you!" (cp. Matthew 21:31). That's a shocking sentence, shocking in two ways. First, that the "better" sorts don't automatically have the first places in line and the best seats in the kingdom. That may be how it is everywhere else, but that's not how it is with the Gospel.

But forget about that. What's really shocking is that "the hairy unwashed" are going into the kingdom at all! People who are always excluded, people who are always on the outside looking in, people who never enter a mansion as a guest but only as a plumber or a cook or a tourist paying to see how rich people live – these people are going into the kingdom! And Jesus is bringing them there. That's how it is with the Gospel. There are unlikely outcomes for unlikely prospects.

This is where the story touches us. We have a traditional theological emphasis on our own unworthiness, that we don't qualify in any way for a place in God's kingdom. That emphasis is on target. We are people who serve our own interests before we serve the kingdom, and who save only our leftover, when-we-get-around-to-it time for God. We are people who love ourselves and the people who love us back, but that's about as far as our love

goes. And we are people who take whatever advantage we can. So we're not at all worthy of a place in God's kingdom. If it were a race, we would be totally out of shape. If it were a race, we would be disqualified for dirty tactics and for doping.

This is what baptism is about, isn't it? Baptism is a sign of our unworthiness, that we are dirty and could stand to be scrubbed up, but that we can't make ourselves suitable or even presentable, that we are unlikely prospects for inclusion in God's kingdom, and that that unlikely outcome takes a gracious action of God. And God is gracious.

That's how it is with the Gospel. A scoundrel like Jacob receives promises, blessings, a new name, and an everlasting heritage. And the blessing doesn't stop. There's more than enough. There are basketfuls of leftovers, overflowing to countless multitudes, to all sorts of people who are no more qualified for the kingdom than you or I. Yet we will stand in that kingdom together, a motley assortment of unlikely prospects, bound together forever in the unlikely outcome of God's grace.