

Gen 32: 22-31    **“Face to Face”** (07/31/2011)

- by Rev. Peter Dennebaum -

*After the Sermon Hymn: Stepping down to the congregation:*

After we will have read the text together I will ask you again as first part of the sermon, what has become important to you. You are then all invited to speak out loud the sentence, the phrase or the word, which has become important you while reading.

Might this be the first step of our own liberation.... Let us read together the story how Jacob Wrestles at Peniel:

*22 The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. <sup>23</sup>He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. <sup>24</sup>Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. <sup>25</sup>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. <sup>26</sup>Then he said, 'Let me go, for the day is breaking.' But Jacob said, 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me.' <sup>27</sup>So he said to him, 'What is your name?' And he said, 'Jacob.' <sup>28</sup>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.' <sup>29</sup>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. <sup>30</sup>So*

*Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, 'For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.' <sup>31</sup>The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip."*

You are now invited to speak out loud the sentence, phrase or sentence, which has become important to you while reading. Repetitions are always welcome as they only show that something is important for several of us.

God's peace with you!

*Please pray with me:*

*Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, □ o God, my strength and my redeemer. □ Amen.*

Last week you picked from the Abraham story, which we read together the words "generations" and "covenant". Week for week I will listen to you and will write down afterwards what I heard from you. And maybe, on a regular basis, you want to have a look at this list and start thinking, what these words means for you as congregation, which kind of theology you can discover in your own choosing and how this might be able to help you in the search of your new long-term minister.

To give you already a little bit of a feedback: The words “generations” and “covenant” are very political. As minimum from my point of view. A covenant between the generations means to limit the freedom of what we COULD do to what it is appropriate in RELATIONSHIP to the next and the upcoming generations. This is theologically very adequate to God, who calls through all scriptures of the bible into relationship with God and God’s creation, which includes also us, Gods creatures. A covenant between the generations would include how we treat the environment or how many debts do we leave our children and their children.

This last example is very up-to-date. And as any good theology compares anyway always Gods word in the bible with the reality of Gods people, us: What is our reality at this point? Our state is close to be bankrupt. Only a few hours are left. It is not my job to go into the why or how. This is the job of the politicians. But as Christians we are called to observe and to intervene, when we see the covenant of the generations hurt. What will happen, when the government will become insolvent [in-sól-went]? Who will be hurt first? The poor or the rich? ... Who can abandon first pension or medicare? The poor or the rich? But what do the scriptures tell us to do: To take care about the rich or the poor? We might wish God would be more balanced, but God -and Jesus- are very one-sided at this point. All scriptures talk about the taking care of the needy. Christians cannot allow a state collapse to happen. The rich don’t need a state, they can take care about themselves. But the poor – they need the state. And not

only them. Most of us need the state too - and we belong to the middle class. Isn't it true that fear has found its way into our middle class long time ago? Is this what God wants us to have? - Fear?

Who talks about this fear? Ministers have betrayed us, have betrayed God and religion with their toothless talking about God, who calls in their words always only for kindness and patience. I am tired to listen to their hollow babble.

The word religion is Latin. "Religio" means awe – the reverence for God. It also can be deduced from the Latin word "religare", which means "Tying back to God". A religious person is a person, which ties EVERYTHING back to God, asking "What might God (not I) would like me to do??

God is a troublemaker. God has fire. God kicks the Pharaohs' butt to lead God's children out of their oppression. The powerful never liked God. They were always afraid, that God might come into their heart and mind, telling them, that everything on earth is only lent, and that having too much can easily become a barrier to God.

God is passionate God. God is passionate, where people suffer. Jesus died for this passionate God at the cross. We say, he his God's son. And? What are we doing NOW? Putting our hands in our laps? In which God does Grover Glenn Norquist believe in? I am talking about the 54yo president of the organization 'Americans for Tax

Reform”, who obviously has committed 277 out of the 287 members of the Republican congress members never to increase any taxes. But taxes are used for kindergartens’, for schools & colleges, for hospitals and streets. The rich don’t need taxes. But we need the infrastructure and people want to have the security, which can be developed through taxes. Certainly: Taxes can be misused in a way we don’t agree with. But then we just vote the next time for another party. But in general: A nation with taxes can build up civilization. A civilized nation can protect the needy. In a non-civilized nation only the strong can survive. What does OUR God tells you to fight for?

I have heard that Grover Norquist describes himself as a Methodist. Well – I am not sure what the Methodist Teaching is, but it would be interesting to know what the official Methodist reading of God is for our world and us.

You all probably know Dr. Jeremiah Wright Jr., Pastor Emeritus of Trinity UCC in Chicago. You all might remember that President Barack Obama was once a member of our sister church, that his children got baptized and he and Michelle got 92 married by Jeremiah Wright. It is the same Dr. Jeremiah Wright, who came three years ago after a Hebrew Scripture Reading to the conclusion that if God damned thousands of years ago nations because of their unjust and careless behavior to the needy and therewith to God that God would damn today also America. Last year I met Dr. Jeremiah Wright Jr. in DC. A few UCC clergy had breakfast with him. And I remember

that he said: "The rich have a God. And the oppressed have a God. The God of the rich is not the God of the oppressed. The God of the oppressed is a different God than the God of the rich." Which God do WE follow?

Let us now have look at the text for today. Again your chosen word from last Sunday fits: Jakob is the grandson of Abraham; it IS about generations. And Jakob later became the father of the 12 Israel tribes. By the way: What are their names? ... A little bible quiz ... for the case that it was so far a little bit boring :) --- (1) Ruben, (2) Simeon, (3) Levi, (4) Juda, (5) Dan, (6) Naftali, (7) Gad, (8) Ascher, (9) Issachar, (10) Sebulon, (11) Joseph (Manasse & Ephraim) and (12) Benjamin. ... Additional question: He also had a daughter. What was her name? Dinah -... correct!

Jakob is a guy you can like or you do not like. He is a very ambivalent figure. He bought from his twin brother Esau the right of the firstborn, when Esau came hungry home from the fields; you could also say: Jakob took advantage of his brother, when his brother was needy. Then he betrayed his blind old dad and stole from him the blessing for the firstborn. Again he had taken advantage of somebody, who was in a helpless situation. This time even with the help and support of his own mother, Rebecca. To protect him from the revenge of his brother Esau, Rebecca sent him to her relatives in Harran, where once Abraham and Sarai had lived, before Abraham received God's call and promise. ... The story from last week.... On the way to

Harran Jakob had the dream with the ladder to heaven – God at the top renewed the promise, given to his grandfather, while angels were climbing up and down, symbolizing the spirit, the “ruach”, the movement, the relationship between creator and creature. After his arrival in Harran he served Laban, the brother of his mother (his uncle) for two times 7 years and received therefore his two daughters, Lea and Rachel. After 6 more years, so in total 20 years after his leaving, Jakob returned home to Kanaan. During this journey the story of our today's sermontext happened.

Only a few remarks:

1. Jakob sent everybody across the Jabbok. Like a good commander he protects the crossing of his loved ones. What then happens is psychologically highly interesting. It happens also to us: We want to leave everything behind, but the past catches up. The breaches, errors and sins of our past cannot be left behind so easily. Our conscious does not allow us to flee. From this perspective Jacobs fight at the Jabbok can be interpreted as the wrestling with the past, to make a transition into a new time possible.
2. It is not really clear, with whom Jacob wrestles. The Hebrew text says “iesch”, which means “man”. But this man explains Jacob later that he would have fought with God (in Hebrew “Elohim”) and humans. A second tradition of this story we find in the book of the prophet Hosea; here it is said that Jacob fought with an angel. As God is in every-thing and every-one Jacob fought in any case with

God.

3. This story of Jacobs fight at the Jabbok is my favorite story... of the whole bible. Why? Because it encourages me to fight and not to give up. ***'I will not let you go, unless you bless me.'*** Jacob is so wonderful stubborn. And then the surprising end: He, a simple man, can defeat God! It is unbelievable. God respects also us in our struggles!
4. I also like the scene, in which the two fighters ask for the name of the other. It is a wonderful symbol for the respect they gained to each other. In this fight is dignity. They fight face to face", don't hide from each other. Fighting for something, showing profile might be difficult, but the result is satisfaction, mutual respect and an identity in shape – like after a workout. For us as congregation maybe a role-model for not being afraid to show profile within this community of Rockville Centre???
5. Jacob, who had the courage to fight with himself and God and all humanity and did NOT run away from all the challenges: He gets a new name, a name which is still well-known all over the world: Israel, -- which means: "persevere with God". ... Which name will we get, when we start wrestling with our past, our faith and the society we live in?
6. Jakob-Israel limped since this fight. We all have our scars. Having

scars means: To have gone through the fights of life. To have gone through the valleys life provides. To have faced difficult situations, but to had the courage to fight them through – with open visor [weiser], knowing that God knows anything anyway. So why should we hide? Who should we fear, when God is with us??

Let me come to an end: At first glance it is obviously not easy even to figure out what it is required to be a Christian. Saying that we believe in Jesus Christ can mean for the one obviously one thing, for another something totally different. For one, Christianity is going to church, to be kind on Sundays, but during the week in the business world merciless and cold only market interested and oriented. For others Christianity is passion, empathy and taking care. Others are somewhere in between. Where ever you are: We need to talk about it. As the Israelites [Israeleits] already did. All religion is seeking. Therefore we need to communicate with each other. What do WE think? Where is God in OUR life? What does God mean for us? Talk over coffee hour and later over lunch with your family about it! Let is start a conversation!

AMEN