

Myers Park Presbyterian Church

October 5, 2014

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Israel

Genesis 32:22-32

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During 2014, the other clergy and I have been preaching on a word a week, essential words for our journey of discipleship. Today we've come to the word "*Israel*."

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²²The same night he (Jacob) got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had.

²⁴Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.

²⁵When 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. ²⁶Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." ²⁷So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." ²⁸Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." ²⁹Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. ³⁰So Jacob called the place Peniel (Penny-el), saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." ³¹The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel (Pee-neó-el), limping because of his hip. ³²Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle.

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What is your identity?

I am a white, American male, a Presbyterian pastor with some Scottish heritage, a husband, father and grandfather; a Southerner, a Charlottean, a born and bred North Carolinian. I'm a baby-boomer, drummer, golfer and a sports nut. I'm an alumnus of Duke Divinity School, East Carolina University and Columbia Theological Seminary. I'm a brother, son, uncle, cousin and friend. (I'm also modest and well-rounded!)

So what's your identity? What defines who you are?

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You can't preach on 52 key words in the Bible without preaching on the word "*Israel*." *Israel* is more than a geographical location. It's more than a place at 31° N latitude and 34° E longitude. *Israel* is an identity.

There is some debate as to what the word "*Israel*" actually means. It could mean "*one who has striven or wrestled with God*" or "*God contended*" or "*God strives*" or "*God prevails*."

Jacob wrestles with God and has his name changed to *Israel*. But *Israel* is far more than one man's name. It is a people with a history of being in covenant relationship with God.

- God makes a covenant with *Abraham* and *Sarah* to make a great nation of them and to give them a land – to bless them so that they will a blessing to all the families of the earth. (Gen. 12:1-2)
- In their old age *Abraham* and *Sarah* have a son, *Isaac*. *Isaac* and his wife *Rebecca* have twins, *Jacob* and *Esau*
- *Jacob* is renamed *Israel* and through him the covenant continues as he has 12 sons, the 12 tribes of *Israel*.

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Let's say this; Jacob was not a saint! In fact, the Bible makes no attempt to conceal Jacob's sketchy nature. He cheats his brother Esau out of what was coming to him. He took advantage of his aging father and his blindness and played him for a fool. He double-crossed his father-in-law. He was basically never satisfied and wouldn't have been a good candidate for seminary!

Frederick Buechner writes about Jacob,

...luckily for Jacob, God doesn't love people because of who they are but because of who (God) is. It's "on the house" is a way of saying it and "it's by grace" is another, just as it was by grace that it was Jacob of all people who became not only the father of the 12 tribes of Israel, but the many times great-grandfather of Jesus of Nazareth, and just as it was by grace that Jesus of Nazareth was born into this world at all. (Buechner, Peculiar Treasures, p. 58.)

Why would God choose Jacob? Maybe because if anything good ever came out of Jacob, everyone would know it was because of God! Why would God take what Buechner calls a, "*dyed-in-the-wool, double barreled con-artist*" (Buechner, p. 57) like Jacob to continue the promise of the covenant? Maybe it was to send this message;

There are a few things in this world that you can't get but can only be given, and one of these things is love in general, and another is the love of God in particular. (Buechner, p. 57)

Israel was not, and is not, perfect, not the nation or the man. God didn't choose them because of perfection but out of promise. The covenant was not about what *Israel* could do for God, but what God was going to do with *Israel*.

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The same is true for the Church. Surely we don't think God needs the Church. It is not our job to do something for God. Like *Israel*, the Church is not perfect and at times can even be extremely flawed, from the pulpit to the pew and back. The new covenant poured out in Jesus Christ is not about what we do for God but what God has chosen to do with us. Our identity is in Christ; in the unconditional love of God that raised Christ from the dead in spite of the crucifixion, in spite of our sin.

Like *Israel*, it's not about us. We are a people who point to God. Jacob didn't change his own name. We didn't change our names; our names were changed in our identity with Christ. We are "*Christians*," the word means "*follower of Christ*." To be a follower of Christ is so much more than one who merely professes a certain belief, or belongs to a particular church, or was born into a particular denomination. It is our identity. It's not *what* we do, it's *who* we are. We belong to Christ.

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Israel belongs to God. When you read the Scriptures, you will see how many times they forgot that and the consequences they suffered in return. *Israel* wandered in the wilderness because of disobedience, they worshipped idols, they chased after pagan gods, they had flawed leadership, and they forgot the commandments of the Lord.

But keep your eye on the God of Israel, a God who chooses to be bound in chains to a flawed character. Pay attention, not to Israel but to the God of their salvation. Keep watching and you will see that same God come to us in Christ for the redemption of the world. There is no end to the persistence of this God of the covenant.

Jacob? It was never about him. It's never about us. It's about the unrelentless, unconditional, unending love of God that will not let us go – no matter what. That's why you want to know the name "*Israel*," God prevails!

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As we come to this table, we come to confess our sin and to receive the grace of God poured out in Jesus Christ. We come to be renewed to the covenant and to the God of all creation who will not let us go – no matter what! Thanks be to God!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Congregation: **Amen**