

Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost, Old Testament, Year C

LIFE PRESERVER

Genesis 32:22-31

Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by Chris Repp

22The same night [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, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." 31The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

DIAGNOSIS: Face to Face with God

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Enmity

The immediate context of this pericope is Jacob facing the consequences of his actions: first of extorting his brother's

birthright and then of cheating him out of his father's blessing. Jacob acts in the way of this world, looking out for number one, serving his own interests at the expense of others.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Faithlessness

Jacob regards God in the same way he regards his brother, as a means to his own ends. God's blessing, invoked upon him by his father, is to give him land and offspring, to rule over his brother, and to make him great in the eyes of his neighbors (see Genesis 27:28-29). Jacob's wrestling with the "man" (v. 24) is symptomatic of his whole life. He is against the world and the world is against him.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): The Face of God

Jacob somehow knows (instinctively?) what God will later tell Moses directly: no one can see the face of God and live (Exodus 33:20-23). He believes the "man" to be an epiphany of God, and knows that to stand before the face of God is to face God's judgment, which for all sinful human beings is the ultimate bad news.

PROGNOSIS: Prevailing Mercy

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Life Preserved

Jacob also knows, in the aftermath of his encounter with the God-man, that a miracle has occurred. He experiences the mercy of God, God's faithfulness to him in spite of his treachery and self-centeredness. He cannot, of course, fathom that the God-man who has spared his life points to God's incarnation in Jesus Christ, who both stands before the face of God and takes on the death that Jacob (and all of us) should have died.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Trust in God

The Jacob story is complex, and doesn't fit easily into our matrix. And yet all the elements are there. When Jacob experiences God's faithfulness to him, he responds in faith

toward God (see, for example, Genesis 28:10ff). When his estranged brother Esau pursues him, Jacob turns to God as his only hope (Genesis 32:9-12).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Reconciliation

God answers Jacob's prayer. For no other discernable reason, Esau, like the God-man, has mercy upon Jacob whom he had intended to kill. Similarly, Jacob earlier made peace with his uncle Laban. In these ways God's blessing upon Jacob is extended to those around him. Thus God's promise to bless all nations through Jacob (Genesis 28:14) has taken root. And it bears fruit to this day in all who hear of God's faithfulness to them through Jacob's offspring, Jesus Christ, the risen Son, and who by the power of the Holy Spirit trust his promise of life.