Lenten Series: Profiles in Courage

The Courage to Seek Grace

Lent 1C-22

Genesis 32: 3-21

3/6/22

**Prayer for Illumination**

**Genesis 32: 3-21**

Jacob sent messengers before him to his brother Esau

in the land of Seir, the country of Edom, instructing them,

“Thus you shall say to my lord Esau:

Thus says your servant Jacob,

‘I have lived with Laban as an alien, and stayed until now;

and I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, male and female slaves;

and I have sent to tell my lord,

in order that I may find favor in your sight.’”

The messengers returned to Jacob, saying,

“We came to your brother Esau,

and he is coming to meet you,

and four hundred men are with him.”

Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed;

and he divided the people that were with him,

and the flocks and herds and camels, into two companies, thinking,

“If Esau comes to the one company and destroys it,

then the company that is left will escape.”

And Jacob said,

“O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac,

O Lord who said to me,

‘Return to your country and to your kindred,

and I will do you good,’

I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love

and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant,

for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan;

and now I have become two companies.

Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother,

from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him;

he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children.

Yet you have said,

‘I will surely do you good,

and make your offspring as the sand of the sea,

which cannot be counted because of their number.’”

So he spent that night there,

and from what he had with him he took a present for his brother Esau,

two hundred female goats and twenty male goats,

two hundred ewes and twenty rams,

thirty milch camels and their colts, forty cows and ten bulls,

twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys.

These he delivered into the hand of his servants,

every drove by itself, and said to his servants,

“Pass on ahead of me,

and put a space between drove and drove.”

He instructed the foremost,

“When Esau my brother meets you, and asks you,

‘To whom do you belong? Where are you going?

And whose are these ahead of you?’

then you shall say,

‘They belong to your servant Jacob;

they are a present sent to my lord Esau;

and moreover he is behind us.’”

He likewise instructed the second and the third

and all who followed the droves,

“You shall say the same thing to Esau when you meet him,

and you shall say,

‘Moreover your servant Jacob is behind us.’”

For he thought,

“I may appease him with the present that goes ahead of me,

and afterwards I shall see his face;

perhaps he will accept me.”

So the present passed on ahead of him;

and he himself spent that night in the camp.

“Lenten Series: Profiles in Courage”

*The Courage to Seek Grace*

You may recall, earlier this fall, we spent time in worship digging into some of the Biblical roots of our church’s four primary values. We spent seven weeks exploring why TPC strives so hard to be inclusive, curious, compassionate, and courageous.

But we noted that courage is really a different kind of value than the others. It’s not so much that God calls us to be courageous… as much as we recognize that it takes courage—sometimes a lot of courage—to walk the path of discipleship and live into the values of our faith. It takes courage to strive for inclusion amid a world that builds walls and casts out. It takes courage to live with a constant curiosity as to God’s perspective… and God’s presence in every situation. Just as it takes courage, we know, to be compassionate. To offer tangible love and care to those around us—whether we know them, like them, or not.

This is why courage comes last when we name our values. It’s like a gentle reminder that if we’re going to be inclusive, curious, and compassionate, then we sure as heck better be courageous, too.

…… J

Which isn’t an easy thing. Life is filled with things that frighten us. We’re all bombarded with realities from which we *want* to turn our heads and pretend we don’t see. Many times these frightening realities are beyond us. They’re threats or pains that other people, maybe other systems wield at us. They exist in situations we can’t control. Whether it be the evils of Russia invading Ukraine and the horror of war… the violence of bullying and physical threats… or the intimate kind of fear we find awaiting a biopsy… or the dread we feel when a loved one shares bad news… or the trepidation we might face amid mounting financial concerns. Many times, we are called to face something we fear beyond ourselves.

…… R

But for most of us… it’s not the external fears that keep us at night as much as our internal fears do. Like our fear of shame. The fear of failure. Fear of disappointment. Fear of embarrassment. Fear of loneliness. Fear of loss. Fear of grief.

While external realities can be incredibly frightening, it’s our inner fears that affect us the most. They’re the ones that control us in ways we don’t even notice, as they sneakily limit and rob us from living our faith as fully and joyfully as God knows we can.

So throughout the next six weeks of Lent, we will be digging into our call to be courageous… by exploring six different Biblical profiles in courage. Each profile, we hope, will speak to a universal fear with which we all struggle and the courage we can find in faith to not just overcome our fears, but the courage to fundamentally live differently—to live fully—in this world.

…… J

And we begin this exploration with two brothers. Twins, in fact. Esau and Jacob. Sons of Isaac, who was the son of Abraham.

This lineage is important, as the covenant between Israel and God began with Abraham. God promised Abraham descendants more numerous than the stars, that God would forever be their God, and his ancestors would forever be God’s people.

In that ancient society, familial legacies traveled through birthrights. So the eldest son, the twin who was born first—Esau—bore the right to continue the covenantal lineage God had initiated with Abraham.

And not just that, of course. Esau’s birthright also entitled him to much of the wealth his family had accumulated along the way.

…… R

All of his life, Esau had been preparing to assume his father’s place in this lineage. From the time he was born, all he’d learned… all he ever did was done with the purpose of being a good and faithful heir of the covenant.

Perhaps not surprisingly, his father Isaac couldn’t hide his favoritism towards Esau—the son who would carry on his legacy.

All of which left his brother, Jacob, understandably jealous. After all, Esau was only older by a few seconds. Why couldn’t he have that birthright? And why couldn’t he share in his father’s love that way Esau did?

All of this ate away at Jacob… as well as their mother, Rebekkah, who, Genesis tells us, favored her younger son, Jacob, above and before Esau.

…… J

So Jacob and his mother developed a scheme to trick the now old and blind father, Isaac, into giving Esau’s birthright to Jacob. And their plan worked to perfection, as one night Isaac very accidentally—yet irrevocably—gave Jacob the birthright that belonged to Esau.

…… R

When Esau found out, he was devasted. Devasted that everything he’d been working towards had been taken from him. Devasted that the legacy he’d been promised had been usurped by his own mother and brother. Devastated that his own twin would betray him so brutally.

Devasted so deeply that his first response was to seek out his brother so he could kill him!

So Jacob ran. He ran away from his father and his mother… He ran away from the family whose lineage he’d stolen. But most of all, he ran away from the brother he had betrayed.

…… J

Jacob had fled to a land called Paddan-aram, where he found work, and was blessed to begin building his own family. In time, he took multiple wives, was blessed with twelve children, and livestock, slaves, and great deal of wealth.

Esau, meanwhile, didn’t chase after his brother. Ever-loyal, he stayed home, serving the family that had disgraced him. But in time, he, too, built a new life from the ashes his brother had left behind, being blessed with prosperity, wives, and children of his own.

…… R

Eventually… after who knows how many years… the word of God came to Jacob, calling him to return home and make right what he had broken. The word of God came calling Jacob to confront the guilt that had never left him… and face the burden of shame that’d been weighing him down since the moment he fled his brother’s wrath.

It’s quite the call, isn’t it? To not only face your greatest shame… but to face the one you wronged? To face the one you hurt so badly you literally had to run away from him?

…… J

It’s easy to understand how scared Jacob was to see his brother again.

So, in our lesson today, Jacob developed a plan. First, he sent some of his servants to meet Esau. They returned with the message that Esau was willing to meet him… and that he was already on his way, along with 400 of his men.

…… R

Jacob doesn’t yet know—is Esau still bent on killing him for all he’d done? Or is there hope for grace?

….. J

Right. So Jacob then decides to send his brother a peace offering. 220 goats; 200 ewes, along with rams, camels, cows, and donkeys. Now, the specifics of what Jacob gave isn’t significant, but it is a telling sign of just how guilty and frightened he felt.

Because he knew… Esau still had every right to be furious.

…… R

That’s one of the hardest parts of seeking grace, isn’t? When you know you’ve messed up… when you’ve done something terrible you can’t take back… when you’ve failed so completely… or harmed one you love deeply… it can be terrifying to face the one you harmed and all the repercussions that may come with it.

And yet… as hard as that is… it’s often not the hardest, most frightening part of seeking grace, is it? Our defense mechanisms are so skilled at rationalizations and deflections. I mean, how much time did Jacob undoubtedly spend trying to convince himself, “My brother was a jerk; he didn’t deserve the birthright anyway.” Or “He was only three seconds older… that birthright was as much mine as it was his.” Or “It’s not my fault my father was so gullible and blind that he gave me that blessing, rather than Esau.”

It's why it often takes us time—far too much time—to simply admit when we’re wrong. *We can be so afraid of acknowledging our imperfections.* Fearful of admitting we failed. We were weak. We did what we know we shouldn’t.

We so want to be all things to all people… and when we’re not… we’re terrified of being honest about it. We’re afraid to confess our sins.

…… J

But Jacob was finally ready. Granted, he could’ve easily lived the rest of his life without returning home. He didn’t have to admit his faults. There was no law requiring him to apologize or try to make amends.

But he returned… *because he knew he would never be whole without admitting his need for his brother’s grace.* He knew life would never be what it could be… what it should be… without confession.

…… R

In many ways… it’s a sign that Jacob had grown up. Matured as a person… matured in his faith… at last finding the courage to follow God’s call back home to make amends and seek reconciliation.

…… J

Once he faced the fear of admitting all of this to himself… perhaps it wasn’t quite as hard to admit his need for grace to his brother.

Granted… he didn’t know how Esau would respond. Clearly, Jacob was still terrified of his brother’s judgment… the anger… the risk of rejection… the possibility of living the rest of his life without his brother’s forgiveness.

But once he found the faith to admit to himself how wrong he’d been… Jacob also found the faith to go to Esau… understanding that regardless of how Esau would respond to him… he would never find wholeness without repentance.

…… R

Isn’t this, friends, the journey of Lent? A journey of acknowledging the distance between the lives we are living and the lives God asks of us. A journey of self-reflection… that we might uncover more and more of the places within us that are crying out for grace.

…… J

To be sure, it can be frightening—to admit our faults and confess our failures. But because we enter Lent already knowing whose we are… because Jesus promises us we do not traverse these forty days alone… friends… we can journey this season of reflection and confession confident that the grace of God is already ours. We can find the faith Jacob found to face our fears… to admit our faults… to confess our deep, unreserved need for grace not just from the Lord our God… but from those around us, as well.

…… R

As we will explore more next week, friends, this pursuit of grace… both seeking it and sharing it… lies at the very heart of discipleship. While it can be frightening at times, this courage to put faith before fear lies within us… as we admit our need for grace.

…… J

Amen.