

Transformed: Jacob

Rev. Cameron D St.Michael – January 26 2024

3rd Sunday after Epiphany

Readings: Genesis 25:21-34; Genesis 32:22-32; Hosea 12:1-6 CEB

Reflection: Psalm 46

Greeting: Give praise to God's holy name! Let the hearts rejoice of all those seeking the Lord! Pursue the Lord and his strength; seek his face always! Remember the wondrous works he has done, all his marvelous works, and the justice he declared! You who are the offspring of Abraham, his servant, and the children of Jacob, his chosen ones. (Psalm 105)

Prayer: Precious Lord, we have seen the way that you can change hearts and lives through your steadfast love and faithfulness. May you help us to remember the transformation we see in the lives that you have touched. That we may remember the struggles of your servants Jacob and the way that you changed his future as you changed the world. Grant that we may know your peace and grace so that we may share it with others. May you lift our hearts in worship so that we may sing your praises and glorify your name. Help us to reach out to one another this day so that we may love our neighbor as ourselves as we further devote ourselves to loving you, O God. May you prepare us so that we may be transformed and call others to a life that is changed through walking with Jesus Christ, our Lord and friend. And it is in his name that we pray this day. Amen.

Reflection: Psalm 46

¹ God is our refuge and strength, a help always near in times of great trouble. ² That's why we won't be afraid when the world falls apart, when the mountains crumble into the center of the sea, ³ when its waters roar and rage, when the mountains shake because of its surging waves. ⁴ There is a river whose streams gladden God's city, the holiest dwelling of the Most High. ⁵ God is in that city. It will never crumble. God will help it when morning dawns. ⁶ Nations roar; kingdoms crumble. God utters his voice; the earth melts. ⁷ The Lord of heavenly forces is with us! The God of Jacob is our place of safety. (46:1-7 CEB+)

We read the words of Psalm 46, and we hear of God's refuge. That the strength of the Lord is something we can rely upon at all times. That we can be thankful for the promise that God makes to his people. That the God of Jacob is a place where we are safe and secure. That God will always be with his people. Do you feel comforted that God is with you in the midst of struggles? How have you had your own life transformed by the love of Christ? How can you invite others to have their hearts and lives changed by following our Savior? Who will you lift up in your prayers this week?

Prayer: Eternal God, we thank you for always being there for us. That you are with us in the good and the bad, in the easy and the difficult. We are grateful that you are with us in all that we are and all that we do. Today we remember the promise you made when you transformed Jacob through struggles and adversity. May we remember the many blessings that you have shown to your people. We come before you in prayer this day lifting up the many joys and concerns that we have. We lift up our celebrations that we may celebrate them with you. We lift up our sorrows so that we may find comfort in your presence. We come together to share the prayers that we have lifted up aloud together. But we also lift up the unspoken prayers that we hold in our hearts. For we know that you hear every prayer that we lift up to you. May you strengthen us in the prayers we speak and the silent pleadings from within. May we know you are there in both our laughter and our tears. May we remember you in our dancing and our mourning. For you are always with us, Lord. May we experience your great love that transforms lives. May we love ever deeper because you are with us. And may we always celebrate Jesus Christ, our steadfast friend and Savior. Amen.

Now let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Sermon:

Our scripture readings for today come from the Common English Bible. Our first reading is from Genesis chapter 25, verses 21 through 34.

²¹ Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife, since she was unable to have children. The Lord was moved by his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant. ²² But the boys pushed against each other inside of her, and she said, "If this is what it's like, why did it happen to me?" So she went to ask the Lord. ²³ And the Lord said to her, "Two nations are in your womb; two different peoples will emerge from your body. One people will be stronger than the other; the older will serve the younger." ²⁴ When she reached the end of her pregnancy, she discovered that she had twins. ²⁵ The first came out red all over, clothed with hair, and she named him Esau. ²⁶ Immediately afterward, his brother came out gripping Esau's heel, and she named him Jacob. Isaac was 60 years old when they were born. ²⁷ When the young men grew up, Esau became an outdoorsman who knew how to hunt, and Jacob became a quiet man who stayed at home. ²⁸ Isaac loved Esau because he enjoyed eating game, but Rebekah loved Jacob. ²⁹ Once when Jacob was boiling stew, Esau came in from the field hungry ³⁰ and said to Jacob, "I'm starving! Let me devour some of this red stuff." That's why his name is Edom. ³¹ Jacob said, "Sell me your birthright today." ³² Esau said, "Since I'm going to die anyway, what good is my birthright to me?" ³³ Jacob said, "Give me your word today." And he did. He sold his birthright to Jacob. ³⁴ So Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew. He ate, drank, got up, and left, showing just how little he thought of his birthright. (Genesis 25:21-34 CEB+)

Our next reading is from Genesis chapter 32, verse 22 through 32.

²² Jacob got up during the night, took his two wives, his two women servants, and his eleven sons, and crossed the Jabbok River's shallow water. ²³ He took them and everything that belonged to him, and he helped them cross the river. ²⁴ But Jacob stayed apart by himself, and a man wrestled with him until dawn broke. ²⁵ When the man saw that he couldn't defeat Jacob, he grabbed Jacob's thigh and tore a muscle in Jacob's thigh as he wrestled with him. ²⁶ The man said, "Let me go because the dawn is breaking." But Jacob said, "I won't let you go until you bless me." ²⁷ He said to Jacob, "What's your name?" and he said, "Jacob." ²⁸ Then he said, "Your name won't be Jacob any longer, but Israel, because you struggled with God and with men and won." ²⁹ Jacob also asked and said, "Tell me your name." But he said, "Why do you ask for my name?" and he blessed Jacob there. ³⁰ Jacob named the place Peniel, "because I've seen God face-to-face, and my life has been saved." ³¹ The sun rose as Jacob passed Peniel, limping because of his thigh. ³² Therefore, Israelites don't eat the tendon attached to the thigh muscle to this day, because he grabbed Jacob's thigh muscle at the tendon. (Genesis 32:22-32 CEB+)

Our final reading is from Hosea chapter 12, verse 1 through 6.

¹ Ephraim herds the wind, and pursues the east wind all day long; they multiply lies and violence; they make a treaty with Assyria, and oil is carried to Egypt. ² The Lord has a charge against Judah, and will punish Jacob according to his ways, and respond to him according to his deeds. ³ From the womb he tried to be the oldest of twin brothers; as an adult he struggled with God. ⁴ He struggled with the messenger and survived; he wept and sought his favor; he met him at Bethel, and there he spoke with him. ⁵ The Lord God of heavenly forces, the Lord is his name! ⁶ But you! Return to your God with faithful love and justice, and wait continually for your God. (Hosea 12:1-6 CEB+)

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

This week we take a look at Jacob as part of our Transformed series. Jacob is an interesting person to look at. I can tell you now that there is too much to cover about all of Jacob's journey in one sermon. Our reading from Hosea gave a bit of an overview of Jacob and just how much he is tied to the idea of Israel. That his struggle is tied to the nation. One of the reasons I included Jacob is because of how often he is referenced throughout the Bible. And if you thought that today's transformation sounded odd, you wouldn't be alone. People have debated it for as long as it has been part of the Bible. But I wanted to look at the way that we see this transformation and how we can relate to it.

For an idea of who Jacob is, we can turn to our reading from Genesis 25. We hear about the birth of Jacob and Esau. As we talked about last week, Abraham and Sarah were going to have a multitude of descendants. But it would happen through one child, their son Isaac. Isaac then gets married, and he and his wife Rebecca have Jacob and Esau, twins. Esau comes out first with Jacob gripping his heel. And Jacob ends up taking Esau's birthright, basically usurping him to take his right as the firstborn. Now, there's a great deal of things that happen

between here and our other reading. I'll try to give a very brief overview here. Jacob tricks his father into giving him Esau's blessing. Jacob then flees the wrath of his brother and goes to Laban. Laban tricks him and he marries two daughters, but he eventually gets the better of Laban and returns home.

That's where we find him in our second reading from Genesis 32. He's about to head back to Esau, whom he has cheated out of his birthright and his blessing. So, he sends everyone on ahead and he spends some time alone. Now, I want to mention something here that most people are going to miss. I mention it because I'm fascinated by the way that some of this works in Hebrew. There is some word play that happens in the Hebrew that lines up what is happening, who is involved, and where it is taking place. They all come together to form something special. We won't notice it in English though. It is something that is lost in translation. I'll do my best with the Hebrew here. We have Jacob, which is yaaqob. He is at the river Jabbok, or yaboq. There he has to wrestle, or yeabeq. So yaaqob yeabeq at yaboq. I was trying to think of an English way to do this and I think maybe if we did Jacob jockeyed at Jabbok is about as close as I could get. But this kind of wordplay is sometimes used to bring those ideas together. That this mysterious encounter happens because Jacob is at this particular place for this to happen. That this transformation is something important. The whole experience is kind of odd and hard to explain. Jacob wrestles with this stranger, and we never actually are given a solid identity. And I wouldn't say that he wins as much as he doesn't lose. Because he keeps going until the break of day. Jacob gets injured but still will not let go. He will not let go until he gets a blessing. So, he is then renamed Israel and is blessed. That he has struggled with God and with men and won. Which is about what Israel means, one who wrestles with God or that God perseveres.

But the meaning of the name really is that Jacob has struggled. He struggled against people. He has struggled against God. And he has not given up. As such, he has been given this new name and this new destiny, that he will be Israel. We can think of the 12 tribes of Israel coming from him, a nation. He is known from this point forward as both Jacob and Israel, with both names being used for him. But I did want to note something else, though, that we see here about Jacob. Jacob doesn't walk away only changed in name. Jacob limps away. I note that he limps away because we have to recognize that "winning" has come at a cost. He didn't just walk away getting the best of everyone else. Jacob walks away from this hurt. He walks away injured, changed both mentally and physically. That he has to deal with this change in his life and this change in how he feels. I couldn't help but wonder if Jacob began to think about the price of winning. Alienated from his brother. Alienated from his father-in-law. And I couldn't help but think this win for him might have been another message for him. That he has wrestled with a lot, and now he wrestles with his life.

I wanted to think about this struggle because we all have struggles in our lives. We will all have struggles that transform us. That there are going to be things that we face in life that leave us permanently changed. And part of the question is, how do we handle those changes? When it seems that life itself is changing around us, how do we persevere? One of the things I always think about with Jacob is that in all of his life, he finally begins to settle down at this

point. That after this striving with God, he tries to settle down, have a family, and basically try to live. No longer fleeing. No longer tricking people to get what he wants. He strove against with God and the world, but at a cost. And I think about the way that he is transformed and I think about the way that we can be transformed. The ways that we live our lives in Christ. The way that we have to deal with struggles. I have never wrestled God by a river, but I have wrestled with difficult decisions and difficult situations. I also wouldn't say God sent those to me to test me. But I will say that God can use those difficulties to transform us. Because no matter what situation we are in, God can teach us something that can transform our lives. God can lead us somewhere. Even if it is through the darkest of valleys. That we do not have to strive with God in order for God to show us how we can be strong. For God to show us how we can overcome. For God to show us how we can persevere. And Jacob is someone who perseveres through everything. He keeps going, often struggling with problems he himself has created. But it doesn't mean that just because he created his own problems that God can't teach him something through them. Just as God can teach us something through our own issues.

One of the things I wanted to think about in our idea of transformation is the way that God can transform us through struggle and hardship, even if God doesn't put that hardship in our way himself. God can teach us about strength, about faith, and about hope. I like to think that Jacob walked away changed, now known as both Jacob and Israel, with a new respect for God and a new understanding for the price that he had to pay to say that he won. And that maybe it made him a little more humble and a little more cautious. And maybe he walked away with a little bit more reverence for God. I think he walked away as the kind of man that could raise his children to become the twelve tribes of Israel. To become a people that would be led out of Egypt. To be the people who had found a nation. That would lead to the king that was David. Whose line would lead to Christ. So let us think about the way that our lives can be transformed through struggle. Let us think about the difficulties that have helped to make us who we are today and have taught us about how we can live and the struggles that helped us to understand each other better. All so that we can understand each other better in Christ. And may we always look at the way that we can say yes through faith to having our hearts and our lives transformed by the love of God through living a life in Jesus Christ our Lord. And may we always accept the invitation from Christ to have our own lives be transformed. Amen.

Prayer of Confession and Pardon: God, you are with us even when we turn away from you. Guide us back into your loving arms. Judge us not by the perfection of our actions but show us mercy and love. We have strayed like lost sheep from your ways, failing both in what we have done and what we have failed to do. Bring us back into your fold that you may guide us and lead us in all things. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy upon us and forgive us. May we walk in your love and trust your ways. Amen.

Almighty God have mercy upon you. May the Lord forgive all your sins and lift you up in love through Jesus Christ our Lord, and by the Holy Spirit keep you in life eternal. Amen.

Offering: If you are so moved to make an offering, you may send it to the church treasurer, or you may send it to the PO Box listed below. We are still the church, and the church still needs your support to keep doing all the important work that we do.

Lord's Prayer

Dismissal with Blessing: May we go forth reflecting God's love in our lives as we go forth in the peace of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our Current Series – Transformed

This series is a 7-week series about transformation. Each week will look at a different person from the Bible that was transformed by God. Each one tells a unique story about God's love and grace that are there for all people. Each person's tale of transformation gives us insight into how God can heal our brokenness. And each gives us hope that we may all be Transformed through a life in Jesus Christ.

1/19: Abraham & Sarah 1/26: Jacob 2/2: Zacchaeus 2/9: Paul

2/16: Moses 2/23: Elijah 3/2: Jesus

Neoga Grace UMC

752 Walnut
PO Box 610
Neoga, IL 62447
(217)895-2809
Worship 10:30am

Toledo UMC

Madison & Ohio St
PO Box 267
Toledo, IL 62468
Worship 8:15am

Etna UMC

2799 Etna Rd
Mattoon, IL 61938
Worship 9:30am

Rev Camron D St.Michael
<https://stmichael.pw>
cdstmichael@outlook.com
(316)530-3182 (call or text)
PO Box 54, Charleston IL, 61920

* Scripture quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition. Copyright © 2021 National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

+ Scripture quotations are from the Common English Bible, Copyright © 2011 by Common English Bible.