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## February 2nd: Genesis 32 & Luke 2:22-40

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Jacob wrestles with the angel. The presentation of the infant Christ in the Temple.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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## Transcript

Genesis chapter 32. And the messengers returned to Jacob saying, We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and there are four hundred men with him. Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed.

He divided the people who were with him, and the flocks and the herds and camels, into two camps, thinking, If Esau comes to the one camp and attacks it, then the other camp 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, that I may do you good. I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant.

But with only my staff I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps. Please deliver me from the hand of Esau, for I fear him, that he may come and attack me, the mothers with the children. But you said, I will surely do you good, and make your

offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.

So he stayed there that night, 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 milking camels and their calves, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys. These he handed over to 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 first, 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 find 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 afterward I shall see his face, perhaps he will accept me. So the present passed on ahead of him, and he himself stayed that night in the camp. The same night he arose and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok.

He took them and sent them across the stream, and everything else that he had, and Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.

Then he said, Let me go, for the day has broken. But Jacob said, I will not let you go unless you bless me. And he said to him, What is your name? And he said, Jacob.

Then he said, Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed. 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.

So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered. The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. Therefore to this day the people of Israel do not eat the sinew of the thigh that is on the hip socket, because he touched the socket of Jacob's hip on the sinew of the thigh.

In Genesis chapter 32, Jacob has just moved on from his encounter with Laban, after he fled from Laban's house and was pursued by him. And at this point he meets angels of God and declares the place where he is to be God's camp. Note the call back to Bethel, another place named after such an encounter.

In that case it's the house of God, the gate of heaven. Here it's declared to be God's camp. And if Jacob's sojourn in Paddan Aram is a there and back again story, the presence of such a symmetry that we're seeing at this point is a sign that we're entering the return leg.

Jacob initiates contact with Esau, sending messengers ahead of him. And there's a directness that has not been characteristic of Jacob to this point. The ways in which he has tended to deal with people have tended to involve subterfuge or deception or some other sort of indirect approach.

Here, however, he approaches Esau directly. Unfortunately, however, his messengers return with the news that Esau is coming with 400 men with him. Jacob, fearing the consequences of an attack from Esau, divides his people into two camps to limit his potential losses if Esau attacks.

And note the connection between the name of Mahanaim, two camps, the place that he named after the fact that it was God's camp, and the fact that Jacob himself divides his company into two camps only a few verses later. It seems that these are connected in some way and it might be worth you thinking about why that might be. I'm not entirely sure.

Jacob wrestles with God in prayer at this point. He appeals to God's covenant promises to him and his fathers, calling for God to act to preserve him from the wrath of Esau. And staying there that night, he uses wisdom in sending out an immense gift of livestock to Esau.

This is a princely gift and the numbers that he's sending are really large. They're suitable for breeding as well. Note the far greater number of female animals than male.

He is probably surrendering a significant proportion of the animals that he gained in Paddan Aram. These gifts are sent on ahead wave after wave to pacify Esau. And in some respects, Jacob might be in a position akin to that of Abraham, his grandfather, when he was called to sacrifice Isaac.

To actually enter back into the land, Jacob has to give up an awful amount of his wealth. He then sends his wives, two female servants and all his children, sending them ahead over the Jabbok before him. And he is like Abraham, prepared to be dispossessed of everything.

He's left alone. And in the darkness and the isolation, a man comes to him as an adversary and wrestles with him until the daybreak. This conflict occurs at the Jabbok.

The Jabbok mixes up the letters of Jacob's name, which is about to be changed later on in that chapter. It's also similar to the word for wrestling. And so there is a lot of wordplay here, as there is throughout the Jacob story.

The man wrestling with Jacob touches the inside of his thigh next to the hip. This is an extremely intimate spot. It's where Eliezer touched when he swore his oath to Abraham.

And we might see it perhaps as being connected with circumcision and the promise of seed. This is an event of wrestling between this unknown assailant and Jacob that is fraught with all these themes that have been playing throughout the book to this point. The sun rises as he crosses over, as he finally defeats the opponent.

And the sun rising maybe draws our mind back to the sun setting at Bethel. He leaves the land of his father's. He goes to Bethel.

And as the sun descends, he sleeps. And now the sun is rising and there's a new stage of his life beginning. We might also think about the significance of water as a threshold.

In the story of Israel, Israel is surrounded by a number of bodies of water that they cross at significant moments in their history. And these water crossings are not just boundaries between the land and other things outside. They're existential boundaries for the nation.

So they serve foreign gods on the other side of the river, the river Euphrates. Jacob has crossed that river just in the previous chapter. Then they are slaves in Egypt, delivered from slavery in Egypt as they cross the Red Sea.

Then there is the event of going into the land through the Jordan. There's the Jabok, a tributary of the Jordan, the site at which Jacob wrestles with God and is given a new name. So all of these events, these water crossings, help define Israel's identity.

Whether it's their name itself, whether it's their deliverance from slavery, their entrance into the land, their movement away from the realm of serving foreign gods. In all of these respects, then, water crossings can be existential passages or changes. The wrestling leads to a new name and a blessing.

Now, what might this remind us of what's taking place here? One of the first things that should remind us of are the two children struggling in the womb of Rebecca. That's the very first thing that we read about in the story of Jacob. He's wrestling with his brother, so much so that when he comes out of the womb, he's grappling with his brother, holding on to his brother's heel.

And as we read through the story of Jacob, we'll see two other things. That name and blessing are crucial themes throughout the story. When he's first born, he is given a name and the name seems to be given by his father, particularly.

Not necessarily by his mother. It's not a flattering name. And later on, it's referred to by his brother, Esau, after he has been robbed of his blessing.

Esau says that he has supplanted him these two times. Now, name is an important

theme then. Jacob does not have a flattering name originally, and he's given a new name here.

Another theme is blessing. Jacob deceived his father and outwitted his brother to receive the blessing. And that was a crucial thing for him to get that blessing.

And now he is given a different blessing and he will not let go until he is given that blessing. That tenacity is something that we've seen in Jacob to this point. But here I think there's something very important about it.

We're returning to the two core themes of Jacob's story to this point. We're replaying the story of the birth and the story of the events in the tent of his father Isaac. And now these themes are being resolved.

Think about the way that Jacob sends on the gift ahead of himself to his lord, Esau. That reminds us of the blessing that is given to Jacob by his father Isaac. It seems as if Jacob is beginning to play out the blessing to Esau to give back what he has taken in some respect.

Jacob has also been a wrestler throughout his life. He's wrestled against Esau. He's wrestled against Isaac.

He's wrestled against Laban. And God recognises this as he wrestles with him. He says that he has wrestled with God and with men and has prevailed.

He's wrestled with those figures like Esau and Isaac and Laban and grown through that conflict. And now he's meeting with God himself and wrestling with God himself. What's going on there? Well one of the things I think we're seeing is that he has been wrestling with God and man and has prevailed.

Who was wrestling with Jacob when Laban was mistreating him? When Isaac was blessing his brother ahead of him? When Esau was trying to kill him? Who was wrestling with him? In some sense ultimately God himself. Wrestling with him as a heavenly father might wrestle with his son so that his son might grow in strength. And at that point Jacob can realise that all these stories in his life, all these events in his life, that he might chalk down to his misfortune and all the opposition that he's facing.

Ultimately this is God wrestling with him. God wrestling with him so that through that testing and trying he might become strong. He might become a true wrestler with and wrestler for God which is the name that he's given.

Then as God is wrestling with him he's able to see his experience in a new way, to see that God's providence has been working throughout. Now a question to reflect upon as we conclude. Many people identify this point as Jacob's conversion.

Or perhaps slightly earlier on as he prays to God as he hears that Esau is approaching. Now I don't think that's the case. However there is a transition in Jacob's life at this point.

He becomes a new sort of person, a more mature sort of person. He's given what he's finally longed for, a new name and a blessing. These things that have been key themes and driving factors of the story to this point are resolved here.

Now what I think we're seeing is a transition in his life. There are many points when in our own lives we have key transition experiences that are not necessarily conversions in the way that they are commonly understood. A movement from not believing in God to believing in God.

Rather it's a movement into a new level of faith. A new level of faith that resolves tensions that have been playing in our lives to that point. Tensions that may have defined our lives are finally moving past them.

As we'll see in the next chapter, Jacob is no longer wrestling with Esau in the same way. He performs the blessing to Esau. He allows Esau to go out ahead of him.

This is another sort of birth scene. Two well matched opponents wrestling with each other waiting to see who's going to go out first. It's a wrestling for a name and a blessing for the first born status in some sense.

And when Jacob is blessed by God, he is able to give the blessing back to Esau that he stole from him. In some sense at least. And so I want to encourage you to think about some time or times in your own life when such a transition has occurred.

Not necessarily a movement from not believing to believing. But a movement from one level of understanding and faith and experience and way of thinking about your life to a completely different one. A movement into a new level of maturity.

Luke chapter 2 verses 22 to 40. And to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the law of the Lord. A pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons.

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. And this man was righteous and devout waiting for the consolation of Israel. And the Holy Spirit was upon him.

And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And he came in the Spirit into the temple. And when the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him according to the custom of the law.

He took him up in his arms and blessed God and said. Lord now you are letting your servant depart in peace according to your word. For my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples.

A light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel. And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother.

Behold this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel. And for a sign that is opposed. And a sword will pierce through your own soul also.

So that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed. And there was a prophetess Anna the daughter of Phanuel of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin.

And then as a widow until she was 84. She did not depart from the temple. Worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day.

And coming up at that very hour. She began to give thanks to God. And to speak of him to all who are waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

And when they had performed everything according to the law of the Lord. They returned into Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong filled with wisdom.

And the favor of God was upon him. Today for the feast of the presentation. We are looking at Luke chapter 2. A passage in which the infant Christ is brought to the temple to be presented to the Lord.

This is in fulfillment of Old Testament law. It's in part a sign of Christ's commitment to keep the law in every respect. But there's more going on here.

One of the first things we should note are some of the characteristic themes that we find within Luke's gospel. And in the book of Acts. Where there is an emphasis upon Jerusalem, the temple and the Holy Spirit at the beginning of the story.

Here we have the character of Simeon. Who is filled with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is upon him.

It is revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he will not see death until he has seen the Lord's Christ. He comes in the spirit into the temple. That's language that we more commonly have associated with a character like Ezekiel or one of the prophets.

And he encounters the infant Christ with his parents. Now this in many ways is language that prepares us for a later stage in the story. As the spirit is given to the church in association with the temple.

At the beginning of the narrative of the book of Acts. And I think some of the symmetries between these events may help us to understand what's taking place here. There is a 40 day period that is involved here.

In the law of Leviticus chapter 12, the male son had to be presented after 40 days in the temple. Now what happens 40 days after Christ's death and resurrection? He ascends into the heavenly temple and is present at God's right hand. And as we see that sort of parallel we can see something of broader framework within which Luke operates.

Where there are parallels between the beginning of Christ's life and the end of it. There's a Mary and a Joseph at the beginning of the story. There's Mary, a number of Marys at the end of the story and Joseph of Arimathea.

At the beginning of the story Jesus is wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. At the end of the story he's wrapped in linen garments and laid in a tomb. And there are a number of these sorts of symmetries that we need to notice.

And here I would suggest that the story of the presentation in Luke finds its counterpart in the story of the ascension of Christ and its associated event of Pentecost. There are various anticipations of Pentecost at the beginning of the story of Luke. And here is one of them.

I suspect that we are supposed to see in the character of Simeon some anticipation of what will be done by Peter on the day of Pentecost. There is one other character referred to as Simeon within the book of Luke and Acts. And that is the character of Peter in chapter 15 of Acts.

And so we have two Simeons. Now there's a Simeon who speaks on the day of Pentecost. Peter.

His speech leads to people being cut to the heart. And the language that Simeon uses here might anticipate that. He says, Simeon then is associated with the sword in the Old Testament in chapter 34 of Genesis.

And this new Simeon is associated with the sword too. But maybe with the sword that we see in the message of Peter. And as Peter speaks on the day of Pentecost, he has a sword that cuts to people's hearts.

This child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel. Note the order of that. The fall and rising.

There's a death and resurrection pattern there. And a sign that is opposed. Christ is one who comes as a sign that provokes response.

Negative or positive. People can't just be indifferent to Christ or neutral with regard to him. He is a sign that provokes response and that reveals hearts by his very presence.

People respond to him and they reveal their true character in the process. So Simeon is an important character. But alongside Simeon is another important character called



Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher.

First, note that she's from the tribe of Asher. Many people would see that these tribes have been completely lost as a result of the dissolution of the Northern Kingdom with the invasion of the Assyrians. But it seems as though some members of those tribes still existed among the surviving tribes of the Southern Kingdom.

The description of Anna is important. She's described as a virgin and then a widow until she was the age of 84. What is 84? 7 times 12.

It's the number associated with Israel and then it's the number of the seven days of creation, the complete order of those weeks. And so that age of 84, she stands for Israel. There are a number of women within the book of Luke that have the age of 12.

You have the woman with the issue of blood and Jairus' daughter. Both of them associated with the number 12. The woman with the issue of blood has that condition for 12 years.

Jairus' daughter is 12 years of age and the parallel between those two is seen because they're held right next to each other. The age then is important. She does not depart from the temple.

She's worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day. And who might she remind us of? Well, there's an Anna or a Hannah in the Old Testament in the book of 1 Samuel. And at the beginning of 1 Samuel, we see many parallels to the beginning of the book of Luke.

We see things like the Magnificat and then we have the character of Anna here. And the character of Anna is like Hannah, praying constantly, fasting and worshipping God in the temple. Not being recognised by the authorities but yet someone who's faithful and pursuing the deliverance of Israel.

And in her faithful prayer, she stands for the whole nation in its faithful character. She is the one who has a symbolic age that represents the whole people. She's also a prophetess as the original Hannah was a prophetess.

Someone who foretold that God would do things to change the situation of Israel and turn the tables on the oppressive rich. Now we have another Anna who's a prophetess and will declare the redemption of Jerusalem much as the first Hannah did. Now there's another thing that Anna might remind us of and that actually comes later in the story which is the early church.

The disciples at the end of the book of Luke and beginning of the book of Acts are constantly, continually in the temple praising God and praying. They're seeking the deliverance of Israel, the redemption of Jerusalem. They're praying for the Holy Spirit to

be given.

And here we have a similar character and what happens is this character calls back to the original Hannah. She's a prophetess that anticipates the prophecy that will characterise the early church. Like the early church, she is gathered in the temple to pray constantly, seeking God's deliverance.

And as we saw in the case of the first Hannah, there is a misperception of these characters. In the case of the first Hannah, she's presumed to be drunk by the priest Eli. Later on, on the day of Pentecost, the disciples are presumed to be drunk as they speak in tongues by the leaders of the people.

And so these characters bring to light a far richer and broader picture of redemptive history. Connecting us back to the early story of the start of the kingdom itself in the events surrounding Hannah and her prayer for Samuel in the temple. But also looking forward to the great events of the day of Pentecost.

And here we have a charged event that anticipates and recalls all these things. And as Christ is presented, the infant Christ is entering into this story that is charged from that very beginning. A story of anticipation, longing, fervent prayer.

A story of expectation of one who will come to be the glory of the people Israel, but not just for Israel. For light, for revelation to the Gentiles. This is already anticipating something that we'll see in the book of Acts as the gospel goes beyond Israel and out into the nations as well.

And Luke ends this account with a declaration that the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the favour of God was upon him. Now these sorts of expressions are common at the beginning of the book of Luke, referring both to John the Baptist and to Jesus as they grow up. And we also see some permutations of these referred to the early church as it grows in numbers, as it becomes strong, and as God blesses it and it grows in favour with God and man.

Now Luke knows what he's doing. He's referring back to the story of 1 Samuel again. There we have the description of Samuel as growing in the presence of the Lord.

In verse 26 of chapter 2, now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favour with the Lord and also with man. And then in chapter 3, verse 19, and Samuel grew and the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. These are all expressions that Luke has in the back of his mind, I think, as he's using this description of Christ.

Why is he using this? Because he's telling a new story of the establishment of the new kingdom. If the story of 1 Samuel is the story of the first kingdom being established, of Saul and David, and of the prophet that set up that kingdom, this is a story of the

establishment of a new kingdom. And Luke is concerned that ready ears will hear this anticipation of what Christ is going to achieve.

That Christ is like the character of Samuel. And that John the Baptist, in other respects, is like the character of Samuel. They're going to establish a new kingdom and this new kingdom is going to be one that is given all authority and power.

A kingdom that will never end and a king that will never fail. These are all themes that are picked up within the book of Luke later on. And Luke is very conscious in his use of the background of 1 Samuel.

He wants his readers to recognise it. And here, in the character of Anna, and then in the description of Christ, he wants people to hear what's going on. That there is something happening here, something stirring.

And what is stirring is something that has deep resonance with events that have occurred in Israel's past. A question to reflect upon. Simeon, we are told, has had some revelation given to him by the Holy Spirit.

That he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Anna is described as a prophetess. Both of these characters have the word of God that has come to them personally.

How might the prophetic character of both of these figures fit into the broader portrait that Luke is trying to paint of the events?