

August 6, 2017, Baptism of Olivia Joan Goddard
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Genesis 32: 22-31

A New Name at the Water

It's good to be back here with you this morning after being away—I've been out of town on vacation with my family. Several people asked where we went: our vacation was water-focused, our destination was a place called Destin Florida, which is on the Florida panhandle, to get there, basically you leave Chicago and drive straight south until you hit the ocean. That was our destination, but on way there we zigged and zagged a bit, stopping at a couple different places, some of which were water-focused, some with historical significance.

One of those places was in Atlanta, Georgia: a church, Ebenezer Baptist church. Maybe you've been there, too, or know the history, will recognize some of what I'm describing about that historic place—it's the church where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was pastor. We were there somewhat early on a weekday morning, not many people out yet, it was warm, and still, and as we approached the front steps of Ebenezer I felt sad. I felt sad as I thought about our country's past, which, as William Faulkner so rightly says about the past, "is not even past." I thought about racism, segregation, the hatred and violence that divides. Just outside the church you can walk by Dr. King's grave—murdered for preaching that we are all brothers and sisters, for practicing nonviolence, for having a dream, for holding on to a vision of the beloved community. He is buried by Ebenezer, surrounded by a reflecting pool.

We entered Ebenezer's heritage sanctuary. At the front of the church, up near the very top of the front wall there's a stained glass window: it was a picture I recognized and I'll bet you would too, a picture of Jesus kneeling, leaning over a large rock, hands clasped together: Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane: "Let this cup pass from me... Thy will be done." And then below the stained glass window, on the front wall of Ebenezer Baptist church there is a large painting. I can't say I recognized the painting, but looking at it made me think about our church, Irving Park Lutheran. I pointed it out to my husband, "Look at that," I said, "a big painting at the front, like IPLC." It's not the same painting as this one, but it is also a landscape, and even has a similar central motif, a zig-zagging of large lines that cross from side to side—though in the case of the painting at Ebenezer, the lines are not a road, but a river.

We're at a river in the Old Testament story we heard today; we have arrived at the water, at the river Jabbok, we've travelled there with Jacob. Jacob's path in life has zigged and zagged. Jacob, our clever, complicated, questionable-in-character ancestor in faith, has grabbed after blessings, and been on the lam, been mixed up in marriage, made a mess of many a relationship. Now, at the point in the story that we hear today, Jacob has amassed a small fortune and a large family—but he's stayed away from his own family, his family of origin. Now, in today's reading, Jacob has decided that it's time to go back home—and he doesn't know how he'll be received. With good reason: he's outsmarted—cheated—his twin brother, twice. But can Jacob maneuver his way through this one?

Jacob pauses, there at the river's edge, as he considers his next move. And is attacked, knocked off his feet into an all-night wrestling match with...what? The ancient text is unclear, the word used could suggest a demon, or an angel. Does Jacob wrestle with God? Or with his own self—his conscience only able to be cheated for so long? And then there's the odd

conversation near the end, the odd outcome of it all, the request for a name, and then the giving of a new name, this strange kind of win—which also wounds.

Some see in this story a parable of baptism,¹ a story of being reborn, renamed and blessed at the water. It's fitting to note this today, as just after this sermon we'll have a baptism here, baby Olivia, who has come with many members of her family—so good to have you all here with us at the water today. Of course, Jacob is no infant, far from it, and he's there alone, he's sent all his family members and all his flocks, all that he's amassed, all on ahead of him, but Jacob has plenty of other baggage still with him—all his mental and emotional baggage, all that baggage that we all have, that we all carry and accrue from the day we are born. It is the human condition—which baptism recognizes: the forces, the powers, the ways of sin we all experience and perpetuate—our baggage, as humans. At the edge of the font we admit that there are bad things in the world and we are carriers of it. At the edge of the river, Jacob confesses this, too. When he's asked his name he says, "Jacob," a name which we know, from his birth, means the grabber, the usurper, the cheater, the heel. That's who he is, Jacob confesses. But then the one holding him says, "You have another name now." The one who holds Jacob, firmly in his grip, says, "I will bless you, and give you a new name." At the water, Jacob receives a new identity, one that holds fast to God. So also, at the font, we are renamed child of God, and called to hold fast. At the water, Jacob's receives the name of the nation from which springs the Messiah, through whom God reveals saving love for all humanity. So also, at the font, we become heirs of God's promise, called to share that love with all. At the water, Jacob receives a blessing so powerful it causes him pain; he will never walk the same way again. So also at the font, we are marked with the cross; we become victors who bear love's scars. We walk, with Jacob, with Christ, with fractured feet, with a victorious gait into the rising, resurrecting dawn.

This is what you are being baptized into, little Olivia Joan. You are being baptized into a faith that bears wounds that love may win; you are being baptized into ancient and transformative stories; into a faith that wrestles, into a spiritual history and a future hope; into the assembly of travelers gathered here today, and every Sunday prior, into all the baptized in every time and place, in Chicago, in Atlanta, all brothers and sisters in the beloved community.

It was quiet that morning, in Ebenezer Baptist church. There were no one else there yet, but still I felt a sense of others. I thought of all the people who had gathered there: all the people who had gathered to hear Dr. King preach, all the people who had gathered to pray, all the people who had gathered to sing songs of deliverance, and confidence, and victory. I felt a sense of all these others there. Being in a church, begin part of a church, does that. People tell me they feel it here. They come on Sundays and remember loved ones; they give thanks for and feel part of that great cloud of witnesses. And sometimes during the week, people will stop by here. The stained glass can prompt a holy hush, especially on people seeing it for the first time. Others stopping by have been here before, maybe a long time ago. Maybe they, too, are wondering if they can go home. They point to the painting, remembering.

Whatever your age, however your life has zigged and zagged, the road is here, come to the water, child of God, and be reborn.

¹ David Lose, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=2804>.