

The Long Way Home

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on August 2, 2026

Covenant Presbyterian Church

The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When 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. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So, he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans 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 place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. (Genesis 32:22-31, NRSVue)

It's the one great question I got after the Covenant Coffeehouse a few weeks ago, after my reading of the stirring final movement of Alfred, Lord Tennyson's poem "Ulysses": *Have you seen "The Odyssey" yet?* And as of last Monday, the answer is Yes.

Wow — just wow. Filmmaker Christopher Nolan has taken one of the oldest stories in the Western world and made it feel *urgent* again. "The Odyssey" has become a cultural phenomenon, drawing enormous audiences into a world of "apparent magic" — of gods and monsters, shipwrecks and enchantments, "wine-dark" seas crossed in a long, perilous search for home.

Homer calls Odysseus *polytropos* — literally, a man "of many turns." He is endlessly resourceful, able to read danger, discover the hidden opening, and reshape himself according to the demands of the moment. He talks his way through one danger, disappears into disguise within another, and somehow invents a path when every visible road has closed. His intelligence carries him through circumstances that would destroy almost anyone else.

That cleverness finally takes the Greeks through the walls of Troy. After ten years of brutal siege warfare, Odysseus conceives of the Trojan Horse. You know the story: The Greek ships withdraw beyond the horizon, leaving behind an immense wooden horse that appears to be an offering. But hidden inside its hollow body, armed men wait in silence. Believing the siege has ended, the people of Troy haul the horse through their own gates and into the heart of the city. That night the soldiers emerge, the gates are opened, and Troy is given over to wholesale slaughter.

Nolan would have us *feel* the terrible brilliance of the idea. The plan succeeds because a gift in that world was still understood to mean *peace*, because hospitality still carried *sacred* obligation, because the people of Troy could scarcely conceive that an offering might be

hollowed out and filled with bloodthirsty men. Odysseus recognizes that *trust* as the city's one *unguarded gate* – and exploits it. Only later does he understand the world his cleverness has helped to make.

The Bible, too, knows something about men of “many turns.” Long before Odysseus began his journey back toward Ithaca, Jacob was trying to find his own way home. He *entered* this world grasping the heel of his elder twin brother Esau, and in his own name that first act is recalled: *Jacob*, the heel-grabber, the leg-puller, and by extension, the deceiver and supplanter. As the years pass, Esau grows into a powerful hunter, favored by his father Isaac. But Jacob grows in other ways – watching, waiting, calculating, noticing when another's *need* may become his *opportunity*.

So, when Esau comes in from a hunt faint with hunger, Jacob puts a price on his desperation: a bowl of red stew for the birthright! And then, years later, Isaac has grown old and blind, and calls on Esau to go hunt and prepare a hearty meal of venison for him, as he so loves, that he may then extend the family blessing to his eldest before he dies. Esau goes out as he is asked. But the sons' mother Rebekah, who favors *Jacob*, overhears and calls her younger son, and, with his cooperation, sets a great deception into motion. She prepares that very meal she knows her husband loves, and then dresses Jacob in Esau's fine clothing, covers his own *smooth* hands and neck with goatskins (for Esau was robust and *hairy!*), and sends him into Isaac's tent carrying that savory food.

But for all the thought put into the plan, Isaac is suspicious almost at once. The voice *sounds* like *Jacob's*; the hunt has ended *too quickly*. But Jacob answers each doubt with yet another lie. Isaac draws him closer, feels the false hair, and asks directly whether he is *truly* Esau. Jacob says, “I am.” At last, he bends over his blind father wearing his brother's clothing and bearing his scent, and the irrevocable family blessing is spoken in the closeness of an embrace.

You see, Jacob has found the household's *last unguarded gate*. He enters through the old man's love. The meal, the clothing, the touch, the blessing itself – all the gestures by which a family recognizes and receives one another – become pieces of the deception. And so, when Esau enters and the truth becomes clear, Isaac trembles violently. Esau's cry tears through the house, and Rebekah rushes Jacob away, far away, to her brother Laban, imagining he will be able to return after a little while.

But a “little while” becomes *twenty years*. Jacob gains the blessing but loses the world in which he hoped to enjoy it: the father he deceived, the brother he cheated, the mother whose scheme secured his future but cost him her presence. And yet, through all those years, a divine voice comes to Jacob in dreams, promising that – despite everything – he *will*, someday, return. And then, at last, the call comes once more. Perhaps twenty years in Laban's household have finally exhausted him—twenty years of living inside another man's schemes and tasting the bitterness of his own old ways. Perhaps the promise that followed him through every dream has finally become a road he is willing to walk.

And so, Jacob gathers his household and sets out toward his day of reckoning. As the great caravan draws nearer to home, Jacob sends messengers ahead to Esau. Perhaps twenty years have softened his brother's anger. The messengers return quickly, and whatever hope he carried vanishes at their report: Esau is coming to meet him—with *four hundred* men!

Jacob is *terrified*. He divides the company into two camps, calculating that if Esau attacks one, the other may escape. Then, at last, he prays, confessing that he is unworthy of the steadfast love that has followed him and pleading with the urgency of a frightened child: *Save me from my brother!*

But of course, never being one to leave *everything* in God's hands, he also prepares a little "gift" for Esau! A river of livestock goes ahead in carefully timed waves. Jacob *still* knows how to work an angle. Yet the old arts have reached their limit. A *thousand* animals can't give Esau the years back. No well-rehearsed speech can answer and heal the cry that tore through Isaac's house. The whole journey has narrowed to this strip of earth beside the Jabbok: behind him, the long trail of all his turns and evasions; ahead of him, the elder brother he cheated out of a life.

As darkness settles, Jacob sends everything across the river—his family, his servants, his flocks, all his abundance. One by one they disappear into the night until the sounds of the camp fade on the opposite bank, and Jacob is left alone, terribly alone, in such a place as no one else can enter with us, where the noise of life subsides and old faces return: people we wounded, people we disappointed, people we loved and could not save. Fear gathers substance there. Regret breathes beside us. The past, held at bay by distance and busyness, comes close enough to lay a hand upon us.

And then, from the darkness, a hand lays hold of Jacob. A man wrestles with him until daybreak. Genesis gives us no warning, no name, no explanation. They struggle in the dirt beside the river. Is it Esau, ambushing him in the night? Isaac, reaching out his hands once more? Is it the past Jacob fled, the future he fears, the self he can no longer evade? Is it ... *God*? In this mysterious stranger, the sum of all Jacob's striving comes at him at once.

Near dawn, the stranger strikes his hip. The man who has survived by staying one step ahead suddenly loses the freedom of movement upon which he has always depended. His leg buckles, but he clings to the one who has wounded him: "I will not let you go, unless you bless me!"

We can hear old Jacob in those words. Blessing has always been something to *seize* before someone *else* receives it. He bargained for it over a bowl of stew and stole it beneath goatskins in his father's tent. Even now, with Esau waiting beyond the river, Jacob reaches for one more assurance that he will survive the morning.

But the stranger answers him with a *question*: "What is your name?" That has always been the question. His own blind father had asked who stood before him, and Jacob answered with the name of his brother. "I am Esau." He carried another man's name into a loving, trustful embrace

and came away with another man's blessing. But now there is no costume left, no borrowed smell, no old man's blindness to exploit.

"What is your name?" the stranger asks.

"Jacob." *My name is Jacob.* The heel-grabber, the supplanter, the man who finds the vulnerable place and presses on it. He speaks the name he has lived and the name that has brought him to this river. His answer may be defiance, or it may be a confession, or it may be both at once. But then, in response, the stranger gives him *another* name: *Israel*, the one who strives with God and with humankind, and prevails. It is a name broad enough to hold both the truth of Jacob's past and the future now opening before him.

To this, Jacob asks the stranger's name, but again, receives only a question in return. The Holy One will *not* become one more secret Jacob can master. The blessing *is* given, but the mystery remains. And with this, dawn breaks over the Jabbok. Esau is still waiting beyond the river, and Jacob rises carrying an old name, and a new name, and a limp – and for the first time in twenty years, he walks forward to face his brother.

Of course, back on another shore, Odysseus also reached the end of his many turns. Nolan shows him allowing the memory of Troy to return in its full horror: the city burning, the innocent dead, the tear-streaked face of Athena's priestess haunting the victory he once regarded as his greatest achievement. The lotus had offered him forgetfulness, a gentle dissolving of Troy and Ithaca and even his own name. But you can't find your way home by forgetting who you have been or who you have become.

And so, Odysseus finally chooses to *remember* – to remember everything. He surrenders his fate to the waves and turns once more toward Ithaca, no longer assured that his genius can master the sea or protect him from the meaning of his own story. Like Jacob beside the Jabbok, *he* has come to the place where yet another escape would only carry him farther from home.

Georgia Coley, writing in *Sojourners* magazine, sees in Nolan's film a truth much larger than the wounded conscience of Odysseus. The Trojan Horse and what it represented has damaged the moral world itself. It violated *xenia*, "Zeus' Law" as the film calls it, the sacred obligation of hospitality by which a stranger could approach another person's home and receive food, shelter, and protection. The Horse took that holy trust and turned it into a means of slaughter. Once a gift can be hollowed out and filled with armed men, *every* gift becomes suspect. Once hospitality has been used as an opening for violence, every stranger begins to look like a threat.

And that is what Odysseus slowly discovers – and lives – on his way home. The brutal world he and his men encounter did not arise from nowhere. It is an *outer* manifestation of an inner moral landscape he and his fellow Greeks have helped to create.

Jacob's deception moved through a smaller space, though the movement was much the same. The lie spoken in Isaac's tent did not remain between father and son. It entered Esau's grief and

anger, Rebekah's loss, Jacob's exile, and twenty years of many turns. Jacob's clever ruthlessness created a *world* in which his whole family was condemned to live.

And as with these, our *own* choices also create worlds in which *many* others, far beyond ourselves, must live. A lie defended because it serves *our* cause weakens *anyone's* expectation that *any* words spoken will carry the truth. Cruelty applauded against those we have been taught to despise, teaches others, far and wide, that cruelty is the language of strength, or even righteousness. When immigrants are described as an infestation, when queer people are made objects of public ridicule, more is being done than injury to those immediately in view. The heart of a whole *society* is being trained in whose suffering we can witness without shame – and having a fatal wound carved into its own soul.

The Greeks of ancient times practiced hospitality because a stranger *might* be a god in disguise. Our short reading from Hebrews, in its way, reflects this folk tradition. *Welcome the stranger*, it says, because heaven may be nearer than you know! But our faith in its fullness ventures an even *deeper* claim: that *every* stranger *already* bears the image of God. *Every* human face carries something of the Creator's own mystery – a holy light that no border, government, army, party, or church can put out.

The stakes are terribly high, and yet, as Coley reminds us, moral consequence also moves in more than one direction. *Mercy*, too, can enter the imagination. A *single* act of hospitality makes *another* more imaginable, and then another, and another. *One person* standing up and saying, "No, this is wrong" gives courage to *another* to do the same. This is how revolutions of Love and Justice are born. Jesus spoke of mustard seeds and leaven because the reign of God often enters quietly, then works through the whole field and the whole loaf.

Beyond the short passage we read, Jacob is about to discover such a mercy. He crosses the river and moves to the front of his household. His limp has taken away the speed on which he once depended, and Esau is now in view, approaching with his four hundred men. Jacob bows as the distance between them closes.

And then Esau *runs*. And for a moment, all the dread of twenty years comes rushing across the ground. Jacob cannot flee, cannot hide behind another name, cannot send one more gift ahead of himself. Esau reaches him, throws his arms around him, falls upon his neck, and weeps. Jacob had prepared for anger. He had calculated the possibility of his own *death* and arranged his household around it. He had *not* imagined this. He looks into the face of the brother he wronged and there recognizes the face of God. The night before, God had met Jacob in the mysterious stranger who wrestled him into truth. Now God meets him through the mercy of the person whose blessing he stole.

Esau's embrace remains *freely* given. Jacob had no power to buy it and no right to demand it. Yet, grace changes what Jacob is able to do next. He urges Esau to receive the wealth he has sent ahead, and the Hebrew word he uses for the gift is *berakhah* – "blessing." The man who once carried away his brother's blessing, now places blessing back into Esau's hands. Both

understand that the old history remains. Isaac's tent cannot be entered again, and the lies told there cannot be taken back. The years are gone, and Jacob will always carry the wound in his hip, and the brothers will always carry the memory of what happened between them. Yet their history has opened to a future larger than those wounds. Their world *can* turn – again.

Jacob began this journey back convinced that home lay somewhere beyond the river, in the land and that past he had left twenty years before, and the sun rose upon him as he limped toward a future he could not control. And soon, he would see the face of God in the brother he wronged, and only there, in a mercy he could never steal or arrange, Jacob would find the long way home. Amen.