

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

17th Sunday after Pentecost
Year B

Duane M. Harris

September 20, 2015

Text: Genesis 33:1-11

Title: “New Beginnings: Taking a Risk”

When deciding where to do my undergraduate work, I wrestled with where to go. There are so many options out there. In our family, we had no allegiances. No one in our family was a State fan or Michigan fan or Buckeye fan, so there was no pressure to go to any particular school. Neither was there any guidance because no one from our family had gone away to school before. I was the first, so when it came time to decide where to go, I felt quite alone in the decision.

After sending for many of the state school materials, I decided on Northern Michigan University in Marquette. I remember sitting at our kitchen table feeling both excited and afraid of the risk I was taking. What if I couldn't find the money as my mother so clearly reminded me as I filled out the paperwork? What if I did and went there and failed? What if? What if? What if?

Whenever we are on the threshold of taking a step into the unknown--whenever it's clear to us that risk is involved--anxiety increases. We become fearful and sometimes that fear, that anxiety, causes us to pull back, to step back from the risks we were about to take. I wonder how many of us have thought about taking a step toward reconciliation with someone from whom we are estranged only to later decide not to do so because fear kept us from doing so. What if?

How many people stay in a job in which they are completely unhappy because the risk of leaving it raises a panic within? Has anyone ever thought about going back to school but just couldn't come to the point of taking the risk? Maybe some have thought about starting a new business but couldn't muster the courage to take the steps necessary to make the change. Or what about churches taking the risk of change, of doing things differently, in order to reach more people with the love, grace and mercy of Jesus Christ? That's not easy either and some retreat, step back to the old way of doing things because taking such risks can bring grief as a result of losing something of the old ways that keep us comfortable. Taking such risks can also result in failure and that's not comfortable either. What if...? What if...? What if...?

New beginnings, however, do not become reality without taking risks and those risks can raise our fears and sometimes even bring about grieving the loss of what once kept us feeling comfortable and settled. How, then, do we navigate risk taking in order to begin again, to begin anew? How do we deal with the endless “what ifs” running through our heads when considering a new beginning?

Once again, we can find some answers in scripture. This story of Jacob and Esau is far longer, of course, than what I read a moment ago. Many of you know this story well. It begins when they are in utero. Mother Rebekah gave birth first to the one who "...came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle[--like a little Chewbacca--]; so they named him Esau." (25:25). The second, then, was born as he held on to his brother's heel and wouldn't let go, so they called him Jacob which means in Hebrew, "supplants" or "He takes by the heel".

The two brothers were born very different from one another. One was father Isaac's favorite. The other mother Rebekah's favorite. One liked to hunt and was a real outdoorsman: Esau. Jacob on the other hand was more comfortable in the kitchen with his mother. Esau and Jacob were not the best of friends, but lived their early lives—at least that's how I read the story—quite apart from one another.

When Isaac, their father, was old and losing his faculties and it was clear that he was in his last days, Jacob deceived their father by dressing up as Esau and taking Isaac's favorite meal prepared by mother Rebekah. The plan was to deceive blind, old Isaac, and have Jacob receive the blessing rightfully belonging to Esau, the first born. Jacob was after Esau's birthright which was confirmed by the father's final blessing. Having the birthright meant he would then be considered the first born. That meant that once Isaac died, Jacob would be the declared leader of the family and as such would inherit double the other male heirs.

How many stories I've heard of families in turmoil over a will! The fights that have ensued over settling estates! Families broken apart by people's greed! I've heard of one adult child manipulating a parent with slight dementia enough to have the will changed before she dies in order to benefit the youngest child. You know the stories; maybe have been part of such a dispute yourself. It's about power and money, inheriting the accumulation of assets of the deceased. Here it is in Genesis, the first book of the Bible, good people of God—Rebekah and Jacob--early in the faith story lying and cheating in order to steal from Esau what was rightfully his.

Of course, once Esau found out, he was furious; so furious, in fact, that Jacob left in fear of his life. He travelled far out of the country to his uncles in hopes that his brother would never go there and hopefully give up the search.

Those of you who know the story remember that it was there that Jacob was tricked by Laban into marrying two of his daughters: Leah first, then Rebekah. And the story goes that God blessed Jacob with wealth, with great flocks of sheep and goats, slaves and children. Jacob became a wealthy and powerful man during his years of exile.

Yet, there was this great matter between him and his brother that lingered in his conscience all those years. And he heard from God at one point: "Return to your country and to your kindred, and I will do you good." But this was risky business. The last time Jacob had contact with Esau, Esau was so angry that he plotted to kill him once their father had died. Why should Jacob go back now? Why take the risk of losing his life now that he was a wealthy man? He could have just stayed where he was comfortable and satisfied. What if he went back and Esau did kill him? What would happen to his family, his servants, all of whom depended on him? Or worse, what if Esau decided to punish his lying and cheating brother by taking the lives of his children and wives? What if...? What if...? What if...?

Potential new beginnings that involve risk always raise fearful questions.

It happens in the church, too. When the Vision Team developed the vision we are currently working to fulfill after the leaders you elected to the church council approved it, it sent ripples through the congregation. “Creating a church where children and youth love to attend: 20/15; 30/16; 40/17”: 20 children and youth involved and touched by the church by the end of 2015, 30 by the end of 2016 and 40 by the end of 2017. The rationale for this vision came out of the realization by the Vision Team and the Church Council that in 10-15 years this congregation probably will not exist if we do not have a new beginning, if we do not work together to begin a new life cycle. Or if it does exist, it will be a shell of what it once was because so many faithful servants who have responded to God’s call to be the church will be taking that final journey to be with God eternally. If we do not find new ways to build authentic relationships with people and fulfill the mission of connecting people with the life and love of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, the transformation that will be happening here is a slow death. That is why we have a vision of creating a church where children and youth love to attend. We are taking a risk together as we seek a new beginning.

But again, new beginnings, raise questions that usually rise out of our fears. What if doing this means I have to change the way I do things? What if the place is filled with kids running around and disrupting things? What if we have to stop doing something we’ve done for years in order to concentrate our energies and resources on reaching children and youth and their families with the grace, love and mercy of Jesus Christ? What if I have to give up what’s comfortable and meaningful for me and my friends? What if...? What if...? What if...?

New beginnings that involve risk always raise fearful questions.

When Jacob decided to listen to God’s instruction to return home and face Esau, Jacob’s fear kicked in. Yet, Jacob prepared to face that fear. He did not allow his own fears--and maybe even his preferences--to keep him from acting on the higher purpose to which he was being directed. He prepared himself. First, he prayed:

“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.” (Genesis 32:9-12)

Jacob placed his fears in God’s hands. I read a proverb somewhere: “One who trusts is not anxious.” When fears arise, it is an invitation to trust the grace and power of God.

I remember those “what if” fears that came with contemplating starting school at NMU and then the fears that came again when considering the Master of Divinity degree, wondering what seminary to attend or if I should even go. It wasn’t something anyone in our family had even considered before. Who was I to enter ordained ministry? But somehow I had experienced a call from God to go. Still the anxieties were strong and powerful and all the “what if” fears did

their best work. The only thing I could do was to offer them to God. Over and over again, I would say to God, “If this is your will, I need your help. I can’t do this alone, Lord.”

New beginnings not only mean risk and the fears that come as a result. New beginnings are an invitation to deeper faith. They invite us to trust God in spite of the anxiety we feel. And that trust begins with prayer.

Jacob prepared first with prayer, but then he planned. He sent messengers ahead to give Esau a heads up that he was on his way. He then collected goats and sheep and camels and cows and donkeys, a great horde of livestock—which was the currency of that culture--and he sent them one drove at a time on ahead to his brother Esau as gifts, hoping to appease his brother’s justified anger.

He received word that his brother was on his way with 400 men with him and saw them coming. Still fearful, he divided up his family and he led the procession himself. He did so by bowing to the ground seven times as he made his way toward his brother, totally submissive and contrite.

I wonder if Esau replayed the deception and theft of his brother committed years before as he approached Jacob. I wonder if any of the fury he felt for his brother the day Jacob stole what was rightfully his by lying to their dying father made its way to his heart when he saw his brother off in the distance. Did he feel the heat of anger well up again? But when he saw his brother make himself completely vulnerable, when he knew that if he chose to do so, he could completely wipe out Jacob the trickster and his family--he was the guy with the power here: did he have a change of heart at that moment or had he forgiven his brother even before he heard the news that Jacob was coming home? Who knows?

Like the prodigal son’s father, though, Esau chose to run to his brother and hug him, and in the custom of the day, he kissed him; their shoulders heaved with the heavy grief and joy that reconciliation and forgiveness brings. Jacob, I can’t help but wonder, weeping because his guilt and fears no longer had power over him. Esau’s tears perhaps falling because his brother’s actions revealed his love for his brother after all. Their relationship would begin anew but it didn’t come easily, without cost, without fear, without risks. Jacob not only prayed and planned but he also acted. He participated in spite of his fears. It was the only way to reconciliation with his brother. Risky as it was, it was the only way to begin again.

Are you hearing a call of some sort to a new beginning in your own life? Is God nudging you to take steps in a different direction? Maybe reconciling with someone you’ve hurt or maybe a ministry of some sort – maybe even ordained ministry? Is the riskiness raising all those “what if” fears? Consider learning from Jacob, the trickster, who found he needed to pray, and plan and act and trust God with his fears.

As a congregation, we are in the midst of working toward a new beginning as we create a church where children and youth love to attend, and I understand the “what if” fears that it raises. The “what if” fears are understandable. Yet, I believe God is calling us to go, to go outside these walls and connect more people with the life and love of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. It’s risky. It raises fears. It’s challenging for us all. But such is the nature of new beginnings. They will never happen if we are unwilling to risk, and they will never happen here unless we continue to bring our fears to God through prayer and then plan and act together.

In all of this, though, God has a record of beginning anew over and over again. When we are able and willing to trust God in taking action toward a new beginning whether in our personal lives or our shared life as a congregation, God is faithful. New beginnings are what God does, and we can count on God's sustaining grace as we participate in those God calls us toward. May it be so in our lives as individuals. May it be so in our shared life in this congregation.