

Cherry Trees and Magic Dragons

Genesis 33:1-20

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Most of us have heard the story. When he was six years old, George Washington was given a new hatchet. He then went about chopping everything in sight, including his father's cherry tree. When the tree was discovered, the father asked and he replied, I cannot tell a lie, I chopped down the cherry tree.

It's a great story often used to teach our children the importance of telling the truth.

Too bad it it's a myth and never really happened.

Instead, historians agree that shortly after Washington's death, in 1800 a pastor named Mason Locke Weems, published a book titled A History of the Life and Death, Virtues and Exploits of General George Washington. In it he made up the story in an effort to inspire Americans with stories of a virtuous hero.

It's a little ironic isn't it, that we use a story which is false to teach our children about honesty? But myths are often like that, they may not be true yet still provide ways to teach.

Then there was the 1960's and early 1970's, a time when both rock music and the drug culture were in their early stages. In the minds of many they were closely linked. Names like Woodstock and Jimmy Hendrix and Bob Dylan quickly remind us of this connection.

Much of the music was counter cultural, some of the writers liked to put hidden messages within the words of their songs. One of the most popular was Puff the Magic Dragon by Peter Paul and Mary. When I was young, I remember hearing complaints about how bad the song was. That it was actually promoting the use of the magic dragon, marijuana. Which of course, you puff on.

Then came the 1990's and the baby boomers' nostalgia for oldies and the music from their youth. Many of the old groups began getting back together for concerts and tours. Peter, Paul and Mary came together for their 30-year reunion tour. Late in their show, Peter Yarrow, who wrote the song, would come out on stage to lead the audience in singing Puff the Magic Dragon, the best known of all their songs. But right before he did, he made this comment, "Many people

thought this song was about drugs. But it never was. It was a simple song about a boy and his dragon, and the sorrows of leaving boyhood behind. I know, I'm Puff's daddy."

It had sounded so good at the time, especially by those who wanted to find reasons to attack the cultural changes going on all around them.

But just like George Washington and the cherry tree, it too was a myth.

one of the definitions of myth is a widely held but false belief or idea.

we are living through a period where myths are thriving
falsely held beliefs and ideas are commonly accepted and promoted not based on knowledge and fact but for no reason other than our politics or prejudices or simply because it's what we want to believe

many then turn around and become their carriers, helping spread these conspiracies and falsehoods

In 2 Timothy 3:13 Paul warned of people both deceiving and being deceived, and he called it evil.

Our faith is not immune to this; we have Christian myths as well.

things widely believed about our faith which are not true, or at least, not the entire truth

before we leave the life of Jacob, there are a few things we can learn from his life and experiences about where we look and expect to encounter God, how we encounter Him, and what we expect after we encounter Him

Genesis 33 says;

"Jacob looked up and there was Esau, coming with his four hundred men; so he divided the children among Leah, Rachel and the two female servants. He put the female servants and their children in front, Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph in the rear. He himself went on ahead and bowed down to the ground seven times as he approached his brother. But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept. Then Esau looked up and saw the women and children. "Who are these with you?" he asked. Jacob answered, "They are the children God has graciously given your servant." Then the female servants and their children approached and bowed down. Next, Leah and her children came and bowed down. Last of all came Joseph and Rachel, and they too bowed down. Esau asked, "What's the meaning of all these flocks and herds I met?" "To find favor in your eyes, my lord," he said. But Esau said, "I already have plenty, my brother. Keep what you have for yourself." "No, please!" said Jacob. "If I have found favor in

your eyes, accept this gift from me. For to see your face is like seeing the face of God, now that you have received me favorably. Please accept the present that was brought to you, for God has been gracious to me and I have all I need." And because Jacob insisted, Esau accepted it. Then Esau said, "Let us be on our way; I'll accompany you." But Jacob said to him, "My lord knows that the children are tender and that I must care for the ewes and cows that are nursing their young. If they are driven hard just one day, all the animals will die. So let my lord go on ahead of his servant, while I move along slowly at the pace of the flocks and herds before me and the pace of the children, until I come to my lord in Seir." Esau said, "Then let me leave some of my men with you." "But why do that?" Jacob asked. "Just let me find favor in the eyes of my lord." So that day Esau started on his way back to Seir. Jacob, however, went to Sukkoth, where he built a place for himself and made shelters for his livestock. That is why the place is called Sukkoth. After Jacob came from Paddan Aram, he arrived safely at the city of Shechem in Canaan and camped within sight of the city. For a hundred pieces of silver, he bought from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem, the plot of ground where he pitched his tent. There he set up an altar and called it El Elohe Israel." (Genesis 33)

This passage immediately follows Jacobs encounters with God and it changed his life
In what can be considered his conversion scripture says it was there on the banks of the Jabbok that he wrestled with God
For is that not what conversion is, a wrestling with God as the old nature gives way to the new?

or as Paul put it in 2 Cor. 5:17, if anyone is in Christ they are a new creation, the old is gone and the new has come

and in Ephesians 4:22-23 he says we are to put off our old self which is being corrupted by its evil desires and are to be made new in the attitude of our minds and to put on the new self which is created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness

for Jacob, his conversion is represented by the new name God gave him which is the indication of a changed life and character and the new life God was calling him to

No longer would he be known as Jacob, the heel grabber and schemer, but Israel, the one who wrestled with God and refused to let go.

It is further indicated by the fact that previously he had only spoken of God as the God of his father Abraham and God of his father Isaac but never as his God

Only after the Jabbok does he start speaking of God as his own.

so in verse 20 of chapter 33 indicates, he built an alter and named it el elohe Israel, which translates as either; God, the God of Israel, or mighty is the God of Israel.

I. One of our common myths has to do with where we look and expect to see and encounter God

Certainly in churches and temples, places and times of worship

For Jesus did say that whenever 2-3 gather in his name he is right there with us

We expect to see and encounter him during things like retreats and prayer meetings and Bible studies

For scripture does say He inhabits the prayers of his people

Many turn to nature, seeking places to be alone to commune and hear him speak, maybe places like the beach or Hoomaluhia.

Jesus often withdrew to solitary places to be with God.

Moses was on the backside of the desert when God appeared in the burning bush.

Isaiah was at worship in the temple when he saw the Lord high and lifted up.

And Elijah was in a cave when he heard that still small voice

Jacob was at the Jabbok where he says in verse 30, he saw God face to face

This we understand and expect but we don't typically expect to encounter him in the daily affairs of life, as we interact with those we may be at odds with, those we don't like or trust or are afraid of.

Yet in verse 10 of chapter 33 he says something very interesting

When he met his brother, he told him **to see your face is like seeing the face of God**

He encountered God in his reunion with his estranged brother who had threatened to kill him and was now leading a small army of 400 men to meet him.

Yet in the midst of his fear and uncertainty, Jacob says he sees the face of God in him

God was revealing himself to Jacob through the mercy and forgiveness of Esau, the brother he had wronged and been hiding from for 20 years.

the encounter he had with God when he saw him at the Jabbok, is now being deepened and strengthened through his encounter and reconciliation with his brother

This is especially important to realize now with all the cultural war acrimony going on all around us, open hostility, distrust, contempt and hatred towards others.

People aren't going to see Jesus in us nor will we see him in others in our anger and hostility towards other people and groups, those we don't agree with

As with Jacob, the face of God will be seen through acts of mercy and compassion, love and forgiveness and Grace

Isn't that what Jesus told us when he said they will know we are his followers not by our righteous indignation but by our love

And when he said the entire law is summarized not just by loving God with all our heart soul mind and strength but then in turn loving our neighbor as ourself

Neighbors which he defined as the Good Samaritan, the tax collectors, the woman caught in adultery, all those who would have been despised by the religious leaders of his day.

He demonstrated grace, mercy, love compassion, forgiveness because they are central characteristics of God and where he reveals himself

When we experience or express them, we have an opportunity to catch a glimpse of God, no matter who expresses them

this is where Jesus could be found as he walked the streets of Palestine rather than in the halls of the self-righteous who looked down on those they classified as sinners

God is present and can reveal himself to us even through those who are far from him and in a lost and dying world.

All creation declares his glory and the earth is alive with God's presence, we just have to look And stop limiting ourselves to predetermined times and places as if they are the only places God reveals himself

we need to look for His presence and activity in life and the interactions with those around us not just when we are in church

II. Another common myth of our faith deals with how we encounter God in our own lives

It is the myth that sees conversion as only a point in time rather than a process

While it is true that Jacob encountered God at the Jabbok and took him as his own.

but that was only the final step in a process God had been working at for over 20 years.

Remember that 20 years earlier, when he first fled from Esau in chapter 28, God was already at work and appeared to him when he lay down for the night.

He even confesses in verse 16 that surely the Lord was in this place and I didn't even know it.

God was beginning to make himself known, Jacob just wasn't ready yet to commit.

And in both chapter 31 and 32 it says he says realized that God had been with him the entire time he lived in the home of Laban, not just protecting and providing, but guiding and preparing him for the day he would reach the Jabbok and take that final step over the line to accept him.

you might say not only was he saved at the Jabbok but he was being saved long before then. Salvation was not just an event, it's a process.

So, for example, on Sunday, July 18, 1976 at approximately 8:00PM at the Redondo Beach Foursquare Church, the first time I ever entered a non-Catholic church and heard for the very first time someone explain how to become a Christian, I prayed to receive Jesus as my personal savior.

I can point to that event as my Jabbok when I was saved.

it would be wrong for me to ignore what God had already been doing in my life prior to that to prepare me, as if it were unimportant
this was merely the last step in a long process where God had already been at work drawing me to himself

He had brought others like my sister and neighbor whom God used to help point the way.
There were books a friend let me borrow that raised questions about God in my mind
There was even the exposure to teachings from my childhood going to the Catholic Church which planted the seeds for knowing God was real.

My prayer, asking Jesus to come into my life, was the last step in a process begun long before.

Yet there are many who hold to the myth that unless you can pinpoint when you prayed the sinners prayer and were saved you aren't .

it would be wrong for me to take my experience in that church when I had just turned 16, and then generalize it to make it the norm by which to judge and question the salvation of others whom God revealed himself in a different manner than he did with me

I've known a number of people, some I went to seminary with and are pastoring today, that had a different experience than mine which was no less real
Their testimony is that he had revealed himself over a period of time, sometimes years.

many of us have heard at least parts of the story behind the hymn Amazing Grace and its writer John Newton. His devoutly Christian mother died when he was 11 so he

went to sea with his father who was a ship captain. Eventually he himself became the captain of a slave trader.

His life at sea was a rough and sinful life. He deserted the Royal Navy, then was demoted and flogged for desertion. He made up disrespectful songs about his ship's captain and was demoted again. He frequently drowned himself in drink. Prided himself in his creative profanity and sharp attacks on Christian beliefs. Even though on several occasions he seemed to be miraculously saved when he should have lost his life, he persisted in the godlessness which so characterized his life.

Popular folk singer Arlo Guthrie told the story that it was while he transporting a cargo of slaves to England, a severe storm struck and the ship was in danger of capsizing. With the threat of death very real, he gave his life to the Lord and was convicted about the evils of slavery. So he immediately turned the ship around and returned the slaves to Africa where he released them. When he returned to England, he wrote the words to Amazing Grace and later joined forces with Wilbur Wilberforce in speaking out against the evils of slavery.

It's a great story of grace and a changed life. Unfortunately, much of it is myth. Newton was the captain of a slave trader. He did live a wild life. He was converted during a storm at sea. And he did become a strong voice alongside of Wilbur Wilberforce helping put an end to slavery in England. But many of the other things are inaccurate.

He did not captain a slave trader until after he was saved. He remained blind to the evils of slavery till much later. And he didn't speak out against slavery for many, many years, until his friend Wilberforce, finally convinced him of the need to speak out against it. And he didn't immediately release slaves after his conversion and the return to England to wrote the song.

It was years later, after he became a priest, that he wrote Amazing Grace as he was preparing to preach on January 1, 1773, based on a passage from 1 Chronicles 17:16-17 where David prayed, *"Then King David went in and sat before the LORD, and he said: 'Who am I, LORD God, and what is my family, that you have brought me this far? And as if this were not enough in your sight, my God, you have spoken about the future of the house of your servant. You, LORD God, have looked on me as though I were the most exalted of men.'"* (1 Chronicles 17:16–17)

Some criticized and questioned the faith of a man who continued to trade in slaves after he claimed to encounter the Lord

Yet that experience on the ship wasn't the totality of his salvation, but a step along the way God continued to work in his heart and life over a period of time to convict and transform, just as he will do in ours

Whether it manifests itself all at once or over a period of time like Jacob for whom God had been working for more than 20 years preparing him for the Jabbok, salvation is a process

God works in our lives to draw and prepare us to receive him.

Once we do, it doesn't end there, he continues to draw us ever closer, shaping our lives to better reflect him so that when others see us, our love and grace, compassion and mercy and forgiveness, they too may see the face of God.

Whether it's in church or out in nature, at work or at play, on a certain day or over time, we all need to reach our own Jabbok, that place where we do open our hearts to the Lord and in faith invite him in to be our Lord and our savior and forgive all our sin.

If God has been at work drawing you to himself, perhaps today would be that day.
What is holding you back?

if there is someone you have been praying for, someone you have been trying to share your faith with that hasn't been willing to accept the Lord, take heart, God may still be at work behind the scenes preparing their hearts for him to come in