

The Jesus Stick

I have a Jesus Stick.

More specifically, I have a tall, beautifully carved staff that Lauren *calls* my Jesus stick.

The whole concept of my Jesus Stick is rooted in The Lion King – the original from 25 years ago. See, when I was younger and first saw it, one of my favorite parts was when Rafiki (the baboon) hits Simba (the protagonist lion) on the head with his staff. One of my friends and I used to joke about this part *all the time* but especially when someone did something that we thought was, well, stupid. That's because Rafiki hits Simba with his stick when the young lion is dithering about whether or not to go back and help out his former kingdom, which is suffering under the oppressive rule of the power-hungry Scar. To my friend and me it seemed like Rafiki was basically saying, "You *idiot!* How could you even *consider not* going back!" (Having recently re-watched this clip, I realize that's actually a mis-remembering of the story, but for two and a half decades, that's how I thought about it).

When I first told Lauren the story about my call to ministry – about the day that I was in my dad's kitchen crying about wasting four years on a major I didn't love and not knowing what to do with my life and my atheist father had then suggested that I give ministry a try – I said that it felt like I'd been whacked over the head with God's Jesus Stick. That the divine was basically (and lovingly) saying, "You adorable, precious idiot, what do I need to do to knock some sense into you? Try being a pastor!"

Thus, the Jesus Stick was born. The fact that I have an actual staff is just a fun coincidence. We refer to the idea of the Jesus Stick in those moments when we feel like someone (usually a politician or prominent church leader) needs a strong reminder of who Jesus

was and what he preached and how he called us to act as disciples. We've been referring to the Jesus Stick a lot recently.

And I found myself wondering if Jacob wrestling with God was actually a kind of Jesus Stick moment too.

In case you're like me and might have forgotten some of the details of this Jacob-reuniting-with-Esau story, here's what you need to know: many years earlier, Jacob and Esau were born to Isaac and Rebecca as twins. Esau was the elder of the two. That means that he should have gotten his father's judicial authority, leadership of the family, and a double portion of his father's inheritance. But Jacob tricks him out of this privilege, which is called a birthright. *Then* to make matters worse, Jacob also manages to deceive his father (who is near-death and quite blind) into blessing him as the heir in Esau's place. All of this, understandably, damages Jacob's relationship with his brother. When Jacob leaves to establish his own family, he's certain that if he ever sees Esau again, the elder brother will kill him in revenge.

So fast forward a bit, and Jacob – with his two wives, the two female slaves with whom he's had children, and all of his children, servants, slaves, animals, and possessions – has to leave his father-in-law's land. God tells Jacob to return to the land of his ancestors and his father, and God says, "I will be with you." That's an important part. God promises to be with Jacob.

So all of that brings us to this chapter that we read this morning. They're all about to enter Jacob's family's land – which is where Esau is living. You can feel the tension rising, right? So Jacob sends some slaves ahead (imagine how excited they must have been) to see how Esau's going to take this. And the slaves come back and say, "Esau's coming to meet you with 400 men." Now I'm curious about this. Did they *know* that Esau was coming in peace (because

he was – you learn that in the next chapter)? Did they just want to scare Jacob because he'd put their lives in danger? We never know. All we know is what Jacob hears: your brother, whom you cheated out of land and power and wealth, is coming to meet you with 400 men. Good luck. So, understandably, Jacob thinks he's about to be attacked. Jacob thinks that he and his family are all about to die. Imagine the *terror*. The absolute, stop-you-in-your-tracks terror.

Now, most of us probably haven't been in *quite* this position. Most of us haven't experienced moments when we've been afraid that our entire existence would be destroyed. But we might understand *something* of what he was feeling – and what his wives and children and slaves might have been feeling. We've been in situations where we felt like life as we knew it was about to end – whether because of death or tragedy or change or failure or divorce. We've been in situations where we felt terror and grief and deep, deep anxiety. We've been in situations where we were certain that everything that we held dear was about to fall apart. So we might understand *something* of what was happening in Jacob's relationship with God.

I imagine that there was some real wrestling going on. Long before this incident at the side of the river, I imagine that Jacob was screaming at God about this crazy thing that was happening. After all, God was the one who said to go back home. God was the one who suggested this move. And now they've arrived, and it looks like a complete set-up for everyone to die. What's up with that, Lord?! What happened to that promise to be present, to go with the family? That's the wrestling that I imagine was happening – and that took on physical form that night beside the river.

Now enter the Jesus Stick.

It starts, for me, with a wondering about what the silent characters in this passage were thinking – the women, the children, the slaves. I wonder if they were actually *less* afraid than

Jacob. I wonder if they heard, “He’s coming to meet you with 400 men,” and thought, *what a nice welcoming party*. Or, if they weren’t entirely there, I wonder if they at least thought it was *possible* that Jacob was wrong in his assessment of the situation. Regardless of whether they were afraid or not, I imagine that they were praying that God would knock some sense into this patriarch – that God would convince him to either take them somewhere else where they might not be in danger or help him to relax and trust in the promise that God had made to him.

And God *does*! God shows up in a physical, tangible, touchable way, and God knocks some sense into Jacob. And maybe not in the way you’re thinking – not by hurting his hip, which is really thrown in there to explain part of the Jewish dietary laws, but by giving him a blessing. *That’s* the Jesus Stick in this story.

Why? Because in the Hebrew Scriptures, blessings mean something very particular. Blessings were power-filled pronouncements, usually by God or someone ordained by God, that *gave life* to the recipient. It might be life in the form of offspring or wealth or crops or health or even something else...but it was *life*. So Jacob is asking for this being with whom he’s wrestling to give him *life* – and God *does*. The Lord interrupts Jacob’s anxiety by showing up and offering him life – which God had, in fact, already promised him earlier in the story.

Think about the story in these terms – a time of anxiety or terror when we forget all divine promises, wrestling with God in some way, and then (even if we only recognize it in hindsight – like me in my call story) getting whacked with the Jesus stick of God showing up and offering us life. The more I thought about it, the more I realized just how frequently this happens in the Bible. There’s Hagar crying out in the desert because she doesn’t want to watch Ishmael die – and God shows up in an angel with water for them. There’s Hannah crying out in the temple because she’s being abused because she can’t have children – and God shows up through

the (initially clumsy) words of the prophet Eli. And there's the Samaritan woman at the well who's the outcast of her community. We don't hear it, but I would wager that she was wrestling with God – and God shows up in the person of Jesus offering her streams of living water. And there are so many more instances that we could name involving Moses (who gets a burning bush) and the prophets (who get things like dreams and rain and even stillness) and Jesus (who gets the resurrection) and the early church (which gets a hurricane-force wind and fire and the collective distribution of wealth). God shows up in physical, tangible, touchable ways, offering *life*, reminding people of the divine promises!

The witness of scripture, friends, is that God shows up, and God offers blessing – God offers *life*. In the midst of our fear, our anxiety, our terror, God shows up. In the midst of our wrestling, God shows up. In the midst of everything seeming like it's falling apart, God shows up, and God offers life. Perhaps it's obvious sometimes – perhaps sometimes it's kind of like a burning bush or a rushing wind that we can't ignore. Perhaps some of us have that spiritual gift that makes it easy to recognize. But most of the time I think God shows up in the most unlikely and even almost-unrecognizable of ways like through the words of my atheist father or in wrestling with a stranger or through something that looks a whole lot more like a cross and tomb than the pathway to resurrection. And that's why we need each other. We need this community to remind us of the truth that God shows up. We need this community to help us recognize how God might be giving us life. We need this community to stand with us in hope on our most anxious and painful of days, to wrestle with us, and to help us to see and hear and feel the divine so that we can look back and proclaim, "That. That is how God blessed me. That is how God gave me life. That is the moment when God whacked me with the Jesus stick. Thanks be to God!"