

(Genesis 32:22-31 NRSV)

<sup>22</sup> 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. <sup>23</sup> He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. <sup>24</sup> Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. <sup>25</sup> 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. <sup>26</sup> Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." <sup>27</sup> So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." <sup>28</sup> 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." <sup>29</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup> So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." <sup>31</sup> The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

Copyright © 2001 by Dudley C. Rose. All rights reserved.

The scripture quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

## Of Stones, Wrestling Matches, and a New Creation

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Date: August 4, 2002

Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: Genesis 32:22-31

Tomorrow I go to live for awhile in the “shack.” If living in a shack sounds a bit romantic, then you have it just right. It is a romantic place, and it comes to me by way of a romantic story.

My grandmother Tink, as she was called from her childhood, was the eldest daughter in a large itinerant farming family. Tink’s parents, my grandparents Ed and Maude Bellows moved their family often, working from farm to farm in the hills of southern Vermont and northwestern Massachusetts. Finally, Maude and Ed scraped together the funds to buy a farm in the craggy foothills of the Berkshires. The winters were hard, the fields were full of stones and the side-hill slopes were a menace. But it was a place called home.

It came to pass, as it mostly does, that my grandmother grew from a child into a woman, met the man of her life, and married him. This was all according to normal and reasonable plan, except for one small flaw. Tink married a man from town, who knew nothing of farming. He didn’t know about the sweet smell of new-mown hay. He didn’t know the summer light show and concert of the fireflies and the cicadas. He didn’t know the solitude granted by nearly a mile to the nearest house. He knew town lights and streetcars and neighbors next door.

Maude and Ed winced. They could not bear their daughter to be bereft of the hill country. And so, they carved out a small piece of the farm. To this small piece of the farm they dragged an old corn shed, boarded up its sides, and placed a few windows, a door and a stone fireplace in it. And then they gave it to the new bride and groom, a place to retreat from town. It was the shack, as it has ever after been called.

Tink and her husband Clem spent most summers at the shack. They spent Clem’s vacations there, and when Clem wasn’t on vacation, he commuted. The shack grew by another room before I ever saw it. The new room was an all-purpose kitchen, dining room, sitting room, and my bedroom when I visited. And I visited many, many times. I was the oldest grand child, and so the apple of my grandmother’s eye from the beginning. I loved her, too. We were soul-mates in many ways. Indeed, perhaps what endeared me to my grandmother more than the privilege of birthright was that I loved the shack as much as she did. I would lay on the old wooden bed with its straw mattress, survey the rough barn board walls and say, “O Grammy, when I grow up, I want to live in a house that is just like the shack.” I had no idea how much my love of the shack warmed her heart.

Copyright © 2001 by Dudley C. Rose. All rights reserved.

The scripture quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Years passed, and much changed. I became a man. I built a house. And the house bore little resemblance to the shack. It had plumbing and Sheetrock walls and hardwood floors. It was a house a man would build and the bank would mortgage, not the house of a young boy's dreams.

But then one day, several years ago, without even telling me, Tink conveyed the shack to me, while she retained her rights to it for the duration of her life. Tink passed away a couple of years ago, and Gerry and I have spent the last year or so adding some amenities and getting the shack ready to use. So you see, it is a romantic story. Tomorrow night, I will live in the shack, just as the young boy I once was had hoped, even if it is only for vacation time. For it turns out that, like Tink and Clem, I have taken up residence in town.

I have told you this story so that you might have some picture of the shack in mind, and some picture, also, of the relationship between a young curious boy and his grandmother. For now, with the scene set, I want to tell you more of the story.

The shack sits up on a slope, and it looks down on an old country way named East Buckland Road. I recall looking down at the road one day and asking Gramma Tink, "Gramma, why is the road so bumpy?" This was a pretty good question. East Buckland Road wasn't just a little bumpy. It had huge protruding humps wherever you looked. If you didn't drive pretty slowly, and aim carefully, too, you would hit your car on bottom.

Gramma Tink's eyes lit up at the question. "Well," she said, "it's a very interesting story. Do you really want to know?"

I nodded earnestly.

"Well it goes like this. When I was a little girl and lived up the way on the farm, there were no cars." I was sure that was an exaggeration. No cars? Right! But I let it go.

Gramma Tink saw the doubt, and patiently continued, "In those days no one had cars. We walked. And we also used horses. In the summer the horses would pull buggies, and in the winter they would pull sleighs." My mind conjured up a scene from Currier and Ives.

"In the winter," Tink went on, "they didn't plow the roads. Oh no! Horses pulled great heavy rollers and packed the snow down tight. It made a smooth, hard, icy surface, and the sleighs glided along on the frozen hard-top." I sat up. This was so cool. I imagined being allowed to sled on the highway. Gramma continued, "We used to take our sleds out and slide down the glazed roads faster than the wind.

"But, there was a problem," she said. "In the spring when the snow and ice melted, all that rolled snow made the road so muddy you couldn't get over it."

"What did you do, then, Gramma?" I wondered.

"Well, it was pretty difficult," she answered. "But the farmers used have the horses haul great big rocks into the mud. After enough boulders, the rocks would steady the mud, and you could get over it with a buggy. Now," she said, "years went by, we all got cars, and they paved the roads. But there was one thing nobody counted on. The boulders didn't stay put. It was like they were trying to climb out of the road. And they still are. Underneath it freezes and thaws and

freezes, and the old boulders just get squeezed up, and they make the road full of those humps you see.”

I was mesmerized by the story. But then I thought of something. I said, “You know what Grammy? That’s pretty funny. A long time ago they put the rocks in the road to make it smooth. And now today the rocks are making the road bumpy.” And we both laughed right out loud.

That old road in Buckland got me thinking. You know, I bet there are a lot of things like that. Things that are used to make the road smooth, but then, later on, they push up to the surface, and make big humps in the road.

In this morning’s passage we meet Jacob at the river Jabbok. Jacob has had a fabulously successful life. Both his mother and he himself made sure the way was smooth. When Isaac and Rebekah had twins, Esau was born first, just before Jacob. Esau, by right, would have been the heir to most of the family’s wealth. In addition, as the first-born Esau he would have received his father’s blessing just prior to Isaac’s death. Both the birthright and the blessing were important and sacred privileges in the ancient near east.

But one day when Esau came in from the field famished, Jacob took advantage of him. Esau was starving, and Jacob agreed to give his brother food only if Esau would turn over his birthright. So, under duress, Esau gave the first of his privileges away. Years later, when Isaac was near death and blind, he called for Esau. Old Isaac was ready to bless his first-born in accordance with the practice of the day. But Rebekah, who preferred Jacob, told Jacob to dress in a way that Isaac would think he was Esau. Jacob made himself seem as Esau to his old blind father and stole Esau’s blessing.

Twice by deceit Jacob took what was not his. But the things he took made his road smooth. For Jacob had wealth and blessing. Of course, he also had a brother who promised to kill him, and so Jacob fled. But Jacob was blessed, indeed. He was sent to family in Paddan-aram. There he married two wives. He had a dozen children by them and their maids. Jacob grew wealthy working for his father-in-law. And finally, he fled there, too, taking his wealth with him, and leaving his father-in-law behind. More rocks smoothing Jacob’s way.

But Finally Jacob longs to return home. He heads south on the long journey to Bethel. And as he approaches home, the stones that have smoothed his way begin to rumble in his belly. Even though Jacob is wealthy and powerful, he is also full of fear and regret. Not since he cheated him and fled has Jacob seen Esau. When they last faced each other, Esau promised to revenge Jacob’s fraud. The stones that once made his path smooth are churning in his insides.

We join Jacob in this morning’s passage just as he sends his family and everyone else across the river Jabbok. And Jacob prepares to spend the night alone with an indigestion of boulders.

And that night, all night, Jacob wrestled. With whom did Jacob wrestle? The text doesn’t really tell us. He wrestled with someone. Was it God? Was it himself? Was it his conscience and his trepidation? Was it the stones grinding at his intestines, trying to burst out? Probably it was with all of these. For the wrestling match that Jacob engaged in that night was the wrestling match to reclaim his life. It was the wrestling match he needed to be in so that he

Copyright © 2001 by Dudley C. Rose. All rights reserved.

The scripture quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

could excavate those old stones that once smoothed his way and were now erupting within him. Jacob came to that moment in life when the ways that had worked reasonably well in his life were now catching up to him. They didn't work anymore. They were now but a source of pain and agony. They had become his demons. On that night Jacob contained a wrestling match between his demons and his conscience, between his demons and his true self, between his demons and God.

And when he awoke, Jacob was not defeated. He was tired. His hip was out of joint. He walked with a limp from that day forward. The stones had left their scars. But they had not done him in.

The irony is that Jacob's road was not perfectly smooth from here forward. There would be family tragedy and loss. There would be famines and pestilence. But Jacob from this day forward faced these things directly. He did not turn to lies or subterfuge, he did not seek wealth to smooth his way, and he did not presume that blessing would keep him from harm. But from that day forward, limp and all, Jacob was the leader of Israel. And though the road had no buried rocks to smooth it, it also had no buried rocks to push and fracture it either.

This story of Jacob is an invitation of sorts. It is an invitation to take an inventory of your insides. What stones reside there, causing you indigestion. Maybe deceit, or maybe more modest coping mechanisms. Have you put in stones to smooth your way in life? Have you ever chased after getting everyone to like you, thinking that would make your life smooth? That's a stone. Have you ever chased after money or success or recognition so that your life would be smooth? That's a stone. Have you ever longed for just the right job or the right love or enough resources to do everything you ever wanted to do, sure that they would make for a smooth ride? That's a stone. Have you ever just lost yourself in alcohol or depression or couch potatoing thinking you could distract yourself from life's bumps? That's a stone. Have you ever burned with hatred, believing that if the world were but rid of your enemies, all would be well? That's a stone. Have you ever thought that only those like yourself, who believed the same things you do, who worship in the same way you do, are the ones who will have a smooth road? That's a stone. O Lord, many of us have a belly full of stones grinding their way to the surface.

But there is good news. The good news is this. You can wrestle with these stones. It may be hard. It may leave its scars. You may limp a bit. But this I can tell you for sure, the difficulty, the scars and the limp will be small compared to the destruction that the stones will do if they stay there. But you can wrestle with the stones, like Jacob did. And if you do that, I will guarantee you that your life will be better than whatever smooth, superhighway you were trying to make.

Tomorrow I go back to the shack. It is the first time in many, many years. But I have already seen that the road has been fixed. It was hard. It took a lot of time and effort. But the boulders were pulled out, and placed along the roadside. A good foundation was put in, and the road no longer threatens to tear the traveler apart. Is the road super smooth? No it is not. And I wouldn't like it that way, either. It's just a nice country road for a man who lives in town to drive on, and to remember its history, and to look at the boulders now sitting on the side of the

Copyright © 2001 by Dudley C. Rose. All rights reserved.

The scripture quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

road, out of harm's way. And one day, I imagine, I will tell my grandchildren the story of how they got there. And maybe one day they will remember the story and think of the wrestling matches they have had with God and with the rocks. And maybe they will be glad for the new creation the struggle has made of them. That is my prayer. Amen.

Copyright © 2001 by Dudley C. Rose. All rights reserved.

The scripture quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission. All rights reserved.