

“Wrestling with God—God vs. Jacob”

For the last three weeks we’ve been taking a detailed look at one of our key spiritual ancestors, Jacob. He’s the father of the nation of Israel and his story is so important that in the book of Genesis, his story is 25 chapters, half the book.

Let me remind you a little bit about that story before we jump into the next part of his story today. Jacob was born a twin to Isaac and Rebecca. The twin boys fought with each other in their mother’s womb, that would set the stage for a big part of their lives. The firstborn son, by just a few minutes, was named Esau when he was born because he was covered with hair—Esau means hairy. Jacob was born just after him grabbing Esau’s heel. Jacob means grabber, or heel puller, which also meant trickster, or deceiver.

Jacob lived into his name. At the age of around 18 he duped his older brother out of his inheritance for a bowl of stew. When the brothers were around 40, Jacob tricks his father Isaac into giving him Esau’s deathbed blessing. Jacob pretended to be Esau and stole the blessing. This was a very big deal. When Esau finds out he swears to kill Jacob.

Rebecca, their mother, sends Jacob away to the Old Country for his safety and to find a wife, start a family. In the Old Country, Jacob meets a beautiful woman named Rachel, they fall in love. He offers to work for Rachel’s father for 7 years in order to get her hand in marriage. Her father, Laban agrees and after 7 years of work, it’s time to get married. But Laban pulls a dirty trick. On the wedding day Laban substitutes his older daughter Leah for Rachel and Jacob ends up marrying her instead.

Jacob confronts Laban and says, “What have you done to me?” Laban says, “Well this is how we do it here. You marry the older one and then you get the younger one. If you agree to give me 7 more years of work and I’ll let you marry the one you really want in a week.” The trickster gets tricked. In that span of one week he gets two wives and spends 14 years of his life working for their father.

They begin having a family and ultimately they have 12 boys and 1 girl between the two sisters and their handmaids. Jacob ends up working another 6 years to earn his flocks of sheep from Laban. So for 20 years he’s been working for Laban and Jacob has been very successful as a farmer and shepherd. Laban starts to get jealous of Jacob’s success and how his flocks have grown. Friction builds between them and Jacob decides that it’s best to leave the Old Country and head back home. He takes with him his wives, his kids, his servants, his flocks and heads back to the land of Canaan. He’s heading back home and he’s going to be forced to encounter his brother Esau.

And that’s where we find ourselves today. You might call this scene **Terrifying News**. We’re going to start in Genesis chapter 32, read along in your Bible if you like. Let me set the scene a little bit. Jacob is going home, he knows that his brother has sworn to kill him. But he knows he has to go home. He’s got to cross the Jabbok River and that is an important dividing line. He’s crossing in Esau’s territory and he is afraid. Here’s how it starts to unfold. **“Jacob sent messengers ahead of him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom. He instructed them: ‘This is what you are to say to my lord Esau: “Your servant Jacob says, I have been staying with Laban and have remained there till now. I have cattle and donkeys, sheep and goats, male and female servants. Now I am sending this message to my lord, that I may find favor in your eyes.”’ When the messengers returned to Jacob, they said, ‘We went to your brother Esau, and now he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him.’ In great fear and distress Jacob divided the people who were with him into two groups, and the flocks and herds and camels as well. He thought, ‘If Esau comes and attacks one group, the group that is left may escape.’” (Genesis 32:3-8).**

Notice a few things here. Gone is the cocky kid who was always trying to call all the shots. Jacob no longer believes that the whole world revolves around him. He’s going to try to make amends for what he did wrong in the past. And twice he calls his brother Esau “my lord.” When Jacob stole Esau’s birthright and blessing, Jacob technically became master and lord over his brother. But Jacob is reversing that. He’s saying, “Esau, I’m giving you back the blessing that I stole from you. You are my lord and I am your servant.”

But when Jacob hears that Esau is coming with 400 men, he knows that this is a fighting force. It’s a small army. And there is no way that Jacob and his servants can withstand the onslaught of these 400 men

led by an angry brother who wants to kill him. Jacob is terrified that he and his wives, and his children, and his servants, are all going to be massacred.

This is the most frightening moment of Jacob's life. And he doesn't know how it's going to turn out. But he comes up with a plan. And his plan is to divide up his family, his servants, his flocks. Leah and her kids and servants and half the flocks are going to go one way. Rachel and her children and servants and the other half of the flocks are going to go the other way. He's thinking, "If I divide everything up then if those 400 fighting men come to slaughter us at least one half of my family will escape."

Can you feel the fear here? He's planning for which half of his family is going to live and which half is going to die. Jacob is terrified.

Now, after he makes this plan to save half of his family, then he prays. We have his prayer right here in Genesis chapter 32. **"Then Jacob prayed, 'O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, LORD, you who said to me, 'Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper,' I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two camps. Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children. But you have said, 'I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted'"" (Genesis 32:9-12).**

In the moments of his distress Jacob does two things. He acts, and he prays. He doesn't just pray and wait for God to take care of things. He doesn't just act and ignore God. He takes action and he prays. And that's a great example of what we should do. When we're facing dire circumstances, we pray and plan. We act as if it all depended on us and we pray as if it all depended on God. Somewhere in the midst of all of that we're counting on the fact that we're going to be delivered. This is what Jacob's doing.

It's something we can do to. In the midst of our anxiety we miss out on something powerful when we don't take the time to pray. When we're afraid, we go to God in prayer. We act and plan. When you get a terrifying diagnosis, you take action. You go see the best doctors you can. AND you pray. If you lose your job. You take action trying to find another job, you network, you send out resumes. AND you pray. We act and we pray.

There are times when I've been afraid, or filled with anxiety about something. And as I take those times to God in prayer, almost without fail, I experience peace. And often a I experience some kind of break through.

After Jacob prays an idea comes to his mind. And this is how it works with us a lot of the time. When we pray we want God to come down himself and fix whatever it is that needs fixing. But it doesn't work that way very often. How it works in my life is that I pray, then I try to listen, then sometime after that a thought will come to mind, an idea. Or somebody else has an idea that addresses the need.

In this case Jacob has the thought, "I'm going to let my brother know how sorry I am for what I've done. So I'm going to send a large part of my flocks to him as a gift to him. He starts by sending 200 female goats and 20 male goats with a servant. The servant is to take the flock to Esau and say, "This is a gift to you from your servant Jacob."

The about an hour later he sends about 200 sheep and 20 rams with a servant who says, "This is a gift from your servant Jacob." Then he sends 30 camels, 40 cows, 10 bulls, and 30 donkeys. Every hour he sends another group of animals with a servant and the same message. "This is a gift from your servant Jacob."

He's trying to show his brother that he really is sorry. And here's what else he's doing: Jacob is returning the birthright that he had take. There's \$100,000 worth of animals he's sending to Esau as a way of saying, "I recognize that I did wrong, I took the birthright from you, please receive it back; with interest. I took our father's blessing from you, but I give that blessing back. You are my lord and I am your servant." This idea came after he prayed! What's going on in your life right now that's causing anxiety, fear, pressure, stress? Are you praying and are you listening. Because chances are God wants to offer you ideas, help and peace. We pray and we act.

Finally when this is finished Jacob sends his family across the river and he stays behind on the banks of the river that night all by himself. And that leads us to the next scene. **The Wrestler.** This is one of the most powerful parts of Jacob's story and it's literally a defining moment for Jacob and all his descendants. As

Christians, that's us. This is a defining moment for all of us. But the scene is a little confusing so let's look at it carefully.

This is 32:24-30. **“So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob’s hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, ‘Let me go, for it is daybreak.’ But Jacob replied, ‘I will not let you go unless you bless me.’ The man asked him, ‘What is your name?’ ‘Jacob,’ he answered. Then the man said, ‘Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome.’ Jacob said, ‘Please tell me your name.’ But he replied, ‘Why do you ask my name?’ Then he blessed him there. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, ‘It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared’” (32:24-30).**

What a cool story! Jacob is around 70 years old. He's all by himself on the banks of the Jabbok River and a man comes to wrestle him. This man wrestles with Jacob all night long! Who is this man? Jacob believes the man is God. That God comes and wrestles with him all night long. This night of Jacob's greatest terror, his darkest moment, God wrestles with him.

What's going on here? I believe this literally happened, but it's also a metaphor for the rest of us because every single one of us in this room wrestles with God from time to time. We wrestle with God at those times when we know what we want to do, and that's not necessarily what we think God wants us to do, so we wrestle. And sometimes we wrestle with God and he prevails, he wins. Sometimes we run away. Sometimes we know what God wants us to avoid and we do it anyway, sometimes it's something we know God wants us to do and we don't do it.

But that's not the only way we wrestle with God. We wrestle with God when we're disappointed with God. When that person you love so very much, and you've prayed for, and everybody you know is praying for, and they died anyway. Or some profound disappointment in your life, or something tragic happens to you. At those moments you wrestle, you pound at God's chest and say, “Why?! Why did you not help me? Why did you not save me?” We wrestle with God in those moments. But listen, wrestling with God at those times is actually an act of faith. Pounding on God's chest is still contact with God. And we know that at some point after all that pounding, and anger, and tears, we fall into his arms again.

And sometimes our wrestling with God is about whether we're going to trust him or even believe in him. Sometimes, God seems conspicuous by his absence. “Where are you? Are you even there? Are you a figment of my imagination?” “Can I trust you in the midst of this dark time? That you're actually going to help me and deliver me because I don't see you doing anything yet.” And in those cases, wrestling with God is holding on and refusing to let go of God. This is what's happening with Jacob that night. Jacob could wake up the next morning and find his family, and himself slaughtered. And he's wrestling with God all night long and he refuses to let go. That is an act of faith.

Here, at Jacob's darkest moment, his lowest moment, God came as a man and wrestled with him. This points to what happened in Jesus Christ. Because we believe that in Jesus, God was actually born into this world; experienced everything we experience. And that he came to wrestle—Jesus was the wrestler! He wrestled with those who are lost, and who had run away—he was wrestling them back to God. He wrestled with the pious religious people who didn't quite get it and he was showing them their hypocrisy. Jesus was wrestling as he hung on the cross. Wrestling with sin, and death, and evil, and hate.

And then there came the moment on the cross where it looked like he was pinned to the mat and the referee was counting down, “One, two, three...” It looked like the match was over. But on the third day, on the third day the wrestler sprang to life. And he became the victor and he pinned death, and sin, and evil to the mat. He was the victor. He was the wrestler and he wrestles with us our whole lives.

This man who wrestles with Jacob, God in human form, you've got to wonder about this because it says that this man could not prevail over Jacob. Really? God couldn't beat an ordinary man in his 70's? I mean, how long could it take God to do a serious smack down? Except for God it was a little different.

My girls have always loved to wrestle with me. And like every dad I put up a pretty good fight and they'll wrestle me to the ground pin me down and think they have me. “We've got you daddy! We've got you!” And then I'll just pick them up and carry them around and pretend that I can't find them. Who has who? When Jacob wrestled with God, did Jacob have God, or did God have Jacob? All that time Jacob thought he was wrestling, God was teaching him. He's saying, “I'm not going to let you go. I'm just not.”

Another interesting piece of this story is when the man, God, says to Jacob, "What is your name?" Did God not know his name? Of course God knew his name! But he's going to make Jacob say it. "My name is deceiver, my name is trickster, that's my name. I'm the one who pulls the leg." And God says to him, "That was your name. But not anymore. From this time forward your name will be Israel. Which means, 'He wrestles with God.'"

Maybe God is ready to give you a new name too. Maybe you've been a deceiver, or maybe your name is anger, or bitterness, or selfish, or loneliness. Listen, God's ready to give you a new name. One that reflects a new you. If you're not who you long to be, God can change it. As Jacob became the man that God calls him to be, he gets a new name. What might that be for you? Faithful, true, strong, powerful, pure, righteous? As you wrestle with God, new things happen. You are Israel. That's my prayer of you.

Now we get to the big scene here, **Jacob meets Esau**. It's morning now. Jacob has sent his gifts over to Esau, he's sent his family over the river, now Jacob crosses the river himself. The family is divided and there in the middle is the 400 fighting men coming to meet them. Jacob can see the dust gathering in the air. The old Jacob might have run at that point. But that's not what happened.

Instead Jacob goes ahead of his family now. He's wrestled with God and he trusts that somehow God will prevail and he goes ahead of everybody else. He goes to Esau, bows down and presents his head to Esau. It's way of saying, "If you're going to kill me, then do it now." It says it this way in 33:3. **"Jacob 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" (33:3).**

This is a story about reconciliation. These two brothers had not spoken for 20 years. There had been no attempts at making apologies or restitution in the past. Jacob realizes, with a little help from God, that it's time to make things right. Jacob is teaching us that it's never too late to make things right. There are some of you in this room who have not spoken with your mother or your father in 20 years. You haven't spoken with a brother or a sister. There's a friend that you used to love and they betrayed you and you haven't talked to them in 20 years. You've held a grudge all this time.

Or maybe you wronged somebody else. You were the one, and you didn't think you did anything wrong so you didn't apologize. So for 20 years, or 10, or 5 or 6 months you've not spoken. Jacob is teaching us that there comes a point at which we go and express our desire to make things right.

Another thing we learn from Jacob is that if you're going to apologize, don't be wimpy about it. Be extravagant in your apology. Go over and above in saying, "I'm sorry for what I did and I was a fool and I know I hurt you and I didn't mean to and this is my way of saying that I am so, so sorry." 20 years is not too long. You can still be restored.

And then there's Esau. Esau is a picture for us of what God calls us to be and to do. He shows us mercy toward his brother, even though Jacob didn't deserve it. That mercy was coming whether Jacob had sent those 550 animals or not. Those 400 men with Esau weren't there to fight, they were the moving company! They were there to help move Jacob and his family back home. How amazing was that! Esau teaches us about mercy and how to show it. Jacob says to Esau, **"...to see your face is like seeing the face of God..." (33:10)**. Esau is a picture of God's mercy, and God's grace, and God's forgiveness. Jacob sees the face of God in this mercy. In Jesus we see that same face of mercy. The face of God that welcomes us home, even when we might expect wrath, or punishment, instead we receive welcome and love. That's the face of God when you or I have wandered away. God's always ready to throw his arms around us when we come home. Because that's who God is.

There's a lot here in this story that probably is relevant to your life. Maybe for you it's that when trouble comes, we act and we pray. Maybe it's that it's an act of faith to wrestle with God and we don't give up. Maybe it's about mercy toward others and God's mercy toward us. Jacob's story, is our story. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I thank Rev. Adam Hamilton, Senior Pastor of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection, for his resources in this message.