

Wrestling with God
Genesis 32:24-28
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This fall we've been focusing on pivotal moments in the relationship between God and humankind, or turning points in the people's understanding of that relationship. First, we heard the story of the Creation, God's creation of us in God's own image, and God's challenge to us to steward Creation on God's behalf. Next, we heard the story of the great flood and God's determination, symbolized by the rainbow, to love and care for us forever, regardless of how far we go astray. Last week, we heard the story of God's call to Abraham, and God's promise to make of him a great nation, through whom all the people of the earth would be blessed. Today we hear the story of Jacob, Abraham and Sarah's grandson. This story is one of my favorites. This is another pivotal moment, the turning point in Jacob's life, and it is the origin of the name "Israel."

Let's take a long running start at this story: Jacob is the son of Isaac and Rebekah, so he is the grandson of Abraham and Sarah. Jacob is a twin. He is the second born, after Esau, and he comes into this world holding onto his brother's heel. The boys had fought with each other *in utero* to the point that Rebekah wished herself dead, and they fight desperately with each other as adults. They are not identical twins. In fact, they are about as different as they can be. Esau, the older one, is an outdoor, sporty type. He is straightforward and physical. Jacob, the younger one, is quieter, less active. He is always thinking of a way to get ahead without having to do the work. In fact, his name, Jacob, means "cheater" or "deceiver." Now, I think I would have liked Esau better, but Jacob is his mother's favorite. And that explains a lot right there. Rebekah plays favorites, and Jacob cheats to get what he wants.

One day, Jacob is cooking some lentil stew, and Esau is out hunting. Esau comes home starving. In fact, to hear Esau tell it, he is starving literally to death. He asks Jacob for some of the stew, but Jacob doesn't show any brotherly charity. Instead, he says, "Give me your birthright, and I'll give you some stew." A birthright was a double share of the estate when his father died, and the right to lead the family in the next generation. Esau figures his birthright won't be worth much to him if he's dead, so he agrees, and Jacob gives him a nice big bowl of the stew. Apparently neither boy tells the parents about this deal they have made.

Now fast-forward a few years. Their father, Isaac, is old and blind. He wants to give his oldest son Esau his blessing before he dies, and he wants to make a nice occasion of it. So, he asks Esau to go hunting and bring back some game to make Isaac's favorite meal, a really spicy dish – another stew. Off Esau goes. Rebekah overhears this conversation, so while Esau is gone, she schemes with Jacob to get the blessing for her favorite son. She makes a spicy stew using a couple of goats they have out in the pen. Then she helps Jacob dress up in Esau's clothes, so he will smell right to his blind father. She puts the goat skins on Jacob's arms so he will feel hairy like Esau, and she sends him in to Isaac with the spicy stew. Old, blind Isaac is indeed fooled by all this trickery, and he gives his blessing to Jacob by mistake. Jacob the cheater. Jacob the deceiver. True to his name.

Later, Esau returns with the game he has killed, and he cooks it up into the spicy stew his father likes. When Esau brings it to Isaac, everyone suddenly realizes that Jacob has already tricked Isaac out of the blessing. Esau is furious! He swears he will kill Jacob, and he means it! But with Rebekah's help, Jacob runs off to hide in Haran, with Rebekah's brother, Jacob's uncle Laban.

Jacob stays there in Haran for 20 years or so. During that time, Jacob is involved in even more cheating and trickery. Laban cheats Jacob, and Jacob cheats Laban right back. Cheating for wives, cheating for livestock, cheating for possessions. Jacob ends up married to two of his cousins, both of them Laban's daughters, and he works away on his father-in-law's farm, becoming wealthy both by his own labor and also – naturally – by trickery. Still, despite Jacob's growing wealth, this is not his own farm. It's Laban's, and that irks him. Enough is enough. The time has come. So, Jacob sets out with all his household and his flocks (and some of Laban's flocks, and, well, most of the Laban family silver) to return to the land of Canaan where he grew up.

Now, Jacob has to know that this decision will eventually bring him face-to-face with Esau, and the Bible says he's scared to death of what Esau will do. Before he gets to Canaan, Jacob learns that Esau is coming with 400 men. That's more than you need for a family reunion. Esau must still be nursing that homicidal rage. Jacob's whole life hangs in the balance, so he schemes, as always, doing what he can do to shape the outcome. First, he takes all his party across the Jabbok River, where he will meet Esau the next day. He divides everything he has into two groups: Half his wives, half his children, half his servants, half his flocks, and half his possessions over here and the other half way over there somewhere. Jacob

figures that if Esau attacks one group, at least he'll have the other half left after the battle. He also sends Esau a bribe: hundreds of animals—goats and sheep and camels and colts and bulls and donkeys, all meant to soften Esau's anger.

After Jacob sends everyone else across the river, where the danger is, he waits alone on the safe side of the river for the night to pass. Tomorrow, Jacob has to face his brother and the consequences of his own past actions. For tonight, he is alone with himself, waiting. Into this night, into this terrible night of helplessness and fear, comes a stranger, who wrestles with Jacob till dawn. It is a desperate wrestling match, and neither one will give in. Somewhere along the way, the stranger hits Jacob, dislocating his hip, yet the wrestling match continues. Finally, the stranger says, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." Jacob responds, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." So, the stranger says, "What is your name?" and he responds, "Jacob."

And there you have it. I am Jacob. I am not the hotshot I pretend to be. I am just what my name says – Jacob the cheater, Jacob the deceiver – the son who doesn't deserve the blessings I have received so far in this life. I am Jacob. In that simple question, "What is your name?" the stranger forces Jacob to face himself and to acknowledge who he really is. In answering that simple question honestly, Jacob receives the greatest blessing of all – a transformed self. The stranger gives him a new name to match his new identity. He is no longer the Jacob of old, but Israel, the one who wrestles with God.

Let's pause for a moment to think about what this story tells us about God and about ourselves. For one thing, it shows us that asking for God's help in a desperate situation doesn't necessarily make us feel peaceful. It's easy to talk about being sustained by faith in troubling times, but some of us are more like Jacob – wrestling in the night with our worries and with God, hoping for rescue, hoping for a good outcome. This story tells us that having God with us in a crisis may not mean being serene in spite of it all; it may just mean that God knows we are human, knows we are struggling, and is right there with us in our struggle.

The second thing I see in this story is that it is okay to ask for blessings from God, even to wrestle for them, to demand them. Hanging onto God for dear life, Jacob says, "I won't let you go till you give me a blessing!" Like Jacob, we too are "God wrestlers." This story says, "You don't always need to be polite with God. You can say what you really need, and say it again and again. God can handle it."

This story also tells us that we cannot get the blessings we hunger for until we face who we truly are. Jacob wrestles with the remnants in himself of sibling rivalry and family dysfunction and fights over inheritance and gross failures of personal integrity. At least some of that must sound familiar in our own lives and our own families. But God asks the simple, central question, the question that requires Jacob to face himself, and in the struggle to face himself, he finds the blessings that he seeks. Who are you, God asks Jacob. Who are you, God asks each of us.

Finally, this story shows us that meeting God face-to-face changes us. God's searing, holy touch acknowledges our broken past and calls us into the sacred future that God intends for us. God's touch marks us. When we encounter God, it shows. We can't pretend we aren't changed, and we can't live our lives in the same old way.

Each week we come worship to meet God. Whether we know it or not, we are asking for our past to be broken open and our present brokenness to be made whole. Whether we are able to walk to this meeting easily and with confidence, or whether we come to it spiritually kicking and screaming as Jacob did, may we all receive the blessing that God offers here, the life-changing, transforming blessing of meeting God face-to-face.

Amen