

## Season after Pentecost

Summer Sermon Series: Jacob Wrestles with God

July 5/6, 2014

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Psalm 121; Genesis 32: 3- 33:11

*Grace and peace to you from God - Father, Son, Holy Spirit –Amen*

If the books of Genesis or the story of Jacob is not one of your favorites, let me give you the background to the Scripture passage we've read today. Jacob and Esau are twins, born of Isaac and Rebekah. Isaac was the son of Abraham and Sarah. Which means Esau and Jacob are heirs to God's promises of land and descendants so that a this chosen people may be witnesses of God's goodness and will in the world.

Esau is the twin born first—with all the rights and privileges of the eldest son. Jacob is born with his grubby little fist seizing his brother's heel, a not-so-subtle metaphor for how their lives will work out. Jacob lowballs Esau on an offer for his birthright—which a famished, and somewhat clueless, Esau accepts to get some food. Jacob, following his mother's plan, sneaks into his dying father's room posing as Esau and steals his one and only blessing. Esau vows that when his father dies, he will have his revenge on Jacob. At his mother's suggestion, Jacob runs away. *(And you thought soap operas were a 20<sup>th</sup> century invention!)*

Jacob ends us living with his mother's folks for 20 years. Here the trickster Jacob meets someone equally masterful at swindling. His uncle and father in-law, Laban, tricks him into working 14 years to marry his daughter Rachel. Jacob turns the tables when he works out a deal with his uncle to divide up all the sheep and the goats they have. It looked like an equitable division. But Laban's flocks did not fair well, while Jacob's flocks thrived and he becomes wealthy. At this point, Laban's had enough of Jacob. Slipping away in the night, Jacob leaves for his homeland with most of the flocks, Laban's daughters and some of his household gods and valuables, courtesy of Laban's own daughter's thievery. Which brings us to today's scenes, as Jacob nears his home and that brother, Esau, whom he swindled so long ago.

When Jacob gets word that Esau plans on bringing 400 men to meet him, Jacob fears the worse. So in his usual fashion, he comes up with a scheme. He sends gifts to his brother. Then he divides his family and wealth, thinking that should Esau attack, he'll only get half and the others may be able to escape. Then he stays back, behind the fray and does something he has not done before this — Jacob prays. God came to Jacob several times before but this is the first time Jacob seeks God. Whether it's to hedge his bets or the beginning of a dawning faith, we don't know. But prayer seems to open him to wrestling with himself, his past and his relationship with the Lord.

When you go on a YouthWorks mission trip, you're not afraid of 400 men attacking you, but you do have anxieties. Will I be able to start conversations with others? Will I be accepted or liked by those I'm meeting? Will I find others to hang with in my crew? Will I be able to do the work we're assigned? Will I be able to deal with the heat, sleeping on the floor and quirky showers? It's often a journey into yourself — becoming very aware of your fears, your perceptions of yourself, your limits and rough edges. Into that vulnerability the YouthWorks program provides you with the materials and time for daily morning devotions, evening worship and processing time with your home church group. If you opt to do so, you have this time, space and community in which you can engage our Lord in conversation about hurts and hopes, experiences and feelings. Part of the experience of a mission trip can be to wrestle with God, yourself and relationships... wrestle with the choice to be open to learning, healing and refreshment or to hide behind all that negative stuff in which we imprison our best selves.

The Youthworks devotional and staff reminded us that Jesus lived to break down barriers and restore our relationship with God and one another. We were asked to consider what barriers we put up to separate ourselves from God and one another. We were asked to consider letting those barriers down during the week to see what God may be able to show us or do in or through us. Perhaps that is why this image of Jacob wrestling feels very real and fresh to me. As we wrestle with God, the question becomes who will prevail? In Jacob's case, will he continue to be the manipulating trickster he has always been or will he choose to go God's way. It should be of no surprise that it's a close match. How hard it is for us to give up, even to God, our perceptions, habits, things, "doing it our way". We could even sense that struggle within ourselves and our Haven group. And we too wondered who would prevail?

Still, Jacob tried one more time to be the master bargainer. With his hip out of joint he still demands a blessing and his opponent's name. What he gets is a new name and identity. No longer will you be Jacob "the grabber" — now you are Israel, "one who strives with God." God has seen the worst of Jacob but re-defines him by his best. No longer the grabber but now the striver. No longer a cheat but resourceful. God will do the same for us: you who are abused, I bless you courageous survivor; you who were swindled, I bless you as trusting; you who feel weak I bless with compassion only the down and out can know; you who think yourself decrepit are blessed with experience that makes you wise; you who think you are not

attractive or loveable, I bless you with a the depth to see what is meaningful and beautiful in God's eyes, including the beauty of yourself; and so on. When we take our flaws, weaknesses, doubts and hurts to wrestle with God, our Lord will lead us to the blessing and strength that are born of such struggles. Jacob's limp is not a sign of weakness but a reminder of God's strength,<sup>1</sup> which is our true source of power and triumph.

When Jacob faces the day he will reunite with his brother, he has dropped the barriers that kept him from following God. He lays down his own schemes and relies on the promises of God. He puts aside his illusions and attempts at controlling others and instead follows the lead of the Lord who prevailed and wants him and all peoples to live in the fullness of life. That morning, trusting in God, Jacob limps toward Esau, still fearful, but he is going ahead of his wives and children rather than hiding behind them. Jacob humbles himself before Esau and asks for his acceptance. He finds an Esau who has let go of some of his own barriers — hatred, anger, grudges — so that he can welcome his brother home.

It can take a while to learn how you may have been changed by your encounters with God on a Mission Trip. You are touched by the people you meet — people from other churches, the YouthWorks staff, those in your own group, the people you meet in the community like Irv and Brandon and even a dog named Rocky, who was the very definition of happy. When you go on a Mission Trip you have a certain satisfaction at knowing you helped others and they gave you something, too. You learn there is more to people and problems than our stereotypes and preconceived notions allow. Perhaps, most of all, you know that one more time you have opened yourself to the presence and work of God and it's yet to be seen if you will let God prevail, if we will let God's picture of us replace our own, if we will let God's will temper our own stubborn wills.

While Mission trips provide a special opportunity to encounter and wrestle with God, it's really something followers of Jesus find themselves doing throughout their faith lives. We can find ourselves, our ideals, our dreams broken, bruised and roughed up by the circumstances and conditions of our worlds. It can throw us in a wrestling match with God — questioning the Lord's goodness, power, love. It can cause our faith and hope to shiver with doubt. But God will hold on to us as we thrash about, pull away, dare God to prove love by doing our will. God will hold on until we are ready to receive the blessing, until we are able to rest again in the Lord who knows our name and loves us. God will hold on to us until we are strong enough to again follow Jesus who carries his own scars from living and dying that we might know nothing can separate us from the love of God and the eternal life promised at our

baptism. Consciously or unconsciously, are you wrestling with God? God has hold of you, ready with a blessing and strength for abundant life. Who will prevail?

Linda M Alessandri 7/5/14

#### ENDNOTE

I am grateful to the following preachers who provided much of the insight and inspiration for this sermon (all were posted on [www.GoodPreacher.com](http://www.GoodPreacher.com)):

Julie Adkins "Costly Reconciliation" 2005

Brett Younger, "Wrestling with God"

Casey Thomspen, "Wrestling"

Randy L. Quinn, Sleepless Nights

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1. Randy L. Quinn, "Sleepless Nights" posted on [www.GoodPreacher.com](http://www.GoodPreacher.com)