

3.12.06 The Man Who Wrestled With God: Jacob Becomes Israel Genesis 32.22-31

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Did you ever have a meeting you truly dreaded? It may have been with an irate boss, an angry ex-employee, a disappointed school principal, or a ticked off family member or a friend. In today's scripture, Jacob has a similar, stomach churning, throat tightening, blood pressure rising sense of anxiety as he prepares to meet up with his brother Esau. Jacob has good reason to be nervous and concerned. He has not seen his brother Esau for 20 years. Jacob must wonder if time will be enough to heal old wounds or if Esau has used the last 20 years to plan and dream of revenge? To understand today's scripture we need to review the story of a very dysfunctional family. In Genesis 25:21-28 we learn that Rebekah and Isaac, the promised child of Abraham and Sarah, are the parents of Esau and Jacob. We also learn that the two brothers struggled together within their mother's womb, foreshadowing the struggles they would have outside.

Unfortunately, the parents didn't have a united front in raising their sons, Isaac, the dad, favored Esau, and mom, Rebekah, loved Jacob. This is a formula for family strife. As a young man, Jacob takes advantage of his tired, hungry, shortsighted brother, getting Esau to agree to give up the privileges that were his as the firstborn in exchange for a pot of lentil stew. If swindling his brother out of his birthright wasn't bad enough, then with his mother's help, Jacob intentionally deceives his dying father to receive his deathbed blessing (Gen. 27:12) which rightfully should have gone to his older brother. Jacob has qualms about his own safety in carrying out their scheme but none of conscience, he is at least psychologically honest, he knows he is deceiving his father and cheating his brother. Esau is heartbroken and ready to take revenge on his brother (27:41); it's Cain and Abel all over again. Esau vows to kill Jacob after their father dies, but Rebekah learns of his plans so she conspires to send Jacob to safety with her brother Laban in Haran under the guise of his needing to find a wife from their own people.

Soap operas have got nothing on the Old Testament. And there's more. Jacob meets his uncle Laban's lovely daughter Rachel and falls for her immediately. When he meets his uncle, Laban tells his nephew Jacob, *"You are my bone and my flesh!"* Little does Jacob know how true that is as Laban will reveal himself to be as deceiving, scheming, and ambitious as Jacob. Jacob agrees to serve Laban for seven years in exchange for the joy of marrying Rachel only to have Laban pull a bait and switch and

Jacob wakes up the morning after the wedding shocked to find himself with Leah, Rachel's older and less attractive sister. Jacob confronts Laban who agrees to let Jacob marry Rachel in exchange for seven more years of free labor and poor Leah is stuck married to a man who never loved her or wanted her and even worse is in love with her sister. Leah is able to have children; Rachel is not so this further complicates the emotionally explosive situation between the sisters and their husband. So to sum up Jacob and his situation - he lies to protect himself like his grandfather Abraham and schemes like his mother and uncle, ends up having eleven sons by four different women while working 20 years for his uncle/father-in-law in a relationship that is characterized by resentment, suspicion, greed and double-dealing. And you thought your family had problems!

After prospering at the expense of Laban and his cousins, Jacob is told by God in a dream to return to his own land. If he stays, he risks disobeying God and the wrath of Laban and his family. If he follows God's command, it means he will have to face Esau, the brother he wronged and cheated. Jacob decides to obey the Divine Voice and he sends messengers to his brother announcing that he is coming. The messengers return with the ominous news that Esau is coming with 400 men to meet Jacob. In desperation Jacob prays the longest recorded prayer in the book of Genesis. He understands that our desperation, our need, our extremity is God's opportunity. The prayer we heard earlier from Genesis 32:9-12 is worth looking at for a moment.

First Jacob thanks God for all the blessings given to him, and expresses his feeling of unworthiness for all God's kindness. Then he reminds God of the Lord's promises to him, that God would guard and protect him. Finally, he implores God to save him from Esau's wrath, and freely expresses his fear for himself and his family. Jacob's prayer is open and honest. He bares his emotions and his soul in an open dialogue with God. Too many prayers may fail to reach their mark because they lack emotional honesty. Jacob shows us how to pray. If we are afraid, we say so, if we are angry, confused, or perplexed we bring this into our prayer. Prayer is a relationship with God and our relationship with God cannot exist without emotional honesty.

Jacob is filled with guilt, fear, and anxiety as he prepares to meet his brother Esau.

Jacob arranges his flocks and goods and his family in preparing to meet his brother sending his flocks, herds, and servants ahead as a present to Esau to try and appease

him. His preparation for the fateful meeting the next morning are almost complete which brings us to Genesis 32:22-31.

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

Jacob decides to obey the Divine Voice calling him to return regardless of his fears. We know he has to go back because his personal and spiritual development cannot be complete until he is reconciled with his brother, and has taken responsibility for the deceitful, scheming person he has been.

Life would be so much easier if God didn’t want us to mature and grow up. Often times we think our lives would be easier if we just didn’t have to deal with the people we’ve wronged or those who have wronged us. After all, it is much easier to replay the hurt and imagined evil motives of the person who victimized us than to deal with the aspects of our own self which are still in need of growth and maturity.

When he left his own land Jacob was a young man following his own will. Now he is returning, an older man who is following a Will not his own. Before he only followed goals he set for himself; now he follows goals set up by God, goals he would rather not pursue because they lead him into uncertainty and possible danger.

And so Jacob finds himself, alone, in the dark, in an unfamiliar place, wondering if he will ever see the stars again after this night. There are some crucial experiences that come to us when we are with other people, and some that come to us only when we are alone. When we are alone in the darkness there are things that happen in us and to us that don’t happen in the light of day. There is something primitive about darkness

and the night that impacts us deep in our unconscious self. It is in the dark of night that Jacob gets jumped by an apparent adversary, as he sits in solitude by the stream. A lesser man might have died of fright, pleaded for mercy, or tried to flee, but Jacob hung on, and all night the two of them struggled together. Imagine what must have been going through Jacob's mind that fateful night. Maybe he roamed back to the dark days of his youth and the deeds he had done to his brother and father. Looking from the perspective of an older man with children of his own, perhaps he wrestled with the selfish and ambitious young man he had been. Among those of us who have a few years on the treads of our lives, who can look back into his or her past and not regret actions or words that were done or said and should not have been; or should have been done or said and were not. Jacob was wrestling with the dark side of himself that night and he was also looking death in the face so he was grappling with his mortality as well.

What are you wrestling with this morning? Perhaps it is your own mortality or declining health. Like Jacob, perhaps you have an un-reconciled relationship you are wrestling with which won't let you go. It could be you're struggling with your future which like Jacob's stretches out before you known only to God. People wrestle with so many things: addictions, fears, anxieties, sins, and concerns, issues either deeply personal or global in nature.

Whatever we are wrestling with we can learn from Jacob. Our extremity, our desperation, is God's opportunity. Jacob refused to let go of his experience until he learned its meaning. Personal change or transformation often comes through wrestling with parts of our selves and our relationships that we would rather not deal with or acknowledge. It is a hard for a person to admit, "I am a gossip." "I am a sower or contention and disunity in the groups of which I'm a part." "I am addicted to arrogance and self-righteousness." "I have a problem with alcohol, drugs, or pornography." "I am hopelessly hooked on consumerism and materialism."

Transformation is not found on the path of retreating from our selves or from our experiences no matter how frightening or disappointing. Jacob tells his antagonist, "*I will not let you go, unless you bless me.*" Jacob would not accept going through his agonizing experience for nothing and he refused to give up the struggle until he knew what it meant. Jacob is often known as the "Supplanter" or "Usurper" however a more accurate translation of his name is "Heel Holder" in reference to his grasping his brother's heel as they struggled in their mother's womb. Jacob becomes Israel "he struggles/wrestles with God." The change of Jacob's name recognizes the change in his

identity from a grasping young man to one who has striven with God, himself, and others and has persevered and prevailed.

Jacob left Canaan as a strong man physically but spiritually and morally weak.

He returns limping because of his wounded hip, but he is more whole now than he has ever been in his life.

The wound he receives is the mark of a person who encounters spiritual reality as deeply as Jacob did. The experience is indelible and it changes us forever. Jacob is never the same and never are we when it happens to us.

The story wouldn't be complete without sharing what happened the following morning. Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming with his 400 men. Jacob had feared seeing Esau's face, but he has seen the face of God and lived to tell about it. Esau, who had very legitimate reason to be angry, furious, and ready for revenge, demonstrates that he too has grown since he and his brother parted. His untold story is also one of personal growth and forgiveness for he had clearly let go of his anger and any desire for retribution or revenge. He has released his resentment about the very real and deep hurts caused by his brother and because of that he is ready for reconciliation.

In one of the most emotional, poignant reunions in the entire Bible, Genesis 33:3-4 describes Israel humbling himself before his older brother, bowing down to the ground seven times as he came near Esau. *"But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept."* Instead of it being Cain and Abel all over again, instead of anger leading to sin to physical harm and a lifetime of grief and guilt; Esau and Israel demonstrate the power of releasing resentment, of letting go of a painful past, and of giving oneself and someone else another chance. Instead of falling on his brother's neck to kill him, Esau fell on his neck and kissed him and wept.

Israel says to his brother (Genesis 33:10), *"For truly to see you face is like seeing the face of God – since you have received me with such favor."*

As the song says, *"To love another person is to see the face of God."*

Closing Prayer:

God be with us as we wrestle with the issues and struggles in our own lives. Help us to hold on. Give us endurance to persevere. Grant us the wisdom and the courage we need to find meaning in the midst of our pain. Enable us to see the traces of redemption in the midst of the difficulties. As we go forward, perhaps even like Israel, limping in our

woundedness, may we have the consolation of knowing we are growing more spiritually whole and mature.