

Theme: Wrestling with God

“Birthrights, a Bowl of Stew, Blessings and Belief”

Sermon preached by Jeff Huber – based on a sermon series by Adam Hamilton
September 21-22, 2013 at First United Methodist Church, Durango

Genesis 25: 21-26

*21 Isaac pleaded with the Lord on behalf of his wife, because she was unable to have children. The Lord answered Isaac’s prayer, and Rebekah became pregnant with twins. 22 But the two children struggled with each other in her womb. So she went to ask the Lord about it. “Why is this happening to me?” she asked. 23 And the Lord told her, “The sons in your womb will become two nations. From the very beginning, the two nations will be rivals. One nation will be stronger than the other; and your older son will serve your younger son.” 24 And when the time came to give birth, Rebekah discovered that she did indeed have twins! 25 The first one was very red at birth and covered with thick hair like a fur coat. So they named him Esau. 26 Then the other twin was born with his hand grasping Esau’s heel. So they named him Jacob. * Isaac was sixty years old when the twins were born.*

VIDEO Sermon Starter – Birthrights and Blessings

SLIDE Birthrights, a Bowl of Stew, Blessings and Belief

The story of Jacob and many of the other stories in Genesis were first told orally around campfires for hundreds of years before it was ever written down. It was the kind of story that was told when a father would come in from the fields or came home from a hunt, and dinner had been served and the family was gathered around a fire for the evening. The children would clamor, "Daddy, tell us the story of Jacob and his birthright. Tell us the story of Jacob and the bowl of stew. Tell us the story of Jacob and the blessing he stole from his brother. Tell us about Esau."

Then the patriarch or matriarch of the family would say, "A long, long, long, long time ago a man named Jacob once lived." They would then go on to tell the stories. The children would laugh at certain points. They would gasp when the story took a telling turn. For the women listening to Jacob's story there would sometimes be tears and for the men there will be moments of deep reflection.

These stories were part of an oral tradition that were not meant just to

entertain but they were also meant to teach. There were stories which taught the children of Israel about their identity because Jacob was the father of Israel. His name was changed by God to Israel and he was the father of the nation. When the Israelites looked to Jacob's story they were learning something about themselves because he helped define who these people would be. When they looked at the things that Jacob had done wrong they learned something about what they should avoid doing. When they looked at the places that he got it right they learned about how they should live life.

As they listened the story of Jacob and his relationship with God they learned about God's call on their life some hundreds of years later. Jacob's story was written at the earliest about 450 years after the time of Jacob, and perhaps even later than that. Moses came along 450 years after Jacob and some of the stories may have been written down even after the time of Moses but they were told and passed down from generation to generation as part of an oral tradition that was very accurate.

For the future generations when Israel was the nation that inhabited a land and a specific place these stories not only taught the Israelites about themselves but it taught them about their neighbors. In particular, they learned from these stories about one specific neighbor, the Edomites in the nation of Edom.

With this back drop in mind I would like you to take out of your bulletin your Message Notes and your Meditation Moments. You will find a Scripture passage listed across the top that we will be reading from today and then below that there is a space for you to take notes. I want to encourage you to do that because I hope you will learn a few things today that you might not have known otherwise about Jacob. I know I learned a lot preparing these messages and I hope you will also learn some keys to understanding the rest of Jacob's story.

Below that you will find meditation moments for each day and I am challenging every one of us to read through the story of Jacob. We won't read all 25 chapters in the book of Genesis that have to do with Jacob but we will read significant portions of it so that we can know this story. These are foundational stories of the Bible as half of the book of Genesis is devoted to Jacob and his family. I want you to be familiar with the story and I am confident that it will speak to you today some 4000 years later. If you will just take a few moments each day then we will have together over the next four weeks read through most of Jacob's story. If you are watching at home or online you can download this resource off of our website right next to the video portion.

Let's begin with a little bit of background information on Jacob and his brother Esau. We don't know exactly when they lived but it was somewhere between 1700 and 2000 years before the time of Christ. We know where he lived because the Scripture tells us that he lived in the Land of Canaan. Once again, these stories were written down hundreds of years later when the descendants of Jacob, the Israelites, were living in the land of Israel and the descendants of Esau, the Edomites, were living in the land of Edom. Take a look at the map on the video screen.

SLIDE MAP of Ancient Near East in Time of Patriarchs (graphic)

Today's story is really a story of two nations. You notice the Mediterranean Sea off the left and modern-day Turkey above. The Nile River in Egypt is on the lower left with Saudi Arabia to the right. In Jacob's day there was the land of Canaan along the Mediterranean Sea.

SLIDE MAP Kingdoms around Israel (graphic)

As we zoom in we discover that the land of Canaan has become the land of Israel. The Sea of Galilee is up on top with the Jordan River running down from that into the Dead Sea. Israel is on the left and borders the Mediterranean Sea while the land of Edom is on your right. The land of Edom is made up of the descendants of Jacob's brother, Esau. We need to understand the relationship between these two people because as we are hearing the story we recognize that it is in some way explaining why Esau's descendants have the poor piece of land which is like a desert and the Israelites have the better chunk of land which is flowing with milk and honey and have lots of water, at least comparatively.

These stories also explain some of the tension between these two groups of people. There are moments where these stories will tweak Edomites just a bit and make them a bit upset to hear themselves portrayed in this light.

Imagine the rivalry between Durango high school and Montezuma Cortez high school, or between Fort Lewis College and Adams State, or between Colorado and Colorado State, or between the Denver Broncos and the Oakland Raiders to play tomorrow night. I grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area and there was this rivalry between California Berkeley and Stanford University. My stepfather was a graduate of California Berkeley and we often went to games and I was at the last game that John Elway played as a Stanford Cardinal when his team lost on the last play the game because the marching band came out onto the field. Would you like to see that play?

VIDEO The Play

SLIDE Jacob and Esau

Needless to say, those teams still don't like each other! They have jokes about each other and their IQ. Jacob and Esau had the same kind of rivalry. They were rivals that at times took up arms against each other. By the time of King David, the Israelites had subdued the Edomites and they had become their servants.

When we get to the New Testament we find the descendants of the Edomites being called the Idumeans. The best known Idumean or descendant of the Edomites was King Herod the Great. You might remember that when the wise men from East came looking for King of the Jews, Herod was terrified because he knew he was NOT king of the Jews because he was not really Jewish. He was an Idumean. He was an Edomite which tells us that this story continues all the way into the New Testament.

The story of Jacob and Esau is the story of these two nations and these two groups of people. As we hear the story today we want to hear some of the humor as it would have been heard in the time the story would have been told and then later written down. We'll be looking at this story in four different acts and each Act will have 3 or 4 Scenes. Let's begin with Act 1 Scene 1, the birth of Jacob and Esau.

Isaac was the son of Abraham and he married Rebekah when he was 40 years old and Rebekah was maybe 18. For 20 years they had tried to have a child but were not able to conceive. The story of Jacob and Esau begins with Isaac praying that God would please bring them a child. Rebekah becomes pregnant and then somewhere around the 8th month she finds herself with great pain in her womb. The Scripture tells us that the two sons were struggling with each other in her womb. The pain becomes so great that she thinks she's going to die and so she goes to God and she says, "Lord, what is wrong with me? What is happening inside my womb?"

She receives this word from God and now I invite you to turn in your Bible to chapter 25 of the book of Genesis. Genesis is the first book in your Bible and chapter 25 is halfway through the book. We are going to look at verse 23.

SLIDE *23 And the Lord told her, "The sons in your womb will become two nations. From the very beginning, the two nations will be rivals. One nation will be stronger than the other; and your older son will*

serve your younger son."

Rebecca learns that she has two sons within her and they are wrestling and will become fathers to rival nations. She also learns that the older will serve the younger and this is an unusual thing to have happen. In biblical times the younger served the older and not the other way around. This is a consistent theme that we find in the Scriptures where God roots for the underdog and often chooses the least likely to lead his people. God chooses Jacob the younger before he is even born to be the one who carries the torch and carries on the promise that God has made to Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rachel. We see this theme when God chooses the Israelites who are people of slaves. God chooses Moses who stutters to be the great lawgiver. God chooses David to be King even though he is the seventh and youngest son of Jesse. Jesus says the first shall be last and the last shall be first; the great among you will be servants. We see this theme lived out the story of Jacob as well.

When the twins are finally born we read these words in verses 24 through 26.

SLIDE ***24 And when the time came to give birth, Rebekah discovered that she did indeed have twins! 25 The first one was very red at birth and covered with thick hair like a fur coat. So they named him Esau.***

We are meant to stop and hear the humor at this point in the story. First, does this sound like an attractive baby to you? Remember that the Israelites are telling the story about the folks down south, the Edomites. This is sort of like saying, "When you're daddy was born he was hairy that his mama had to use dog shampoo to wash him." The children were probably giggling as they were telling the story because it was funny.

"He was hairy so they called him Esau." Do you know what Esau means? It means hairy. He was hairy and so they called him hairy and the children probably giggled when they said that.

SLIDE ***26 Then the other twin was born with his hand grasping Esau's heel. So they named him Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when the twins were born.***

Can you see the picture of this with these twins being born and the one has a hold of his brother's foot? It's as if Jacob is saying to his brother, "Come on back in here. I'm coming out first."

He was holding onto his brother's heel and so they called him Jacob. Do you

know what Jacob means? Jacob literally means, "To pull the heel." It meant what we mean when we say we are, "pulling someone's leg." What do you mean when you say to someone, "Are you pulling my leg?" Are you kidding with me? Are you joking with me? Are you trying to trick me?

Jacob's name literally means, "trickster." This means we have hairy and trickster who are the twins. This was meant to make the children giggle because this was their language. They know what this language means and they know the humor that is meant to be conveyed in this story, which we sometimes miss unless we read the footnotes in our Bible.

We learned then in this story that hairy and trickster are born to Rebecca and Isaac. We only have one other story about Jacob and Esau, trickster and hairy, before they become adults and we find that in the very next part of Genesis 25. We learn that Esau was a skilled hunter and he loved to be outdoors. He loved to shop at Cabela's and he was a man's man. The Scriptures also tell us that Isaac loved Esau.

But Jacob liked to stay among the tents. This meant he was a bit more refined and he could be found shopping at the mall at the Eddie Bauer store and not at Cabela's. The Scriptures also tell us that while Isaac loved Esau, Rebekah loved Jacob which made him a bit of a mama's boy. We find this family dynamics set up that is probably not very healthy and a bit dysfunctional from the very beginning.

With this in mind we turn to Act 1, Scene 2.

SLIDE Birthrights and a Bowl of Stew

Turn in your Bible to Genesis 25 verses 29 to 34 and we can read together this quite famous story. Remember that the children would ask for this story because it is entertaining and it is funny, but it also was meant to teach both children and adults something profound about what it means to be human. There are two teaching moments in this story that we want to understand as we read it so keep an eye out for those.

SLIDE *29 One day when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau arrived home from the wilderness exhausted and hungry. 30 Esau said to Jacob, "I'm starved! Give me some of that red stew!" (This is how Esau got his other name, Edom, which means "red.")*

Once again we are meant to see some humor in this when we recognize that the Edomites were named after a bowl of stew which was red.

SLIDE ***31 “All right,” Jacob replied, “but trade me your rights as the firstborn son.” 32 “Look, I’m dying of starvation!” said Esau. “What good is my birthright to me now?” 33 But Jacob said, “First you must swear that your birthright is mine.” So Esau swore an oath, thereby selling all his rights as the firstborn to his brother, Jacob. 34 Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and lentil stew. Esau ate the meal, then got up and left. He showed contempt for his rights as the firstborn.***

This is a great story that teaches us several important things. First, we need to understand what a birthright is. The birthright was the share of the inheritance that the oldest child received. Today most people divide up the inheritance equally between all the children but in those days the oldest child got a double portion. That means that if there were five children then there were six portions to the inheritance and the oldest would get two of those portions or one third of the inheritance.

Since Isaac has only two children in Jacob and Esau there would be three portions which meant the oldest child Esau would get two portions or two thirds while the youngest son Jacob would get one third or one portion when Isaac dies. To sell his birthright would mean Esau was giving him half of his inheritance for a bowl of stew. Who in their right mind would do that?

Esau did do that and this in part explains from the Israelite perspective why they have the better piece of land and why the Edomites live in the desert. But this is a story first about the need for instant gratification. When they are telling this story, the moral that we learn from Esau is to think about the future and not just about the present. Esau comes in and smells the stew when he is famished and needing to have that meal right then and right there. He is probably thinking to himself that Grandpa Abraham lived to be 170 and right now his father Isaac was probably around 78 years old and he might live another hundred years. Why should he care about his birthright? He is hungry right now and he wants it all and he wants it now.

SLIDE **Learn to delay gratification**

One of the main points of this story is to encourage us to learn to delay gratification and think about the future. We might wonder who in their right mind would sell their birthright for instant gratification today, but the truth is that many people have. We decided that we wanted it all and we want it now and we were willing to give up our retirement and many other things in order to have a

house we want now in the car we want now and eat out every night of the week. This is how we got into the great recession in many ways, because we were willing to put off until tomorrow what we could have today on credit.

This story is relevant and is meant to speak to us today. Esau is an example of what not to do but interestingly enough so is Jacob. Think about this for a minute. What kind of sibling says, "I'll feed you if you will give me half of your inheritance."? What does that tell you about Jacob just from this story? We learn that Jacob was a selfish toad who cared only about himself. The world revolves around him and he was quite willing to take advantage of anybody, including his own brother.

SLIDE Jacob lived primarily for himself

We learn that in his early years Jacob was pretty selfish.

When I was about 12 years old I began collecting baseball cards, mostly because I like the bubblegum inside. I would do anything to be able to get some of those baseball cards and I did get some for my birthday which is October 1, and I also got a really cool G.I. Joe. My sister's birthday is October 9th and that year she got a Barbie doll. We both got some cash from our grandparents to spend as well. I had chewed up all of my bubblegum from my baseball cards by the time my sister's birthday rolled around eight days later and so I came up with a great idea. One day after school I took my sister's Barbie doll and tied it up in a tree where she couldn't reach it and my G.I. Joe held her hostage. I told my sister that she could have her Barbie doll back if she would give me the cash that my grandparents had given to her for her birthday. The truth is that she was only six years old and she didn't have a clue what to do with the money anyway and so she readily forked over the ransom. I quickly went down to the 7-11 and bought some more baseball cards so I could have more bubblegum.

Needless to say, when my mother came home she was not very happy. I tried to explain to my mother that my sister had no idea what to do with your cash anyway but I got a pretty good lecture about how we don't do this to our sister and take advantage of her like that. My sister got some new cash from my mother and I got a double dose of chores and a week of being grounded.

Part of the point of stories like Jacob and Esau is to teach children that the world does not revolve around us. We don't do this to people. We don't take advantage of people just because we can. This is another teaching that we get from the Jacob story.

When we read the story of Jacob we are meant to ask as Jacob's descendants a simple question. Do we believe that it's okay to take advantage of people? Do we believe that the world should revolve around our happiness? We are meant to read the story of Jacob and Esau and grow in our understanding of how we treat each other, understanding that we are all brothers and sisters in the faith.

SLIDE The Blessing

Let's turn now to Act 1, Scene 3 from Jacob's life which is about the trickster and his mother. We can imagine children sitting around the campfire begging their parents to tell them the story about the blessing. "Tell us the story about the blessing!"

In this scene Isaac thinks he's near death. He is 100 years old and his children are now 40. Jacob is single while Esau is married. What you will find in the Bible is that the deathbed blessing has real power. The father is dying and he places his hand on his children and announces a blessing. That blessing has power to shape the future for that child. When Isaac thinks he's near death he calls for his oldest son Esau that he loves. He tells Esau to go out and shoot some game and bring it back and prepare it just the way he likes it. He wants this last supper with him and Esau and then he will say a blessing upon him.

Esau walks out of the tent and he's thinking, "This is great. My brother tricked me out of my birthright but he is not going to get my blessing that is due to me." He goes out to go hunting and you can imagine it might be a full day or even more in order to get the game in a hunt. Then he will have to bring the animal back and prepare it. This conversation happens in the morning and it will be evening before the supper is prepared.

Rebekah is standing near the tent and she hears Isaac give this request to Esau. She calls for Jacob and says, "Come here quickly. Your father is about to announce the deathbed blessing upon your brother Esau and we are not going to let that happen. Here is what I want you to do. Go out and get a couple of the kid goats from our flock outside the tent and I'll prepare them just the way your father likes them. Then you are going to go and see him and pretend to be Esau and taken this meal and ask for his blessing. You will get Esau's blessing that way."

You get this sense that this is not a happy functional family? Jacob says, "But mom, he is going to know that I am Jacob and not Esau." Rebekah reminds Jacob that Isaac is almost blind and can't see hardly anything anymore. Jacob insists, "But mom, he is going to feel me and know that I am Jacob and not Esau

because Esau is hairy. If he doesn't figure it out when he feels me then he will figure it out when he smells me because I wear Calvin Klein and not Ewe de Lamb. He's going to know I'm not Esau."

Rebekah has figured this out because she took one of the Esau's cloaks and made a special pair of gloves for Jacob to wear. She says to Jacob, "You put on these gloves and his cloak and when your daddy feels all that fur he will think you are Esau. When he smells your cloak he will smell your brother." Can you hear children giggling over this story and how silly it sounds?

Let's take a look and see what happens as a result of this in chapter 27, beginning with verse 18.

SLIDE **18 So Jacob took the food to his father. "My father?" he said. "Yes, my son," Isaac answered. "Who are you—Esau or Jacob?"**
19 Jacob (looked into his father's eyes) replied, "It's Esau, your firstborn son. I've done as you told me. Here is the wild game. Now sit up and eat it so you can give me your blessing." (Notice that there is no sympathy from Jacob towards his father's illness. "Hurry up and eat so you can bless me.")
20 Isaac asked, "How did you find it so quickly, my son?"
"The Lord YOUR God put it in my path!" Jacob replied. (Notice that it is YOUR God and remember that subtly.)
21 Then Isaac said to Jacob, "Come closer so I can touch you and make sure that you really are Esau." **22 So Jacob went closer to his father, and Isaac touched him. "The voice is Jacob's, but the hands are Esau's," Isaac said. 23 But he did not recognize Jacob, because Jacob's hands felt hairy just like Esau's. So Isaac prepared to bless Jacob. 24 "But are you really my son Esau?" he asked.**
"Yes, I am," Jacob replied.
25 Then Isaac said, "Now, my son, bring me the wild game. Let me eat it, and then I will give you my blessing." So Jacob took the food to his father, and Isaac ate it. He also drank the wine that Jacob served him. Then Isaac said to Jacob, 26 "Please come a little closer and kiss me, my son."
27 So Jacob went over and kissed him. And when Isaac caught the smell of his clothes, he was finally convinced, and he blessed his son. He said, "Ah! The smell of my son is like the smell of the outdoors, which the Lord has blessed!

Isaac then blessed Jacob and told him that his brother's children would serve his children. Isaac unknowingly fulfilled the promise of God that had been made to Rebekah years before. He gave the blessing to the younger son rather than the older son. You might wonder if those words really counted because he thought he was giving it to his oldest son, but in those days the words really did count and by touching the child and blessing that child with words it set the future in motion.

We might think that is a bit bizarre that a father could shape the future of his children by the words that he says in a story like this, but you and I both know the power of the parent's blessing or a parent's curse. I was a youth pastor for my first 10 years serving in ministry and I'll never forget a young man who was a great leader in my group. His father would refer to him as a "dumbass" on a regular basis because he thought it was funny. He would call him that name over and over again and chuckle when he said it. The boy tried to laugh along with his father and laugh it off but it wasn't very funny to him and it caused a deep wound inside of them. I know that as he grew and matured he wrestled with whether he was the man that his father said he was.

Our words have power and curses like that can be painful and leave a mark. We often teach our children, "Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me." But that's a lie, isn't it? That's not true. Names sometimes hurt more than sticks or stones.

SLIDE Kiva Web Site Photo

The opposite of this is true as well. A parents blessing can not only change a child's life but change the world. Kiva is a Christian business that is a not-for-profit organization that allows people like us to make microloans to people in Third World countries. You can do it online and use PayPal or your credit card and it's a pretty amazing ministry as you can read about different people who have been selected and who are in need of loan is because they live in a developing nation and there is not financing available for their business venture. People apply for these loans like a fisherman in Africa or woman who wants to raise goats. If they just had \$100 to buy nets or to buy their first set of goats, they could fish or begin to raise their own animals and not only feed their families but actually sell some of them and provide a business for their family. Then they pay the loans back and you get to be a part of the story.

SLIDE Jessica Jackley

Jessica Jackley founded Kiva and served as Kiva's first Chief Marketing

Officer. Jessica was first inspired to start Kiva in the spring of 2004 when she was 27 years old, working in East Africa with rural entrepreneurs. She became deeply moved by their stories of success, and wanted to provide a way for her friends and family to participate in the next chapter of those stories. This year they will make more than \$100 million in loans to developing nations. Jessica has also worked with the Stanford Center for Social Innovation, Amazon.com, Potentia Media, the International Foundation, World Vision, and others. Jessica is an active advisor and board member on a number of organizations championing microfinance, women's issues, tech, and the arts. She holds an MBA from the Stanford Graduate School of Business with Certificates in Global Management and Public Management, and a BA in Philosophy and Political Science from Bucknell University. She teaches Global Entrepreneurship at the Marshall School of Business at USC, and is a Visiting Scholar at Stanford's Center for Philanthropy and Civil Society.

She has a pretty amazing story and in an interview by Bill Hybels, the pastor of Willow Creek Church near Chicago, she was asked how was possible for a 27-year-old to do something like this. She said, "My dad always told me when I was growing up that I could do anything. He told me I could be anything and I shouldn't dream too small because I could change the world." She gave the credit to her father and the blessing that he poured into her life.

I don't know if you had an earthly father like that who poured that kind of blessing into your life. I do know that you have a heavenly Father like that. I know that God formed you in your mother's womb and he says to each of us, "With me you can do anything. I see the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and to bless you."

SLIDE Do you understand the power of blessing and who are you blessing?

This is one of the questions we should be asking as we read the story of Jacob. Who are you pouring into in order to bless their lives? It may not be your own children because your children may be grown. Maybe you don't have children. Maybe you will never have children. But you have a chance to talk to nieces and nephews and other young people here at the church who need you. You invest in youth group or Sunday school where you have a chance to say to children that they can be anything and do anything for God. We can point out what we see in their lives that are remarkable and how they might use their gifts to bless the world and bring about the kingdom of God. We have a chance to set

the future emotion for young people, which is why one of our core values is that children and youth are of utmost importance and we must invest in future generations.

We have a new ministry this year which is an intern program here at First United Methodist Church. We have three young people who are interested in ministry as a vocation. Aaron Strietzel is interested in becoming a pastor and he is currently in seminary online. Tanner Church is currently a music student at Fort Lewis College and he helps lead worship for Rooted, our Thursday night worship experience for college students and young adults up at the chapel at the college. He wants to be a worship leader in a church Sunday, similar to what Diane Bock now does for us. Tori Sheridan recently graduated from high school and is interested in becoming a youth pastor. We have another Fort Lewis College student Kimmie Laumann who is currently exploring becoming a pastor or serving the church as a career.

Each of these young people receives a stipend from the church and they are doing different tasks in these areas of ministry so they can learn more and so that we can pour into their lives. Myself and Zack Esgar meet with them on a regular basis and we are reading books and exploring what it means to be called by God together. It's an amazing opportunity pour out blessings on each of their lives, and you are a part of that through your gifts and offerings each week. This is part of what we are called to do, to invest in and bless others, in the generations that are coming behind us.

Jacob got what he wanted and he stole the blessing and manipulated the birthright. But let's end today by looking at how it turned out for him. In verse 38 Esau comes back to his father Isaac with a meal prepared, made with the animal that he has hunted during the day. He comes in and announces to his father that he has come for the blessing and Isaac realizes that he's been snookered. He says, "I have already given the blessing to your brother who has deceived me."

Esau's response to his father, "Have you only one blessing father? Bless me also father!" Esau lifted up his voice and he wept. Isaac tells him that he has already given the blessing way and he doesn't have another one to give like he gave to his brother. We find the results of this deception in Genesis 27:41.

SLIDE ***41 From that time on, Esau hated Jacob because their father had given Jacob the blessing. And Esau began to scheme: "I will soon be mourning my father's death. Then I will kill my brother, Jacob."***

When you live for yourself all the time, when it's all about you and you

giving it to you and your descendants. 14 Your descendants will be as numerous as the dust of the earth! They will spread out in all directions—to the west and the east, to the north and the south. And all the families of the earth will be blessed through you and your descendants. 15 What’s more, I am with you, and I will protect you wherever you go. One day I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have finished giving you everything I have promised you.”

16 Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I wasn’t even aware of it!” 17 But he was also afraid and said, “What an awesome place this is! It is none other than the house of God, the very gateway to heaven!”

Jacob has had an encounter with the God of the universe. He has seen God in his dream and he realizes that he is on holy ground. He takes the stone that was his pillow and he sets it up as an altar and he commits his life to God.

This is a fundamental turning point for Jacob and a conversion in Jacob's life. Suddenly, for the first time in his life, he believes in God. Remember that when Jacob is taking the meal to his father Isaac and Isaac asks him how he got the food so quick Jacob says, "YOUR God gave me this blessing." God was a figment of his father's imagination until this moment when he finally comes to see, in his darkest moment, that God had come to him. In his darkest moment, after 40 years of living his life for himself, God had come to Jacob and said, ***"Listen, I want to be your God. I care about you. I have plans for you."***

Jacob said "yes" to God and commits himself. After he built the altar he then does something very unusual. We read about this in verses 20-22.

SLIDE ***20 Then Jacob made this vow: “If God will indeed be with me and protect me on this journey, and if he will provide me with food and clothing, 21 and if I return safely to my father’s home, then the Lord will certainly be my God. 22 And this memorial pillar I have set up will become a place for worshiping God, and I will present to God a tenth of everything he gives me.”***

Remember what the most important thing was to Jacob beside himself. He wanted the birthright and the blessing. He wanted it all, but in this moment he says that if you will be my God and you will watch over me, then I will give you a 10th of everything that I ever earn. Abraham tithed a 10th of his spoils to God but this is where tithing begins as Jacob makes this promise for the rest of his life, to

take the thing that was his God and to be able to give it away.

In this dream God has called him and reiterated what God has said to Abraham and Isaac. God says, "Here is why you exist. I have chosen you and I will bless you so that you will be a blessing." This is the mission for us as human beings.

SLIDE We are blessed to be a blessing.

We are the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and our mission is to bless others. We are to take what we have been given to figure out how we live our lives as instruments of God's blessing in the world. Jacob finally got it in this experience and everything then begins to change for him.

I have been a pastor for more than 20 years now and one of my greatest joys is getting to watch God work in your lives. I see so many of you who began your journey where Jacob was that first 40 years. Then you begin to find out about Jesus Christ and you commit your life to Christ. You commit yourself to be a blessing and to being the presence of Christ in the world and things change for you. It's fun to watch the transformation.

I think of a man I know who became part of our congregation many years ago. He was very successful in the world's eyes but he was somewhat mean and the people who worked with him didn't really like him. He was tough but one Christmas Eve he came to church because he got one of our postcards and I suppose the Holy Spirit prompted him. Something began to happen on Christmas Eve and he came back for the January sermon series. He kept coming through the season of lent and on Easter weekend he grabbed my hand and he left with tears in his eyes and said, "I need to change. I can't keep living like this. Today I decided that I really do believe in God and I want to follow Jesus Christ."

He began to use the Meditation Moments every day and he got connected to a small group. Several months later one of our church members who works with this man came up to me and said, "I don't know what happened to him, but he's not the same man that he was before. I actually like him now!" He wasn't the same man. He was changed from the inside out. His life purpose in life orientation is not the same.

This first part of Jacob's life is about transformation, and it often is our story. We start out in life focused on ourselves and we don't always care about other people or their thoughts. We can be ruthless and do whatever it takes to get what we want, but this part of Jacob's story ends with him having an

encounter with God that changes him forever.

My hope for you today and every time you set foot in the building is that you would have that same experience, where you have a chance to encounter the living God and know that you can be the presence of Jesus Christ the world. I hope you can say to him every day, "Here I am Lord, send me and use me!"

As we close I invite you to put your hands on your lap if you would. Close your eyes and as your eyes are closed I want to ask you a simple question.

SLIDE Prayer

Are you Jacob in the part of his life? Are you still treating people poorly, using them, deceiving, lying and cheating just to get what you want? Or have you come to understand that there is a God who knows your name and loves you, and has a purpose for your life which is far different from that?

Even in my own life, and for those of us who decided to follow Christ, there are moments where we have mistreated other people or done the wrong thing. Let's take a minute just to say, "God, I'm sorry for the way I have treated others. I'm sorry for the way I have lived for myself. Help me oh Lord not to do that anymore." I invite you to pray that and bring to God what you need to bring in the silence...

Now you might simply offer God this prayer, "Lord, help me to follow you, to be one of Jacob's descendants. Make me a blessing to others. Help me to follow and serve you..."

Lord, thank you for Jacob's story—the humor in it, the profound messages that we see, in the invitation for us to see ourselves in this story. God, as you chase after Jacob, even when he was turned away from you, we know you chase after us. Today we offer ourselves to you. Help us to love you. Help us to know you. Help us to follow you. Help us to be a blessing to all that we meet. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

“Birthrights, a Bowl of Stew, Blessings and Belief”

Theme: Wrestling with God

Scripture: *Genesis 25:21-26*

Things I’d like to remember from today’s sermon:

Meditation Moments for Monday, September 23 – Read Genesis 25:19-26 – Twin boys—and they were trouble from the start. Rebekah could feel them grappling (“jostling” may be too mild a word) before they were born. Why does Genesis stress that Jacob was born “grasping his brother’s heel”? To “grasp the heel” was a Hebrew way of saying a person was devious. (We still call people like that “heels”!)

- **Jacob, Abraham’s grandson, enters the Bible story. Jacob’s descendant, Jesus, quoted Exodus 3:6, where God self-identifies as “the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.” (Mark 12:26-27) What barriers could have kept the baby Jacob from being a great patriarch, a key person in history?**
- These spare Hebrew stories omit so much we’d like to know. It’s clear, however, that Isaac and Rebekah turned to God with their concerns, and found divine guidance and help. Have you made it a central part of your life to “inquire of the Lord”? Do you have mentors or models who help you know how to do that?

Tuesday, September 24 – Read Genesis 25:27-34 – Isaac’s boys were twins, true, but hardly alike! Esau traded his birthright for a bowl of stew—prompted by Jacob. What’s a “birthright”? In their culture, the oldest son (even if by just minutes) inherited twice as much as others. The birthright also implied family leadership. Genesis saw Esau as both foolish and disloyal to give it away so casually.

- Jacob was “sharp,” in all of the positive and negatives senses that term can carry. What do you learn about yourself through your responses to this story? Are you more apt to admire Jacob or to deplore the way he treated Esau? With which qualities in each of the brothers do you most identify?
- We may not know what “Edom” (verse 30) means. Most Israelites would have known at once. The nation of Edom (Esau’s progeny) lived next to Israel in the desert by the Dead Sea, was mostly hostile, and cheered when Israel was crushed (Psalm 137:7). How can you act to keep conflicts in your family or work from having long-lasting results?

Wednesday, September 25 – Read Genesis 26:34 to 27:29 – Both Isaac and Rebekah played favorites (Genesis 25:28). Isaac tried to flout custom by giving a parting blessing only to Esau, his chosen. Rebekah overheard. She and Jacob fooled nearly blind Isaac, and Jacob got the blessing. Jacob now had all of Esau's birthright. Genesis is bluntly frank about Isaac's family, the keepers of the covenant!

- Usually, a father called all his sons around his deathbed, and blessed each one (see Genesis 49). Isaac was not just a naive victim—he tried to bypass Jacob. Do you believe God could have worked in this situation without Rebekah's deceit or not? How do you decide when to wait and trust God and when you need to act?
- Genesis hints in many ways that Esau was not likely to carry on Abraham's covenant with God (e.g. Genesis 26:34-35). What do you learn about God's heart from God's readiness to work with Jacob, despite Jacob's flaws? In what ways has God had to be patient with you?

Thursday, September 26 – Read Genesis 27:30-41 – Esau's return showed up Jacob's fraud—but too late. You may ask, "Why not just take back the blessing, or say it again to Esau?" Isaac's world saw words as potent, not trivial (unlike ours, which says, "They're just words"). Often we can't just say, "I didn't mean it" and undo the harm words cause. Esau's words at the end were angry and ominous.

- Isaac and Jacob's culture may have been a little "over the top" on the permanent nature of words. We, on the other hand, are probably too casual about that (see James 3:2-11). When have you wished you could take back words that were irretrievably gone? When have "just words" uplifted and blessed you?
- Only late in the story does Esau show any interest in or appreciation for the blessing and birthright that might have been his. How might his life have been different if he had valued them from the start? Now he became angry and bitter. What healthier, more healing ways have you found to deal with your regrets and hurts?

Friday, September 27 – Read Genesis 27:42 – 28:22 – Jacob ran for his life. Isaac didn't think the plotting and hurt wiped out God's covenant with Abraham (28:3-4). And God went with Jacob. Did you ever sing "Jacob's Ladder"? In Jacob's dream, the Lord at the top of the ladder promised him safety and a role in God's grand story. Jacob inherited the covenant promises, not because he was great, but because God is.

- As to Abraham in Genesis 12:3, so here God promised Jacob that his descendants would be a blessing for all peoples on earth. How does this "blessed to be a blessing" theme shape your grasp of what it meant for God to bless Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? How does it challenge you to use the blessings in your life?
- Genesis says that when Jacob awoke, he said, "Surely the Lord God is in this place, and I was not aware of it." Have you ever had a moment like that—an uncanny sense that "God is in this place, this person, this event—and I had missed it"? How can you become more aware of God's presence in your life?

Saturday, September 28 – **Personal Application:** In Genesis 28:18, Jacob turned the stone he used for a pillow into a sign of God being there with him, even in painful times. Find a way to do something similar in your life. It might be a picture put up in your workspace, a verse taped to the dash of your car, or a common TV tray used as a simple altar. Creatively remind yourself of God's abiding presence and steadfast love.

Family Activity: Do you appreciate receiving a blessing? Blessings, whether they are words, gifts, or kind deeds uplift our spirits, renew our strength and sustain us along life's journey. Scripture is filled with blessings from God. Read aloud the following passages: Genesis 2: 2-3; Psalm 33: 12; Ezekiel 34: 26; and Matthew 5: 3-11. Discuss the blessings found in each one. Create a family blessing basket. Write kind word or phrases on several small slips of colorful paper and place them in a basket. Younger

children could draw pictures to place in the blessing basket. Whenever a family member is in need of a blessing, pull a slip of paper, read or show it to him or her, then share a hug or smile.

Prayer: Dear God, as we read about Jacob's beginnings, we relate to his moments of manipulation, scheming and shortfalls. Yet, despite all this, you were with him every step of his journey. This brings me confidence, Lord, that you will always be with me no matter what I say or do. Forgive me for the times when I do not live up to your hopes for me and transform me this day by your ever-present grace. Amen.