

Theme: The Stories of Jacob
“Wrestling with God”

Sermon preached by Jeff Huber – based on a sermon series by Adam Hamilton
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Genesis 32:22-28

22 During the night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two servant wives, and his eleven sons and crossed the Jabbok River with them. 23 After taking them to the other side, he sent over all his possessions. 24 This left Jacob all alone in the camp, and a man came and wrestled with him until the dawn began to break.

25 When the man saw that he would not win the match, he touched Jacob’s hip and wrenched it out of its socket.

26 Then the man said, “Let me go, for the dawn is breaking!”

But Jacob said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.”

27 “What is your name?” the man asked. He replied, “Jacob.”

28 “Your name will no longer be Jacob,” the man told him. “From now on you will be called Israel, because you have fought with God and with men and have won.”

VIDEO Sermon Starter – Wrestling with God

SLIDE Wrestling with God

Two weeks ago I went with my daughter's fifth grade class to Camp Redcloud near Lake City for three days of outdoor education. Our final night at camp, the wonderful staff that we had all week long hosted a campfire and told stories and did skits for the kids. We mostly laughed but there were times of deep reflection as well as we thought about what we learned during the week. 2000 years ago the Hebrew people did the same thing every evening as they gathered around the evening fire and told stories which made them laugh and made them think about themselves and about God.

These stories were the foundational stories that were so important that they were eventually written down which is what we have in the book of Genesis. Half of the book of Genesis is written about Jacob and his family and we have been looking at those stories in this series of sermons. Let me remind you where we have been so far in terms of the story Jacob.

We learned that Jacob was born a twin to Isaac and Rebekah, and Isaac was the first biological son of Abraham and Sarah. Jacob and his twin Esau were fighting and jostling even inside their mother's womb before they were born. Esau was born first and was named Esau because that name means "hairy" and when he was born he was covered with hair and he was red. Jacob was born just after, clutching the heel of his slightly older brother. Jacob's name literally means "to pull the heel" and that phrase is similar to our phrase "to pull someone's leg." He was called Jacob the trickster or the deceiver and he lived into that name.

At the age of 18 Esau was coming in from the field and he was very tired. Jacob knew that his older brother would inherit twice as much as he did because he got two portions of the three parts of the inheritance. So Jacob created a marvelous stew and when Esau came in that night and was famished, he smelled the stew and said, "I want some of that stew." Jacob said he was welcome to have some stew as long as Esau gave him his birthright. In this way, Jacob manipulated his brother into giving him his birthright for a bowl of stew and some bread and wine.

When two of them were 40 years old Isaac their father thought he was dying and it was time to announce the deathbed blessing upon the oldest son who was Esau. Esau was also Isaac's favorite son and he told them to go out and make a meal for them and then he would bless Esau and his younger brother would have to serve him. The land would go to Esau and his descendants because of this blessing. Jacob was Rebekah's favorite son and when she found out that Isaac was going to give a blessing, she called Jacob and told him to go out and find a couple of lambs from the flock and she would make meal for him. Then he could pretend to be Esau to his sight impaired father Isaac. Jacob went in just before Esau returned and because he was wearing gloves on his arms, which were hairy, and a cloak that smelled like his brother, Esau, Isaac was convinced this was Esau and so he put his hands on Jacob and blessed him with a blessing that was meant for his older brother. He blesses Jacob with good land and tells him that his brother will serve him.

When Esau returned to discovered what has happened, he wanted to kill his brother Jacob because Jacob had gone too far in being a trickster and deceiver. Rebekah sends Jacob away to keep him safe and tells him to go up to the old country in the North and find her brother Laban. There he can find a wife and get married and have children, and then Rebecca said that she would send for him when it was safe and Esau had cooled off. Unfortunately, Rebecca died before she could send for Jacob and they never saw each other again.

Jacob meets a beautiful woman named Rachel and he falls madly in love and we learned last week of their beautiful love story. He offers seven years of labor to work for Rachel's father Laban in order to have her hand in marriage. Laban agrees and after Jacob has worked seven years, they have a wedding celebration. There was a heavy veil across the bride's face during the wedding celebration and during the wedding ceremony itself. After the party, at which there had been much drinking, Jacob goes into the tent to make love to his wife Rachel to consummate the marriage. He makes love to a woman only he doesn't know that this is not Rachel but the unattractive, older sister Leah. Laban has pulled a fast one on Jacob in order to marry off his oldest daughter.

Jacob awakes in the marriage tent and he's curious because he had been tricked and he has married the wrong woman. He confronts Laban and says, "What have you done to me?" Laban says, "This is how we do it here. You married the older one and then you can have the younger one. Give me seven more years of working for me and I will let you marry my more beautiful daughter Rachel." The deceiver is deceived and the trickster is tricked and he spent 14 years of his life working so he can have two wives and their maidservants.

They begin having a family and ultimately they produce 13 children between the two wives and the two maidservants, Zilpah and Bilhah. Laban continues to receive the benefit of Jacob's labor for a total of 20 years, seven years for each his daughters and six years for Jacob's flocks.

At the end of the 20 years Laban becomes jealous and Jacob decides to leave and flee the land of Paddan-Aram. He takes with them his wives and his children and his servants and all of his flocks. He heads back to the land of Canaan where he is from and he will be forced to encounter his brother Esau again. This brings us to the next phase in Jacob's life.

Please take out of your bulletin your Meditation Moments and your Message Notes. You will find a Scripture passage we are using at the top and below that are some space where you can write down things you would like to remember and reflect upon from today's message. I trust there will be a few things you hear today that you want to remember and reflect upon during the week so use that space to write those things down. You then will find an opportunity to read your Bible on your own this week and to read the stories of Jacob on your own. If you are watching at home or online you can download off of the website.

SLIDE Ancient Near East Map Jacob and Esau's Route (Graphic)

Just to give us our bearings for today's story let's take a look at the map on the video screen. You also will have a copy of this map in your bulletin this week. Jacob has been living up north which is modern-day Syria. He has lived there 20 years but when things go bad with his father-in-law, Laban, he gathers his family and possessions and moves south back towards Canaan. He leaves without saying goodbye and he ends up right here on the banks of the Jabbok River right in the middle of your map on the right-hand side. You can see the Sea of Galilee at the top and the Jordan River runs down into the Dead Sea. Jacob has grown up in this land of Canaan and so he is heading home.

When Laban discovers that Jacob has left, he chases after him and meets up with him in this region near the Jabbok River. After much discussion they agree that Laban will stay up north and that Jacob will live down south. The only problem is that Jacob's brother Esau lives there with his flocks. Jacob can go back South where he will have to now deal with his brother Esau in the southern land of Canaan. This sets the stage for what will happen in today's story. Let's turn to Genesis 32:3 and see what happens next as Jacob and his family arrived at the Jabbok river, knowing he's going to have to confront his brother who wanted to kill him as he was leaving Canaan 20 years earlier.

SLIDE 3 Then Jacob sent messengers ahead to his brother, Esau, who was living in the region of Seir in the land of Edom. 4 He told them, "Give this message to my master Esau: 'Humble greetings from your servant Jacob. Until now I have been living with Uncle Laban, 5 and now I own cattle, donkeys, flocks of sheep and goats, and many servants, both men and women. I have sent these messengers to inform my lord of my coming, hoping that you will be friendly to me.'"

6 After delivering the message, the messengers returned to Jacob and reported, "We met your brother, Esau, and he is already on his way to meet you—with an army of 400 men!" 7 Jacob was terrified at the news. He divided his household, along with the flocks and herds and camels, into two groups. 8 He thought, "If Esau meets one group and attacks it, perhaps the other group can escape."

Notice in this part of this story that the Jacob who was cocky and arrogant is now gone. He is no longer the one who believes the whole world revolves around himself and he's going to try to make amends. In this text he calls his brother Esau, "my master," and calls himself a servant to his brother. When Jacob stole the blessing he became the Master and his brother became the servant, but

now in this text he is reversing those roles. He is recognizing that he stole this blessing and that now he is the servant and Esau is the master as the older brother.

When Jacob hears that Esau is sending 400 men, he sees this as an army, and there is no way that Jacob and all of his servants can withstand the onslaught of the 400 men led by an angry brother who wants to kill his younger brother who tricked him out of his birthright and blessing. This will be a slaughter in the mind of Jacob. Jacob's family will be massacred by Esau and his 400 fighting men and Jacob is terrified. This is one of the most frightening moments of Jacob's life and he doesn't know what to do.

The only plan he can think of is to divide his family in half. He takes half of his family and his property and he sends them in one direction and then he takes the other half and he sends them in a different direction. Jacob is thinking that if he divides up the family, at least for those 400 fighting man coming with Esau, they will attack one half of my family and slaughter them but hopefully the other half will escape. Can you feel this pain and he is planning which half of his family will live and which half will die?

After Jacob makes this plan he then prays and we have this prayer in Genesis 32:9. This is a powerful prayer and we find in that moment of distress Jacob does two things. He plans for his own deliverance and he takes action and he prays. He doesn't simply pray and wait for God to take care of everything. He doesn't simply act and ignore God. Instead, he takes action and he prays and this is what we do as people of faith.

SLIDE Jacob takes action AND he prays

When we are facing dire circumstances we both pray and we begin to plan. We plan and take action as it depends on us and we pray as though it depends on God and somewhere in the middle of that we are counting on the fact that we will be delivered.

There also is an opportunity in this prayer to learn something about how we might pray as we go to God when we are struggling with the dark place in our lives. This is a powerful part of the Scriptures and that gives us guidance on how to pray that we can learn and be mentored by these great figures in the Scriptures. We can actually see a pattern for how we might pray in the middle of this prayer from Jacob beginning in verse nine.

SLIDE 9 Then Jacob prayed, "O God of my grandfather Abraham, and God

of my father, Isaac—O Lord

SLIDE Naming God

This prayer begins with naming God and recognizing that God is God and Jacob is not. He recognizes that God is the God of his grandfather and his father who promised to bless Abraham and make his descendants as numerous as the stars.

SLIDE LORD = Yahweh

When you see this word “LORD” in the Old Testament it is referring to a very sacred way of talking about God. We sometimes miss translate this word as Jehovah and when most devout Jews see this name for God, they won't even say it out loud or speak his name because it is so holy. Yahweh means, "I am that I am." God gives us this as his name, "I am life itself. All beings spring forth from me. Nothing that exists would exist apart from me. I am the very source of life itself." All of this meaning comes out of this one word Yahweh. This prayer begins with naming God and recognizing that God is the source of all of life.

SLIDE Remembering the promises of God

The next part of verse nine is a place where Jacob remembers the promises of God.

SLIDE *O Lord, you told me, ‘Return to your own land and to your relatives.’ And you promised me, ‘I will treat you kindly.’*

When we are in prayer and we are struggling, it is good to remember the promises of God. Jacob is remembering that God promises to be with him always and that God will treat him kindly. In verse 10 he recognizes that he has done several things to push God away but God has remained faithful. After he conveys this sense of being unworthy he recalls what God has done for him so far.

SLIDE *10 I am not worthy of all the unfailing love and faithfulness you have shown to me, your servant. When I left home and crossed the Jordan River, I owned nothing except a walking stick. Now my household fills two large camps!*

Finally, Jacob makes the petition in verse 11.

SLIDE Petitioning God

SLIDE *11 O Lord, please rescue me from the hand of my brother, Esau. I am afraid that he is coming to attack me, along with my wives and children.*

The prayer ends by remembering the promises of God once again.

SLIDE ***12 But you promised me, 'I will surely treat you kindly, and I will multiply your descendants until they become as numerous as the sands along the seashore—too many to count.'***

We need to remember that in the midst of our anxiety we miss out on something important when we don't take the time to pray. When we are afraid we go to God in prayer, and we act and plan.

When we receive a difficult diagnosis we go see the very best doctors and we listen to the nurses and we pray. When we lose our job we work on finding another job by networking and putting in job applications and we pray. When we have a relationship which is broken, we work to make amends and we pray. This is what the apostle Paul tells us in Philippians 4:6-7.

SLIDE ***6 Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. 7 Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.***

There are times in my life I have felt afraid. There are times when I have felt alone. There are times when I have felt anxiety and in those moments, I begin to talk to God without even realizing it sometimes. Simple prayers can make all the difference.

When I was in seminary we learned to find a breath prayer, which is a simple line that you can breathe in and out from Scripture. You might do this with Psalm 23 and just pick out one line or phrase that you can say and have in your back pocket when you get afraid. *The Lord is my shepherd. The Lord is my shepherd. The Lord is my shepherd.* You keep repeating that and breathing it in and out until the peace comes over you.

You might remind yourself of these words. *Yea though I walk through the Valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.* We can say these lines over and over again to remind ourselves that God is with us. Maybe we can take a line from a song that touches us deeply, but we need something that can help us go to God in prayer in those moments when we feel darkness surrounding it like Jacob experienced.

Let me remind you of a simple pattern for prayer that we talked about a couple of years ago when we did a sermon series on prayer. You may have heard

it before but it would be helpful for each of us to remember.

SLIDE A – Adoration (Build these slides so one letter comes up each time)

This is the naming of God and the praising God.

SLIDE A – Adoration

C – Confession

We name those places where there is brokenness or where we have done wrong.

SLIDE A – Adoration

C – Confession

T – Thanksgiving

We give God thanks for the way that God delivered us from the past and for the blessings that we do have, even in the midst of tough times. We recognize the blessings in our lives.

SLIDE A – Adoration

C – Confession

T – Thanksgiving

S – Supplication

Supplication is about asking God to supply our needs.

This is the general framework of Jacob's prayer and it is the framework of the Lord's Prayer, but most importantly, remember that when we are facing difficult times, we act and we pray.

Most often when we pray we want God to send a legion of angels or create a miracle to fix things, but it doesn't work that way very often. How it works in my life is that I pray that I try to listen and then I might have a thought or an idea. If I am praying with a group, then someone else might have a thought or an idea or sometimes I am praying and I get a e-mail or something that gives me an idea of how to deal with whatever it is I'm struggling with.

Jacob has this experience when he realizes that he might be able to do something to keep his brother and his army from killing him and his family. He decides to let his brother know how sorry he is for what is done. He is going to try to appease him and so Jacob decides to send a gift to Esau.

SLIDE **3** Jacob stayed where he was for the night. Then he selected these gifts from his possessions to present to his brother, Esau:
14 200 female goats, 20 male goats, 200 ewes, 20 rams,
15 30 female camels with their young, 40 cows, 10 bulls, 20 female donkeys, and 10 male donkeys. **16** He divided these animals into herds and assigned each to different servants. Then he told his servants, "Go ahead of me with the animals, but keep some distance between the herds."
17 He gave these instructions to the men leading the first group: "When my brother, Esau, meets you, he will ask, 'Whose servants are you? Where are you going? Who owns these animals?' **18** You must reply, 'They belong to your servant Jacob, but they are a gift for his master Esau. Look, he is coming right behind us.'"
19 Jacob gave the same instructions to the second and third herdsmen and to all who followed behind the herds: "You must say the same thing to Esau when you meet him. **20** And be sure to say, 'Look, your servant Jacob is right behind us.'"
Jacob thought, "I will try to appease him by sending gifts ahead of me. When I see him in person, perhaps he will be friendly to me."
21 So the gifts were sent on ahead, while Jacob himself spent that night in the camp.

Jacob is hoping that Esau will receive these gifts and spare his family but we are meant to notice that Jacob is returning the birthright that he stole from his brother for a bowl of stew. There are 560 animals he's returning to Esau which would probably be worth a hundred thousand dollars or more. He sends the animals back wave after wave as a way of saying, "I recognize that I did wrong. I took the birthright from you. You can have it. I give it back to you with interest. I took the blessing from you. You were to be the master and I am to be the servant and I stole that from you but now I give it back. Now I am your servant and you are my master."

This idea came AFTER he prayed.

Jacob then sends his family and flocks that are remaining off into two groups and he spends the night on the banks of the Jabbok River all by himself, which leads us to the next scene of our story.

SLIDE **Wrestling with God**

This sermon series is actually named after this part of the Jacob story

because it is so intriguing. It is literally a defining moment for Jacob and all of his descendants. Remember that spiritually, as Christians, we are also descendants of Jacob and part of his extended family spiritually speaking. This is a defining moment, not only for Jacob, but for all who would follow after them. This scene is a bit confusing and kind of difficult to understand at times so let's listen very carefully. You might turn in your Bible to Genesis 32:24.

SLIDE **24 This left Jacob all alone in the camp, and a man came and wrestled with him until the dawn began to break. 25 When the man saw that he would not win the match, he touched Jacob's hip and wrenched it out of its socket. 26 Then the man said, "Let me go, for the dawn is breaking!"**
But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."
27 "What is your name?" the man asked.
He replied, "Jacob."
28 "Your name will no longer be Jacob," the man told him. "From now on you will be called Israel,* because you have fought with God and with men and have won."
29 "Please tell me your name," Jacob said.
"Why do you want to know my name?" the man replied. Then he blessed Jacob there.
30 Jacob named the place Peniel (which means "face of God"), for he said, "I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been spared."

Jacob is sixty years old and he is all by himself camping on the bank of the River when a man comes to wrestle with him. He wrestles with the man all my alone. Who is this man? Jacob believes this is God and that God has wrestled with him all night long. In his darkest moments, when he is terrified, God wrestles with Jacob.

SLIDE **We all wrestle with God**

While this story is meant to tell us what happened to Jacob, it also is a metaphor for what happens in our own lives because every single one of us wrestles with God if we are honest. **We wrestle with doing God's will.** We wrestle with God when we know what we want to do but it is not necessarily what God wants us to do. We feel the tension of wanting to do our own thing and God wanting us to do something else. Sometimes we wrestle with God and God prevails and sometimes we persevere in our faith and sometimes we run away. There are times when we know what we're not supposed to do and we wrestle

with that as well.

Paul describes this wrestling that we all have when he says that the things that he wants to do, he finds it hard to do, and those things that he knows he shouldn't do, he finds himself wanting to do. He wonders who can save him from the struggles and he wrestles with God much like we do as we look at what God wants us to do and what God doesn't want us to do. Do we run away or do we stay?

We also wrestle with God when we are disappointed in God. You have a person that you love with all of your heart. You have prayed for them and you have asked for every prayer team that you can find it to pray for them and they died anyway. Something tragic happens to us and we wrestle with God. You take your fist and you pound it into God's chest and scream, "Why? Why didn't you save me? Why didn't you help me?"

The act of wrestling with God in those moments is by itself an act of faith, because we haven't turned away from God but instead we are still pounding and arguing and yelling at God. God can take it and at some point after we weep and cry and yell, we fall into God's arms again because we are people of faith.

We wrestle with belief in God. Sometimes we wrestle with God because we wonder if God even exists. God seems conspicuous by his absence. Where are you? Are you even there? Are you a figment of my imagination? Did I make you up or did my parents make you up? Maybe you are not real adult God? Can I trust you in the midst of this dark time that you are actually going to help me and deliver me? I don't see you doing anything just yet and it would be nice if you would give me a clue?

When we ask those questions, we are wrestling with God and simply holding on and refusing to let go, despite all the evidence to the contrary that God is not present.

In many ways all of these reasons are why Jacob is wrestling with God this night. Jacob could wake up in the morning and find himself and his family slaughtered and he is wrestling with God all night long, but he refuses to let go. That is an act of faith that makes this story very profound.

There are several other interesting side notes to this story. I have several Jewish friends who I have conversations with and sometimes they will say something like this. "I really like Jesus. He's an interesting figure and I believe he is a fascinating teacher and prophet. But we just don't believe as Jews that God

came in the flesh and walked on this planet as you Christians believe about Jesus. That just doesn't happen."

But we find it happening twice in the Hebrew Bible. Here with Jacob and another time when Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, in the book of Daniel, were thrown in the fiery furnace by King Nebuchadnezzar. The King is expecting them to be consumed in the fire of the furnace, but instead he sees these three Jewish men protected and alive. He then sees a fourth man dancing around the flames, one who looks like the Son of Man according to the Scriptures. In that moment when they were to be consumed, God came in the flesh and walked with them through the fires of the fiery furnace.

What does that tell you about God walking with us through the dark times of life? Here at Jacob's lowest moment, God came as a man and wrestled with Jacob all night long.

SLIDE Jesus the wrestler

This is a powerful prefiguring of what happens in Jesus Christ. We believe that God was actually born into this world in Jesus and he experienced everything that we experience. Jesus came and in many ways he was a wrestler. He came to wrestle with those who were lost and who would run away, and he was wrestling them back to God. He wrestled with the pious, religious people who didn't quite get it and he showed them their hypocrisy and their own broken places.

We believe that Jesus hung on the cross and wrestled with sin and death and evil and hate. There was that moment on the cross where it appeared that Jesus was pinned to the mat and the referee was counting down to 10. It looked like the match was over and Jesus, the wrestler, had lost.

But on the third day the wrestler sprang to life. He became the winner and Jesus pinned death and sin and evil to the mat. Jesus was the wrestler and he wrestles with us our whole lives.

SLIDE Why could the man not win the match with Jacob?

There is another interesting question to ponder in this story. Why couldn't God win the match with Jacob? How long should it really take for God to finish off a wrestling match?

When my children were younger and we had just come back from adopting them in Ukraine, I would come home from work and they sometimes would both be standing at the front door waiting for me to get home. I would walk in the door and they would both scream and giggle and each one would take one of my legs

and wrap themselves around them. They would do it really tight and it would be hard to walk even a few steps. They would claim victory in Ukrainian until I picked them both up and threw them over my shoulders and began to tickle them and throw them on the couch. Then I would lay on top of both of them and push them as they laughed and laughed and I would claim victory in that tickle war.

Who really won that match? Did the kids have me or did I have the kids? Did Jacob have God or did God have Jacob? All that time that Jacob thinks he is wrestling I wonder if God was just playing with him and teaching him. Maybe God is teaching Jacob, "I'm not going to let you go."

SLIDE Did God really not know Jacob's name?

Here's another question to ponder in this story. It says that at daybreak the man asked Jacob, "What is your name?" Did God really not know Jacob's name? Is God confused? Is God just out looking for a fight because he wants to wrestle with someone that night?

What is God doing when he asks Jacob his name? I think he wants Jacob to say it out loud, "My name is trickster. My name is deceiver. That's my name. I'm the one who pulls the heel. I'm the one who tricks people out of things. That's me."

God says to him, "That was your name, but not anymore. From this time forward your name will be Israel which means, 'to wrestle with God,' for you have wrestled with God and human beings and you have prevailed."

Israel is not just someone who wrestles with God. We all do that. Israel is someone who wrestles with God and prevails. Israel is one that says, "Despite the circumstances I am going to hold on and not let go. I am going to turn back to you God even though I don't feel like it. Even when I have run away I'm going to run back into your arms." That's what it means to be Israel—to continue to trust, to continue to hold on and to not let go.

This is my prayer for you as your pastor, that you might be Israel. I pray that you might be the people who at times of trouble and difficulty run back into God's arms. I pray that you will always walk with God no matter what happens in your life. I pray you will refuse to let go because God refuses to let go of you. You are Israel. I am Israel.

SLIDE Was God trying to hurt Jacob?

Before the match is over, the man touches Jacob's hip and he will walk with a limp the rest of his life. Was God trying to hurt Jacob? I believe God never

wanted Jacob to forget this wrestling match. The limp is a metaphor of a constant reminder that when we wrestle with God and we refuse to give up, we prevail in the end. The scars that we carry with us in this life, the painful moments of the past, point to the fact that we survived. We trust and somehow we make it through and that is what it was with the hip socket for Jacob.

SLIDE Jacob meets Esau

This leads us to the closing of this part of Jacob's story, when Jacob finally meets Esau. In the morning Jacob has already sent his family across the river. Jacob then sent his family in two directions and then there is the dust of the 400 men in Esau's army that are coming to meet them. The old Jacob might've stayed back on one side of the river and figured out which of the two sides of the family would survive and then go and lead them. But that doesn't happen.

Instead, Jacob goes ahead of the rest of his family. He has wrestled with God and he trusts that somehow God will be with him. He bows down and in essence he presents his head to Esau, "If you're going to kill me, then kill me." This is what we read in Genesis 33:3.

SLIDE 3 Then Jacob went on ahead. As he approached his brother, he bowed to the ground seven times before him. 4 Then Esau ran to meet him and embraced him, threw his arms around his neck, and kissed him. And they both wept.

Jacob is waiting to be run through with the sword and instead his brother wrapped his arms around his neck and kisses him. Esau didn't even need the animals as a gift and, as a matter fact, he wants Jacob to keep them. What we see demonstrated in this moment is pure grace. Esau shows his brother mercy even though he doesn't deserve it and that's what mercy and grace is. This is the very definition of grace because you don't deserve it when you get it. You can't earn it and you can't give enough flocks of animals to receive it. It is given as a gift that is undeserved and all you have to do is receive.

SLIDE A story of reconciliation

There are several things to notice in this part of the story. The first is that this is the story of reconciliation. These two brothers had not spoken for 20 years. There had been no attempt at making up or making apologies or restitution in the past. Jacob realizes that because he is between a rock and a hard place it's time for him to make up with his brother Esau. Jacob teaches us that it's never too late to make things right.

Some of us have not spoken with our father or mother in 20 years. Some have not spoken with a brother or sister. Some of us have a friend that we used to love and they betrayed us and you haven't talked to them in 20 years. You have held a grudge all this time. Maybe you have wronged somebody else. Maybe you didn't even think you did anything wrong so now you are going to apologize. Maybe it's been 20 years or 10 years or five years or six months, but Jacob is teaching us that there comes a point where we must go and express our desire for making things right and reconciling.

We also learned from Jacob that we should be extravagant in our apology. We should go over and above in saying, "I'm sorry for what I did. I was a fool and I know I hurt you. I didn't mean to and it wasn't my intention. This is my way of saying I'm so sorry."

Esau is a picture of what God calls us to be and to do because he shows mercy to his brother, even though his brother didn't deserve this. Mercy and grace that Jacob experienced were coming whether he sent those flocks or not. Those 400 men were not fighting men but they were the moving company. They were coming to help move them into the land of Canaan. Esau brought 400 people just to help his brother move back home. How is that for extravagant grace and generosity?

How many times did Jacob bow down before Esau? He bowed down seven times. Do you remember what Jesus said about forgiveness? He said that we should not just forgive seven times but 70x7 times. Jesus taught us about offering this mercy and grace when he said to pray this way, "God, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

SLIDE A story of grace

God uses Esau to teach us about grace. Esau, the hairy one, becomes a personification of the grace of God. In this moment Jacob can see what God is truly like, that God is merciful and slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. As far as the East is from the West, so far will God remove and restore your broken places. This is what is written in the Psalms and this is what the gospel teaches us.

God sent Jesus Christ to show us mercy and to save us from each other and from ourselves. I can't help but think that Jesus had this story in mind when he told the parable of the prodigal son. Do you remember that story? There was a father who had two sons and the younger one, Jacob, wanders away. He takes his father's inheritance because he wanted it now and for himself. He didn't care if

his father needed it later because he wanted it now.

That younger son goes to the far-off country, much like Jacob went to Paddan-Aram, but he squanders all of his wealth. The son ends up eating pig slop because he has nothing left and he wonders if he could go back and just be a servant to his father, because then he would at least be able to eat. Jesus tells us in this story that when the boy was a long way off, the father saw him and ran to him. Before Jacob got Esau, Esau had sent out 400 men to find his brother and welcomed him home.

The father wrapped his arms around his son's neck and he kisses him. Do you remember what Esau does? He wrapped his arms around Jacob's neck and he kisses him and he weeps. He celebrated that his brother was lost was found again. Jesus said the father celebrated that his son who was lost was found again.

This story is a story about the love of God for us, who waits for his prodigal children to come home. God welcomes us with open arms because that's what God does, because that's who God is.

When you think about Jacob and his story of wrestling with God, I encourage you to remember these things.

- When trouble comes we act and we pray.
- Jacob, Israel, wrestled with God and he refused to let go and he prevailed.
- Esau teaches us about mercy towards others and God's mercy towards us.

If you're willing would you join me in this prayer?

SLIDE Prayer

As we go to God in prayer I recognize that some of you may be here today and you may be going through a really dark time like Jacob was. I want to encourage you to pray and simply trust God. You might simply pray, "God help me through this. Save me. I remember your promises of what you've done for me in the past. I trust you. Hold on to me, God, and don't let me go." I encourage you to pray that way as we take a few moments to go to God in a minute.

For those of you who find yourself in a place where you have turned away from God, where you have wrestled with God and you decided to go your own way, or you are disappointed with God or you are angry with God, I want you to know that God can take it when you wrestle. If you have pounded against God's chest and turned away from God, please know that he is waiting for you to run back into His arms. So run into His arms and embrace Him and allow God to hold

you. He's waiting literally saying, "Come here my child." I invite you to pray in this way in a few moments.

Some of you have been alienated from a family member or a friend for a long time. It's been too long. You might pray for that person and pray, "God, please help me to show mercy. Help me to ask for mercy. Reconcile me with my brother or sister, my father or mother, my friend." You might pray this way.

Whatever you need, take a few moments and bring those things to God...

Oh God, we have all been Jacob. We have hurt other people. We have had seasons where it is all been about us and then it comes back to haunt us. Forgive us for those times. God, we all have had moments where we are angry with you, or disappointed, or felt like you were so far away we didn't even know if we believe in you anymore. We have had times where we have turned to do our own thing and rejected you altogether. Tonight we run back into your arms. Hold us, oh God, and don't let us go. Help us be Israel, those who cling to you and don't let go.

Finally, O God, reconcile us with those from whom we've been alienated. Help us to show mercy and grace. Help us to ask for forgiveness. We ask these things in Jesus' name who wrestled for us so that we might be forgiven and set free. Amen.

“Wrestling with God”

Theme: Wrestling with God

Scripture: Genesis 32: 3-8

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

Meditation Moments for Monday, October 7 – Read Genesis 32:1-21 – Laban had been a minor threat. Now a frightened Jacob was going to meet his twin Esau, who he perceived as a major threat. The first word he got was that Esau was coming to meet him with 400 men—which didn’t sound good! Jacob thought strategically, and sent gifts ahead in a way that might be psychologically and physically disarming to Esau.

- *Verses 1-2 of today’s reading say Jacob received a deep sign of God’s presence. By verse 7 he was in “fear and great distress.” Does fear always show lack of faith, or is it a normal human reaction even with faith? (Don’t forget Jesus in the garden—Luke 22:41-44.) When you feel frightened, what is it in your relationship with God that calms your fears?*

- *For the first time, we see Jacob praying earnestly. In verse 10, he said, “I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant.” How do you respond to this part of Jacob’s prayer? Can you honestly pray that prayer, or do you believe God “owes you” all you have and more?*

Tuesday, October 8 – Read Genesis 32:22-32 – Jacob sent his wives, his

sons, his servants and his possessions across the river. When Jacob was alone—just Jacob—“a man” wrestled with him until daylight. In the darkness, Jacob somehow knew this was not just a man, and asked, insistently, for a blessing. God gave him a new name, one that echoes even today—Israel. He left blessed—and limping!

- *Have you ever wrestled with God? If so, what led you to the wrestling? What was the outcome, and what marks of the struggle do you still carry with you? If not, what is your inner response to Jacob’s story? What circumstances or inner forces do you believe might lead people of faith to wrestle with God?*

- *With what are you wrestling right now: Certain people? God? Evil powers? Are you winning, losing, or “limping along”? How might God help in your struggle? Israel means, “he struggles with God.” What name might God give you?*

Wednesday, October 9 – Read Genesis 33:1-20 – Jacob (now limping) met Esau. Esau was gracious beyond expectations—an early Biblical picture of God’s grace. Jacob carefully kept calling Esau “lord,” and himself “your servant.” It probably showed both his spiritual growth in humility and his concern for safety in the face of his brother’s might. Jacob found a place to settle, and built an altar to God.

- *What signs do you find of ways that Jacob had grown during his twenty years of exile, and through wrestling with God? As you look back over your own life, what indicators can you see that God has been at work in you? Are there any areas in which Jacob’s growth challenges you to follow his example?*

- *When is it easier for you to forgive others? When is it harder? When is it easier to feel forgiven? When is it harder? What do your answers reveal about your fears? Your faith? Your God? Like Esau, what gift from someone are you having a hard time accepting? Can you be gracious and accept it today? The stories of the patriarchs frequently describe special places they devote to God. What place holds special meaning in your life?*

Thursday, October 10 – Read Genesis 35:1-15 – God told Jacob to return to the place where he had his dream of the ladder into heaven. Jacob did, and cleansed his household of the “foreign gods” they had carried. He renewed the name Bethel (House of God) for the spot. God spoke with Jacob, and again (or this may reflect a separate tradition behind the story) changed

Jacob's name to "Israel."

- *It's been said, "God loves you as you are, but God loves you too much to leave you that way." God loved and led Jacob and his family while they had Laban's household gods with them—but in today's reading they got rid of them. Do you have any "household gods"—any attitudes or practices God has been nudging you to change? Will you do it?*
- *What is your "Bethel" – where God has met you in times of stress? If you were to bury something under the oak at Shechem, what would you bury? What will do to thank God for the special places, promises and "fears of God" that God has given you?*

Friday, October 11 – Read Genesis 35:16-29 – Rachel, Jacob's great love, died giving birth to Benjamin. (Jacob's favoritism to Rachel's two sons will be a key to the next phase of the story.) Jacob got to see his father Isaac just before Isaac's long, patriarchal life ended. After the years of division, it is a bright spot to read that "his sons Esau and Jacob buried him."

- *Reconciliation is a key theme in Jacob's story. Esau once chose a wife because she would upset Isaac (Genesis 28:8-9). But in today's reading Esau joined Jacob, the brother he'd once sworn to kill, to honor their father. What spiritual and emotional choices does it take to keep the past from blighting the present?*
- *Consider Isaac's death in verse 29. How would you like your own life and death remembered?*

Saturday, October 12 – Personal Application: Most of us, at some point in our lives, will wrestle with God. Our wrestling will not be a physical wrestling match like Jacob's, but an internal struggle with God. That wrestling often occurs in what are called the "dark nights of the soul" when we feel hopelessness and despair and God seems conspicuous by his absence or silence. We wrestle with God when we want to do one thing, but we feel God wants us to do something else. We wrestle with God when something tragic has happened and we are angry with him and we don't understand. Sometimes we wrestle with God and our faith in God when we're facing difficult circumstances and we're fighting to trust him. Can you trust God today? What is keeping you from trusting God? Can you let that go in the coming days?

Family Activity: In the Bible, God changed the names of some of the major

characters. In this week's story, God changed Jacob's name to Israel. List the first and middle names of your family members. Using websites such as www.behindthename.com, research the history and meaning of each name. Discuss each person's unique personality traits. How much is that person like, or different from, the meaning of his or her name? Pretend each person can change his or her name. We usually choose names we think "sound nice." If you chose names for their meaning instead what would each person's name be and why? Thank God for knowing each of you by name and for loving you more than you can imagine.

Prayer: God, sometimes we play the prideful 'trickster,' just like Jacob. We want to walk in your footsteps, yet we feel a tension within ourselves as we struggle with our dual identity as your children and as products of the world. It challenges us to think of Jacob clinging urgently to you, gasping "I will not let you go until you bless me." Give us a deeper hunger for your presence and blessing. Teach us how to make being with you our highest priority. Amen.