

## WRESTLING WITH GOD

September 24, 2023

Good morning – it is good to be with you again. It appears that not only was your pastor on medical leave from church, I too, was on leave. Probably of another kind. Your pastor at least jumped on-line to watch worship. I am afraid I did not. I also am glad to report that there have been no bells involved in helping Kris out these six weeks. Thanks Charlie for suggesting it and Meg for offering to lend me a bell. But somehow we managed without a bell – a minor miracle I suppose!

I must say the first verse from the narrative reading nearly wore me out. Two wives, two maids, 11 children. I sometimes struggled with one wife, no maids, and two children. Jacob was a busy man! Perhaps a wise man as well. Did you notice that he sent them all, along with all their belongings, across the river to the other side. I'd like to think that Jacob was hoping for a quiet night alone – a rarity I would guess with two wives, two maids and 11 children. By the way those two wives, Leah and Rachael, they are sisters. Jacob's first love was Rachel, but he was tricked in to marrying Leah. He persisted and eventually also married Rachel.

Leah and Rachel are the daughters of Laban who is the brother of Rebekah, wife of Issac, who is the son of Abraham. I've often wondered if some of these Old Testament stories were the inspiration for soap operas.

He actually sent them ahead because he feared his brother Esau's wrath. Jacob had good reason to be fearful. He had tricked his brother out of his birthright. Jacob, with his mother Rebekah's help, tricked his father, Issac, out of Esau's blessing. Now a blessing is the father's gift to the eldest son. It is much more than what we might think of as a blessing in today's world. No, this blessing is like roadmap for the future. Here is the blessing that Issac gives Jacob:

May God give you of heaven's dew  
And of earth's richness –  
An abundance of grain and new wine  
May nations serve you  
And people bow down to you.  
Be lord over your brothers,  
And may the sons of your mother bow down to  
you.  
May those who curse you be cursed  
And those who bless you be blessed.

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Esau was furious and wanted to kill Jacob for his trickery and so Jacob fled to his mother's homeland. But after 14 years, God tells Jacob to return to the land of his father and to his relatives, and most importantly tells Jacob – I will be with you. This is where we find Jacob in today's reading. On the journey home to his family.

Now Jacob has learned that Esau is coming to meet him with 400 men and he has sent gifts and messengers to pacify Esau. His wives and children and his herds of goats and other possessions are on the other side of the river. Before he did these things, he first prayed to his God, the God of Issac and of Abraham and asked God to protect him from the hand of his brother. He feared Esau was coming to attack him and his wives and children.

And then the wrestling match begins. A wrestling match with God. A wrestling match in which Jacob will not let go until he receives a blessing from God. God changes Jacob's name to Israel – because he has struggled with God and with men and has overcome.

So, what are we to make of all of this? I found the writings of Melanie Campbell, a Christian writer from Oregon helpful in thinking through the lessons from Jacob's struggle.

It is not a stretch to take Jacob's story literally in the sense that his struggle with God occurs in the night. Perhaps you are like me, finding myself awake at three in the morning thinking about some problem or issue I am facing. It is in the quiet and solitude of the night that we often face our fears and worries. Perhaps it is something I have done or left undone. And where might we find peace? It is through forgiveness by the mercy of God. But it also means we need to turn to God for His mercy. Not inward or away, but turn to God. Time and time again, Jacob turns to God and seeks not only his protection but his mercy, for Jacob knows he was guilty of wrongfully treating his brother.

God wants to be in relationship with us. He wants us to persevere in seeking this relationship, even when it is hard or most importantly, when we are convinced we are right. When we turn to God, and we accept Christ Jesus as our Savior, then we are bound up with Him and have been given a new identity.

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We are born anew through Christ Jesus when we receive forgiveness and mercy from God. In Paul's letter to the Corinthians, he writes: Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old is gone, the new has come! (2 Corinthians 5:17).

And God wants this relationship to be intimate. By reading the bible, praying and worshipping with our hearts and minds fully focused on God can lead to a more intimate relationship. My Aunt LaVerna – she prays hard, fully focused, wholly into prayer with not only her heart and mind, but her whole body. I have witnessed this with her – it is powerful. The other place for this intimacy is in the community of Christ. To be with others, to witness their relationship with God, to be inspired by their faithfulness, brings an energy and peace to me. And I am reminded of this when? When I haven't been faithful in attending worship but am always received with warmth and grace when I do return.

Being close to God also requires humility. This does not mean thinking less about oneself, but it does mean thinking about oneself less.

If we can walk humbly with God, if we can trust in God's plan for us, trust that he knows what we need, and recognize that our dependence on God is a strength, not a weakness, we can find freedom from arrogance and pride. And in doing so we will be a better husband, father, mother, sister, neighbor, a better disciple of Christ. And we just might find ourselves sleeping through the night. Amen.