

This morning we are going to read another segment of the Jacob story; I've entitled the message "*Wrestling and Reconciling*". If you have your Bibles with you I want to encourage you to turn to Genesis 32-33; if you will using the Blue Bibles in the seat racks in front you, you can find our text on page 51.

Now I trust that when I use the word "story," with respect to the Scriptures, you understand what my intent behind the word. When I read to my daughter the story of Sleeping Beauty, or Cinderella, or the adventures of Little Bear, I'm ushering her into the world of imagination and make-believe. The goal of such stories is most often entertainment; neither she, nor I, are looking for any grand lessons about life.

The stories in Scripture are something very different. They describe life...real life...real encounters between God and humanity. And while there is drama, intrigue, suspense, and even entertainment in these Biblical stories, we read them with a different kind of expectation.

You might ask, "*how can a story, thousands of years old, focussed on a Palestinian nomad and his family, have anything to say to us about life on the North Shore in the 21st century?*" A most excellent question!

We read the Biblical story with expectation because the God that Jacob encountered all those years ago is still alive today, and He is just as real, just as present, and just as invested and interested in this world, and in our lives. And as we discover how God was at work in Jacob's story, I trust we will discover a thing or two about how God might want to be at work within our own.

By a show of hands, have you all heard the phrase, "*Old habits die hard*"? It's true isn't it? I'm told that if you do something daily for a period of 30-40 days, you will develop a new habit. I don't have the scientific evidence to back that up, but I do know that if you practice a habit for 20 or 30 years, it is terribly difficult to break.

Illus: Have you ever tried to quit smoking? Or tried to break the pattern of emotional eating? How about something smaller...have you ever tried to break the habit of throwing your clothes on the floor when you're finished wearing them? I have...without much success. I typically tell my son to clean up the clothes he has strewn all over his bedroom floor, and then walk down the hallway and try to do the same on my side of the bedroom.

Old habits die hard. The story we encounter in Genesis 32-33 is a story about old habits, old patterns, character qualities that need to die...we find in Jacob, just as in our own lives, that the patterns of life we have practiced over decades don't die easily.

In Jacob's case, deception and manipulation needed to die. The problem was that they were as much a part of him as his hand or his eye. Jacob came out of the womb grasping his twin brother's heel, and had lied, cheated, and stole to get to where he was in life. When Jacob met his future father-in-law, Laban, he met his match; for the next twenty years Jacob got a taste of his own medicine. But Jacob found ways to work around his father-in-law; in the end, he made sure that he got what he felt he deserved.

When Jacob left Laban, character-wise, he wasn't any different than he had been 20 years before. But as John Walton points out, Jacob's character flaws went deeper than the level of his actions. Deception

and manipulation were but “symptoms of the more pervasive problem of self-sufficiency.”¹ We’ve all met people who don’t need anyone or anything haven’t we? Maybe in small, or large ways, we are that kind of person. In any case, self-sufficiency is utterly incompatible with the life of faith.

It was time for Jacob to face what he had become. And God showed up to hold a mirror in front of Jacob. In God, Jacob found a counterpart he couldn’t smooth talk, connive, or bend to his will. When confronted by God, Jacob was the one who would be changed.

In our text this morning, we see Jacob making his way back home, and along the way he began to fear the worst as he prepared for a confrontation with his brother Esau. But before there could be peace with his brother, Jacob needed to make his peace with God.

Let’s pick up the story at Genesis 32:1. *“1 Jacob also went on his way, and the angels of God met him. 2 When Jacob saw them, he said, ‘This is the camp of God!’ So he named that place Mahanaim.*

3 Jacob sent messengers ahead of him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom. 4 He instructed them: ‘This is what you are to say to my lord Esau: ‘Your servant Jacob says, I have been staying with Laban and have remained there till now. 5 I have cattle and donkeys, sheep and goats, male and female servants. Now I am sending this message to my lord, that I may find favor in your eyes.’”

6 When the messengers returned to Jacob, they said, ‘We went to your brother Esau, and now he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him.’ 7 In great fear and distress Jacob divided the people who were with him into two groups, and the flocks and herds and camels as well. 8 He thought, ‘If Esau comes and attacks one group, the group that is left may escape.’”

9 Then Jacob prayed, ‘O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, LORD, you who said to me, ‘Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper,’ 10 I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two camps. 11 Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children. 12 But you have said, ‘I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted.’”

1. Genesis 32:1-12. This first part of the story can be divided into three sections: an angelic encounter, a back-up plan, and a last-ditch prayer. Let’s begin with the encounter.

a. An Angelic Encounter: While angelic encounters within the Scriptures are far from common, you may recall that this is not Jacob’s first encounter. Twenty years earlier, as he left his family’s land, fleeing from his brother, Jacob had a God dream in which he saw a stairway to heaven, with angels ascending and descending.

¹ Walton, 611.

God spoke to him in that dream saying, *“I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”*²

Now twenty years later, Jacob is back on the border of this promised land, and God’s messengers show up one more time; this is no coincidence. Jacob calls the place “Mahanaim,” or, “two camps,” exclaiming: *“This is the camp of God!”* The first time Jacob had an angelic encounter he exclaimed, *“Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it;”* he couldn’t be more right.

Friends, in every moment of life, in every place we tread there are two camps, or two realities: a human **and** a divine reality. For a brief moment, the veil was lifted from Jacob’s eyes and he was enabled to see what only moments before had been unseen: God was surrounding him on every side.

Jesus once said, *“surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”*³ But what we might know with our heads so often fails to make an impression on our hearts; our senses can be so dull. We don’t always recognize God’s presence. We might be aware of tension in the natural and fail to see the supernatural all around us. What we receive as a rejection from a potential employer, a “no” from a friend, or a closed door in front of us might just be the hidden plan of God in our lives.

² Genesis 28:15.

³ Matthew 28:20.

⁴ Waltke, 439.

I think you’ve heard my rant about Christian marketing...the signs, the bumper stickers, and the like...let’s just say I’m not a big fan. But having said that, maybe as Christians we all need t-shirts that read “God lives here!” God isn’t far off, and there’s no such thing as a God-forsaken situation, or place.

Psalm 34:6-8 says, *“6 This poor man called, and the LORD heard him; he saved him out of all his troubles. 7 **The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him**, and he delivers them. 8 Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.”* God surrounds us on every side!

If you are a disciple of Jesus, then *God lives here...* in and around your life. And it is our ongoing encounter and friendship with Jesus that enables us to deal with the people and situations around us.⁴ Before Jacob meets Esau, God sent His angels to remind Jacob that he was not alone...and neither are you.

Let’s move on to the back-up plan.

b. A Back-up Plan: After meeting God’s angelic messengers, Jacob sends some messengers of his own to tell his brother Esau that he is on his way. But the messengers bring back a foreboding message: *Esau is coming, with 400 of his closest (and possibly armed) friends.*

It has been said that “*time heals all wounds,*” but as many of us can attest, time can heal some wounds and deepen others. Have you ever had a falling out in your family? Or in a friendship? Have you let years, or even decades go by? Have the years of silence made the wound disappear?

Jacob was under no such illusion. He quickly divided everything he had (flocks, servants, and family) into two groups, hoping that if one was attacked the other would escape. And this leads Jacob to a last-ditch prayer.

c. A Last-Ditch Prayer: Isn't it amazing how quickly crisis, conflict, or pain can cause us to look for a solution that lies outside of ourselves?

We are told that it was in great fear and distress that Jacob prayed.⁵ You might be interested to know that this is the only extended prayer in the entire book of Genesis⁶; this is certainly the first time we have any record of Jacob praying. *Then Jacob prayed...*this is a step in the right direction.

Sometimes our prayers can be little more than an attempt to manipulate God; we pray to convince God to use His power to do what we want. But friends, I'm convinced that even this kind of praying is better than no praying at all; it's a start and God always begins where we are at. When we pray, we begin to invite God's

action into our lives. When we pray, God can begin to transform us, and He often begins by transforming what we are praying for.

Let's take a look at Jacob's Prayer (vs. 9-12):

- in vs. 9: **He names God as the God of history.** God is the One who spans all generations; He holds all of history in His hands. And while this is true, this isn't really what Jacob was getting at; his view of history was much more personal. He was saying, *You've been the God of my family's history. You were my grandfather's God, my father's God, and here I am in a bit of pickle...You are my God as well.* We need to pray like this; we need to remember that God has been present in our history long before we pray...He's present and invested.
- in vs 9: **He names God as the One who leads.** *God, you said to me "Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper". God, I'm here by Your design, You've led me to this place.* We need to pray like this, recognizing that we are not here by accident; God has a plan for us.
- in vs. 10: **He names God as the One who is kind, faithful, and generous.** *I haven't earned the favour I've received...I left with nothing but a staff in my hand and I'm coming back with large flocks, and a large family; all that I have is a gift.* We need to pray like this, remembering with thanksgiving that Jesus is kind, faithful, and generous. Remembering who Jesus is will add fuel to

⁵ Genesis 32:7, 9-12.

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Genesis*, 263.

your praying, it will give you faith to contend for the things you need.

- And then, in light of these realities, Jacob did something unbelievable, even if only for a moment...he placed his life in God's hands. In vs. 11, he prayed: *Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid*". *My life is in your hands God.*
- his prayer concludes in vs 12 with these words: *God...You have said...*Jacob reminded God about all the promises He had spoken. Now God hadn't forgotten, He doesn't forget, but we do and so it does our own hearts good to pray in this way (God, you have said...). Often, it's in the act of "reminding" God of His promises that our own hearts are reminded and they rise up in faith.⁷ Friends, we need to pray like this.

In great fear and distress, *Jacob prayed*. The one who feels self-sufficient has no room for faith, or for prayer. Prayer is a dependent act, for dependent people, for people who know they cannot control life. This act of praying marked the beginning of a new beginning for Jacob; and as we pray, it will for us as well

2. Genesis 32:13-23. The second section of the story, vs. 13-23, shows us the side of Jacob we're used to seeing. Some progress has been made, he's praying, he's beginning to entrust his life to God, but as I said before, old habits, old patterns, and character qualities don't die easily.

After Jacob prays, he gets back to doing what he knows best: trying to control outcomes. He comes up with a plan to send three waves of gifts to his brother. *I've prayed, but perhaps God needs my help a little? Maybe these gifts will avert my brother's anger.* And so he sends ahead of him 220 goats, 220 sheep, 30+ camels, 50 cows, and 30 donkeys.

Now before we get to the last section of Genesis 32, I want to pause to ask a question and have you think along with me. *What did God see when He looked at Jacob?*

God saw in Jacob a man at odds with everyone he was supposed to be close to. Jacob hadn't spoken to his twin brother for 20 years. Jacob probably resented his mother for pushing him lie to his father. He had deeply wounded his father. Jacob had lied to his dad to steal the family blessing, and twenty years later his dad was likely dead...he could no longer make amends.

God saw in Jacob a man who was caught between two wives who hated one another and were constantly jockeying for position; in a situation like that there are no winners, only losers. His relationship with his in-laws wasn't any better; his father-in-law had ripped him off in a thousand different ways. Jacob was a man in desperate need of peace. Perhaps we aren't so different from Jacob. Perhaps we are equally desperate for peace with others and peace within. But, like Jacob, the peace we crave cannot be found apart from peace with God.

⁷ Brueggemann, 265.

When God looked at Jacob, He saw a man who looked self-confident and controlled on the outside but was terrified on the inside. Jacob was trying to make life work on his own, trying to control every person, situation, and variable but the cracks were beginning to show. Jacob was a desperate man at the end of his resources. His circumstances had forced him to wrestle with his own limitations.

But friends, *is that all God saw when He looked at Jacob?* I think not. Simultaneously, God sees what is, and what will be; He sees both our brokenness and our beauty. He saw in Jacob, and He sees in us, a man or a woman of faith in the making; the raw material is all there because God has put it there.

God saw that Jacob was a proud man, too crafty for his own good, too “competent” to need anyone, too proud to ask for His help. Jacob had built a wall of self-sufficiency that was choking out any hope of a life of faith. The question is: *What about us...have we built walls of self-sufficiency around our lives?*

Self-sufficiency is utterly incompatible with the life of faith; like oil and water, they do not mix. Self-sufficiency and faith are two opposing strategies for life; one must win, one will win out over the other. The only question is: *which strategy will rule in your life?*

3. Genesis 32:24-32. The third section of the story, vs. 24-32, is one that gives me hope. After sending his possessions and family ahead of him to meet Esau, Jacob remained behind alone. And vs. 24 tells us that “a man wrestled with him till daybreak.” It seems random doesn’t it? I’m not sure anyone, including Jacob saw that coming...he needed a little alone time before the showdown with Esau, and out of nowhere a “man” comes and begins to wrestle with him.

But throughout the night, as he wrestled for his life, Jacob came to the realization that the person he was wrestling was more than a “man”. Later in vs. 30 Jacob said of this encounter, “*I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.*”

The obvious question to ask is: *what was going on?* Why would God, or one of God’s angelic messengers, wrestle with Jacob? We’re told that at daybreak, when Jacob’s wrestler partner had had enough, he simply “touched” the socket of Jacob’s hip and it was immediately, and permanently, wrenched. The Bible doesn’t really say much about this bizarre wrestling match, and so we’re left to speculate. For what it’s worth, here’s my take on the matter: I suspect God wrestled Jacob to get the wrestling (the self-sufficiency) out of Jacob’s system.

Jacob, clearly you like to fight: your brother, your father, your father-in-law...you are constantly warring against the people around you and I will never be able to use you like that. So let’s get it out of your system a little; wrestle against me for awhile. A few hours later...Are you tired yet Jacob? Have you had enough? Are you ready to yield?

Jacob needed to learn once and for all that he wasn’t the Alpha male, nor did he need to be. I have met so many people who are angry and unhappy because they are still trying to prove to themselves, and everyone else, that they are the biggest dog on the block: the strongest, the smartest, the richest, the best-looking, the most capable, the most important.

We’ve all met “that guy” or “that girl” before...no one likes them, and if the truth be told, they don’t even like themselves. I know...because for many years I was striving to be that guy. God continued to wrestle, until Jacob was willing to yield.

Self-sufficiency is utterly incompatible with the life of faith; they are two opposing strategies for life. Jesus cannot use us so long as we are trying to outwit, outplay, or outlast Him.

When you're finally convinced that Jesus loves you, the need to be the Alpha dog begins to wither away. And it's not that our strength withers away, it's just that we no longer have to waste our strength trying to prove that we're significant or valuable. When we finally accept that we are significant and valuable to Jesus, He can redirect our strength into making us a blessing to the nations.

Jacob received two gifts from God in that encounter: a new limp and a new name. The limp reminded him that he was dependent, he was not God (we all need those reminders), and the new name spoke about the future God had planned for him. No longer would he be known for his deception and manipulation, God would bring an end to those qualities. Formerly, he had wrestled with people to get what he wanted, now, he would contend with God for the future promised to him.⁸

I said earlier that Jacob's praying marked the beginning of a new beginning for him. The Jacob we see after this wrestling match, is a new Jacob, a transformed Jacob. No one wrestles with God and comes out the same; when we wrestle with God we emerge with both a new limp and a new destiny.

In Genesis 33, Esau encountered a brother he hardly recognized: repentant, humbled, and generous. We're told in vs. 4 that "Esau **ran** to meet Jacob and **embraced** him; he threw his arms around his neck and **kissed** him. And **they wept**." It is a great ending to a real life story of wrestling and reconciliation.

Conclusion: As I draw this message to a close, I want to point out that the relational divide between Esau and Jacob mirrors a greater and deeper divide that exists between us and God, apart from Jesus. Apart from the work of Jesus on the cross, all of us are on our own and at odds with God. Like Jacob, we need a Reconciler, we need someone to save us.

Jesus is that Reconciler, He is the Saviour. Jacob offered Esau a gift of many animals, Jesus offered something more precious: His perfect life. His body was lifted high on a cross and offered to God as payment for our sinful rebellion. His life was the gift, and it was more than enough to secure our peace, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

None of us are sufficient to save ourselves, but neither are we sufficient for our own transformation. The good news is that Jesus is sufficient for both! He is sufficient to forgive, love, and bless us; He's also sufficient to transform us and make us holy. He is up to the task if we would only let Him.

⁸ C.f. Hosea 12:4 for a further explanation of Jacob's wrestling with God. "*In the womb he grasped his brother's heel; as a man he struggled with God. 4 He struggled with the angel and overcame him; he wept and begged for his favor.*" Sometimes we need to contend with God in prayer. There is wrestling against (resisting) God, and wrestling with God (contending).

So often, in our wrestling with God, we undermine the gifts He wants to give. He wants to give us peace but if we are fighting Him tooth and nail in other areas in our lives, we're never in a posture to receive the peaces He wants to give. Often we are like that restless child who is sitting on a parent's lap: we're dead tired and desperate for sleep but we're fighting it, refusing to give in and let go.

As I pondered what the Lord might want to say to us this morning, this is what God brought to my mind:

I want my people to know that I am enough for their lives. Don't live with clenched fists, striving on your own to make things happen. Don't live like I don't exist, don't see, don't care, and can't provide for you. Look to me...where else does your help come from? I'll give you vision to see things like I do.

I am enough for you, in every season of your life I will always be more than enough for you. You don't have to live with despair, and you don't have to keep juggling all the balls in your life. I keep the cosmos running like clockwork, do you really think I can't handle the details of your life? I know every freckle on your face, every hair on your head is counted, every wrinkle on your skin is precious to Me...

Response Song: *Lord I look To You* (Jen Johnson)

This morning I want to invite you to be still, to stop wrestling for long enough to receive what God wants to give you. Self-sufficiency is utterly incompatible with the life of faith...my friends, choose today to lay your independence down...choose the strategy that leads to life, joy, and peace!

I've asked the worship team to sing a song over us this morning as we conclude, and I'd like to invite them to come now. As they sing and play, be still, ask God to open your eyes, and then listen: *God lives here!*