

## *Lessons from the Patriarchs sermon series*

### **“Jacob”**

#### [Genesis 32:24-31](#)

This is the third Sunday of our 4-week sermon series on the patriarchs in the Bible. So far, we have reflected on the stories of Abraham and Isaac. Today, we turn to the story of Jacob, the younger of Isaac's twin sons.

Among the patriarchs, Jacob is the most mentioned in the Bible. As you may know, he was the father of the twelve sons who started the twelve tribes of the Israelites. In the book of Genesis, Jacob's story starts in chapter 25 and extends through chapter 36. And then, he appears again in a couple of chapters near the end of the book, as he blesses his 12 sons, as well as two of his grandchildren. However, if you have ever done a close reading of Jacob's story, he is not a character whom you would consider to be a religious patriarch. Though we saw how his father and grandfather had their own flaws the past two weeks, Jacob had serious character flaws.

In Genesis, he is repeatedly depicted as a schemer. Although they are twins, Isaac's twin boys are very different from each other, like day and night. Esau is strong and likes to hunt, so his father, who we saw last week was meek and mild, loves him. But, Jacob is quiet and likes to stay at home, so his mother loves him. One day, with a bowl of stew he made, Jacob convinces Esau to sell him his right to inherit as the first son. When their father is ready to bless Esau, as was the custom in the ancient world for a father to bless his first born son, Jacob tricks Isaac who is weak and cannot see well because of his old age into giving him his brother's blessing. Actually, the mother conspires with Jacob to do so. What a dysfunctional family! Sadly, we see how parents' favoritism and sibling rivalry, as well as deception, were breaking up family relationships even at the start of the Bible.

When he finds out what Jacob did, Esau is enraged and vows to kill his brother once their father dies. Jacob is a skillful trickster, but he cannot talk his way out of this messed-up situation. So, with his mother's help, Jacob leaves his home and makes his way across the border to his uncle Laban in Haran. Living at his uncle's home and working for him, Jacob marries his two daughters, Leah and Rachel and has many children. In the meanwhile, he accumulates lots of wealth.

But, again, his success is not without deception and fraud. As Laban tricks his nephew into marrying both of his daughters and working for him for free for 20 years, Jacob also tricks his uncle and systematically steals his sheep. But, he cannot deceive his uncle forever. Eventually, his in-laws become suspicious of his deception. Then, Jacob hears God's voice to go back to his hometown. He persuades his wives to go with him, and they agree. So, one day, while his uncle is away, Jacob quickly gathers up all of his family, all of his livestock, and all of the property he has gained and leaves town.

After living in a foreign land for 20 years, Jacob is finally heading back home. In normal circumstances, this would be a joyful and exciting trip. But, instead, his heart is full of fear because he is still living with the threat of death at the hands of his brother. He knows he must reconcile with his brother if he wants to live in his father's land. So, he carefully prepares his return.

First, Jacob sends messengers ahead to his brother to let him know about his coming back home. Through the messengers, he informs Esau that he is peaceful, wealthy, and humble, and is seeking reconciliation and healing. But, his messengers come back with bad news: “Your brother Esau is coming to meet you, and 400 men are with him.” Upon their report, Jacob becomes greatly afraid and distressed because he knew that this was not a welcome party coming out to greet them. Apparently, Esau had not forgotten what his younger brother did to him and his family. Even after two decades, he is still seeking revenge. Right away, Jacob divides his caravan into two groups, thinking if Esau comes and attacks one group, the other group may escape, so he would not lose everything.

Jacob spends the night in prayer, admitting his fear and asking for God’s deliverance. The next day, he selects and prepares gifts for his brother. They are elaborate and generous - 220 goats, 220 sheep, 30 camels, 50 cows, and 30 donkeys. In total, they are 550 animals, 490 of which are female. Female animals would be considered more valuable because they can quickly increase the number of the flock. He sends them in several groups with his servants. Each group has the same message: “They belong to your servant Jacob. They are a gift to my lord Esau, and he is coming behind us.” Jacob is hoping that his brother’s anger will slowly disappear, as he is showered with gifts after gifts, again and again.

Then, in the middle of night, Jacob rises and gets ready for an early start in the morning. He takes his family and crosses the river, called Jabbok. He sends everyone across the stream with all his possessions, everything he has. Yet, he stays behind, as today’s scripture reads: “Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.” (32:24) Jacob is alone by the riverside, waiting for the dawn. Imagine his emotional state. After 20 years, he is still living in fear, like a fugitive. Trapped by his guilt, he cannot help but be terrified.

Then, suddenly, a man appears out of nowhere and attacks him. He starts a fight with Jacob and wrestles with him until dawn. Who is this intruder, wrestling with Jacob? A phantom? A ghost? A river god? No, not according to Jacob’s account. He clearly identifies the wrestler as none other than God, as he later calls the place where they wrestled as, Peniel, meaning, “the face of God.” Yes, God, in human form, shows up and wrestles with Jacob. There is no reason, no explanation given for the fight. The Bible doesn’t say it was because Jacob did anything wrong. It doesn’t say it was because God wanted to punish him for all the lies he has told or teach him a new lesson. It simply states that God shows up and starts a fight with Jacob.

Do you not find this to be strange? This depiction of God who shows up and just starts a fight with us for no reason? Certainly, this is not the image of God we were taught in Sunday School. This is not the image of the God we know or like to believe in. We like the God who shows up when we cry out in distress. We like the God who leads us to green pastures and still waters, who walks with us and comforts us when we are in the dark valleys of life. But, it is not the image of God we see in this strange story of Jacob wrestling with God. And, it gets more strange. Verse 25 says, “When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on his hip socket; and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint.” God could not overpower Jacob? Again, what a strange image of God? This is not the image of God we are used to. The God we find in other places in the Bible is all powerful. God can bring down kings from their thrones and defeat their armies. God can move mountains. God can order the rains to come down and create a river in the desert and can command the storms to be still.

And yet, God could not overpower Jacob, so He struck and broke his hip? What a disturbing image of God! It’s an image of God we are unfamiliar with because the God we know and believe in comforts and

heals people. He doesn't strike them down and wound them, does He? And yet, this is the story we find in Jacob's account. If God indeed can and does strike and wound us, perhaps, it is for the same reason it was done to Jacob. All his life, from the time of his birth till now, he has orchestrated his life according to his own plans. He has tricked and betrayed everyone close to him get his way: his brother, his father, and his father-in-law. They were like pawns in his life that he moved around to get what he wanted.

Now, he wants to reconcile with his brother, and he seeks to do it according to his familiar ways. He wants to continue to be in control. He wants to continue to trick and manipulate those around him. And as he is preparing to carry out his latest scheme, God comes to him. God comes to him and demands that he surrender. God struggles with Jacob who would not let go of his ego, his will, his control of his life. And it was an epic battle. It lasted throughout the night. And yet, Jacob would not surrender. So, God strikes and wounds him. He makes him limp for the rest of his life, so he will remember the night of his wrestling match with God for as long as he lives.

Isn't this battle our battle, too? Our endless desire and need to be in control.

The stranger tries to leave before the sun rises, but Jacob would not let him go until the man blesses him. It is then that this stranger gives Jacob a new name, Israel. Jacob's name change has a significant meaning. The first patriarch Abram was renamed Abraham, and his wife's name Sarai was changed to Sarah. Simon was renamed Peter by Jesus. Saul became Paul through his conversion experience. For all of them, a new name meant a sign of a new phase of faith. A new beginning. God who struggled with Jacob, now gives him a new name to remind him and to tell everyone that he has struggled with God and with humans and has survived.

Now, Jacob asks for his wrestling partner's name, "Please tell me your name." But, the man does not reveal his name. Instead of a name, Jacob receives a question as well as a blessing from the man. The question is "Why do you ask my name?" This is the same answer the angel of the Lord gives to the father of Samson in the book of Judges. The father asks, "What is your name?" and the angel replies: "Why do you ask my name? It is beyond understanding." (Judges 13:17-18)

In the ancient world, to name something meant to have control over it. A name provided a way to define and control. So, people created idols and gave them names. By giving a name to each god they believed, ancient people tried to define their gods and control their power. But, the people of Israel did not want to do anything with the idols because they did not want to limit God. And, they did not want to call their God by any name, either. That's why God's name was just 4 consonants, JHWH, which we now call "Yahweh." And, it was to avoid actually pronouncing God's name. Some Orthodox Jews still do not say or write the word God. Instead, they write G\_D!

The human tendency to control God is still strong today in all forms of religious faith. With absolute certainty, we, people of faith, divide the world between believers and unbelievers, conservatives and liberals, saved and unsaved. We constantly draw lines and build walls between us and them, and the divisions create conflicts and result in violence.

However, as today's scripture reveals to us, God cannot be defined by anyone or any means because God is a living God, who cannot be contained in a box. God cannot be confined to a building, whether it is a church, a mosque, or a synagogue. God is free and unpredictable. God who appeared to Jacob and wrestled with Jacob, still appears to us out of the blue. God intrudes into our lives, into our broken relationships, into the places of our shame and guilt, our deception and regret, our fear and terror and fights with

us, so that we can be free, we can have peace, we can be healed, we can love one another, and we can live with hope. This God blesses people not according to what they have accomplished but in spite of what they have or have not done, on the basis of His love which is unconditional, on the basis of Her love which is beyond our imagining and understanding.

Finally, the sun rises and the intruder of the night is gone. Jacob also rises and leaves the place of his battle with God. Outwardly, he is wounded, but inwardly, he is healed. He is a changed man, and his limping is a remembrance of his encounter with God, a mark that will remind him of God's grace and love, a mark of faith he will cherish for the rest of his life.

What happens next? As Jacob sees Esau coming with 400 men, he goes out in front of his family and throws himself to the ground, bowing to his brother 7 times. Literally, he is crawling before Esau as a sign of surrender. Then, Esau runs to Jacob and embraces him with a kiss. And, they weep together. At last, Jacob is free from guilt and fear, and Esau is free from anger and bitterness. What an encounter and homecoming! May this be our story and our blessing, as well! Amen.