

Wrestling with God

Sermon notes for the sermon

Given by Carolyn Herring

On Sunday, July 31, 2011

Jacob's story continues. If you've been in church the last few weeks you know we've been hearing about Jacob, a great story of a totally dysfunctional family, as good as anything you'd see on TV. To be honest, up until this part in the story I haven't been a big fan of Jacob. His willingness to use deceit and trickery to get whatever he wants, to cheat his own family members, his laziness, lying about indoors while his brother is out working the fields, then expecting to receive his father's blessing- these are not exactly the qualities of a hero. And I've been asking myself, why would God want this guy to be the Patriarch of the chosen people?

A quick recap of the past weeks- Jacob's born the second twin, the younger brother, but grabbing hold of his brother's heel, wrestling with his brother to get out first, so he's nicknamed the supplanter, or, as Frederick Beuchner says what we might call the go-getter, the hustler, the guy who's always working the angles trying to get ahead. He cheats his brother Esau out of his birthright in exchange for a home cooked meal, and steals his father's blessing which rightly belongs to his brother, making Esau so mad that Jacob has to high-tail it out of there and go stay with his Uncle Laban. As we heard last week in Greg's sermon, Jacob falls in love with his cousin Rachel, but Laban tricks Jacob into

marrying both his daughters, Leah and Rachel, when Jacob wants only Rachel. Even though he doesn't love Leah, Jacob manages to have six sons and a daughter with her (and by the way, one of those sons of Leah, Judah, produces the lineage that leads to the Messiah, Jesus. Leah's son Judah is the ancestor of Jesus).

Twenty years later now, after having worked seven years for each of his wives, and six years for the livestock from his father-in-law, Jacob's homesick and wants to return to Canaan, the land of his fathers. Before he leaves, however, Jacob and his father-in-law Laban play one last game of deceit, each trying to outwit the other. Laban promises to give Jacob some of his livestock, but then reneges on the promise, so Jacob finds a way to acquire the best and strongest of the goats and sheep through selective breeding. When Laban's sons hear about this latest trick and complain that Jacob has stolen their father's wealth, Jacob finally reads the handwriting on the wall. He's no longer favored in Laban's household, so he packs up his two wives, his two mistresses, his eleven children, and all his livestock and sneaks out of town under the cover of darkness without a word to Laban. Unbeknownst to Jacob, his beloved wife Rachel is not above entering into all of the lies and thievery, for as they're leaving Rachel steals her father's gods (I guess they were some small figures or idols representing the gods). She doesn't tell Jacob about this. She does this on her own, stealing from her father in a way similar to how Jacob stole the blessing from his father. When Laban finds out that Jacob and family have left and that his gods have been stolen, he goes after Jacob and when he catches up to him

and confronts him, each of them- both Laban and Jacob whine and complain and each accuses the other of deceit and trickery, until finally they reach an impasse and decide to bury the hatchet and call a truce. Laban then sends Jacob and all his household away in peace, and Jacob heads for home. Though he's unsure of how Esau will receive him when he gets there, Jacob figures he can buy off Esau with some goats and sheep and Esau will forget and forgive all that has happened. What a soap opera!

And this brings us to today's episode. Jacob and his troop arrive at the Jabbok River on their way back to Canaan. He's probably at the lowest point of his life, essentially homeless, having alienated most of his relatives far and near, unsure of what awaits him at home. He sends everyone and everything that he has on across the river, and he makes camp there alone by the side of the Jabbok River. It's night, and when he lays down to sleep, he has a surprise visitor. He wrestles all night with this stranger who, when he sees that he's not able to prevail against Jacob, strikes him on the hip, giving him a permanent limp. The man asks to be let go, but Jacob refuses and instead demands a blessing. Despite the way he has messed up his life so far, Jacob is as bold and audacious as ever. He must know that this is no ordinary stranger he's wrestling with, otherwise he wouldn't need a blessing from him. He asks the stranger's name, as if he doesn't know, and the stranger refuses to tell him. But though Jacob may be afraid to admit it, I think in the back of his mind he knows exactly who this is, and that this encounter will change his life forever. This is a turning

point in Jacob's life, and that's probably what scares him most. In fact, this is the death of Jacob and the birth of Israel.

He'd been running from God with all his might, depending on his own smarts to get him through life, and now, at his most vulnerable time, when everything has come to ruin, and he's royally messed up his life, the God he has been running from his whole life, finally catches up to him. And Jacob's first reaction is to fight. His stubborn refusal to submit to God leaves him locked in mortal combat, wrestling with this stranger until the break of day, leaving God no choice but to strike him on the hip. In a way, that wound is self-inflicted, a result of his own stubbornness and egoism, and this struggling he does this whole night reflects the struggle he's been waging his whole life.

By the end of the encounter, however, this visitor is no longer a stranger. Jacob knows who it is that he has been with. And Jacob is no longer Jacob. No longer will he be Jacob the supplanter, the hustler, the schemer, lying and stealing to get what he wants. His old self, that he's known all his life will be gone. From now on he will be Israel, the one who has wrestled with God and been blessed by God, the patriarch of a mighty and chosen people. Finally he understands, and he names the place of this holy encounter Penuel, meaning I have seen God face to face, and I have lived.

What did he expect? I guess after the life he has led, maybe he expected to meet an angry God, one who would punish him, maybe even kill him. Maybe that's why he reacted defensively at first, preferring to wrestle for dominance, not

wanting to give in. He thought he was fighting for his life. Instead, what Jacob discovers is that the God he encounters that night is not a punishing God, but a loving and forgiving God who is willing to give a second chance even to a hustler and schemer like him, a God who demands your life, but who offers you a better one in return. What's more, once Jacob allowed his eyes to be opened, he's able to look back on his life and see that God was with him all along. When Laban and Jacob decide to call a truce and cease their fighting, it's because both of them realize that God's hand is on Jacob. That might have been the beginning of Jacob's growing awareness of God's presence in his life. Though Jacob may have been running from God all his life, God was running right behind him. Throughout Jacob's life, God never gave up on him. God's faith remained true, not faith in who Jacob was, but in whom Jacob could become, with God's help. It took all of the hardship and collapse of his life, and one last night of defiance for Jacob to finally see clearly that God was calling him to something better, for him to leave Jacob behind and to become Israel.

That's what happens when you wrestle with God. It can mean a big change in your life, in fact, it can mean the death of your old life and the birth of a brand new one, and *THAT* can be scary. But it can also mean a blessing.

When I was in Sierra Leone I met a young man, 20 years old named Abdulai (and I have Melvina to thank for connecting me to this wonderful young man). After losing both his parents in the war- he saw his father killed right in front of him and his mother flee into the woods to avoid the armies storming the villages- he spent a year as an 8 year old living on the streets, before being taken

in by the Child Rescue Center, an orphanage run by the United Methodist Church. He said during that year he always ran from people who approached him. After what he had witnessed in his village he was afraid of strangers, especially adults. But when he finally went to the Child Rescue Center, he said, he was treated like a king, and he learned to trust and to love those who cared for him. He was eager to tell me that he was baptized when he was 12 years old, and that he took at his baptism the name Gad. When he first told me this, I pretended to know who Gad was. I didn't really. I knew he was in the Bible, but it wasn't until I started reading the background story for this sermon that I understood why Abdulai would take that name. Gad was one of Leah's sons and when she discovers she is pregnant with him, she exclaims "Good Fortune!" and names him Gad. That's how Abdulai sees his life now, a life of good fortune. God hasn't just changed his name, God has changed his life. Today he's at a youth camp run by his church, and he posted on his Facebook page the theme of the camp this year: Abide in Jesus' love. From John 15:4: Jesus says, "Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me." It's the same thing Jacob learned. On his own, running from God, he floundered, and went from one problem to another. But God can turn any life around- a life of sadness and pain, of trickery and deceit. And this episode, of Jacob wrestling with God by the Jabbok River, has helped me to understand why God would call someone like Jacob to be greater than he is. That's really what God calls all of us to- to be greater than we are.

Charles Wesley, the musical half of the Wesley brothers, was also a poet, and he wrote a poem called "Wrestling Jacob" that he based on this morning's story. We have a hymn in our hymnal, "Come, O Thou Traveler Unknown" which we're going to sing in a few minutes as our closing hymn, that's based on Wesley's poem. There are 14 stanzas to the poem, but don't worry, we're only singing four of them. Wesley interprets Jacob's story as one moving from fear of the unknown stranger, to discovery of the true nature of God. Jacob refuses to allow the stranger to leave until he knows for sure who this God is that has been following him all his life. Finally, after wrestling all night, he understands, and says to the stranger, "Thy nature and thy name is Love." His fear is gone, and he is content, even to walk with a limp, a constant reminder of his dependence on God, and of the day he saw God face to face, and discovered God's love.

That's what Jacob's story teaches us. That nagging feeling deep down inside that God is calling us to something unknown- that can be pretty unnerving. We might be tempted to react as Jacob did at first, resisting as long as we can, fighting to maintain control of our lives. To give in to God's call can mean a big change. It might mean we end up walking with a limp, a reminder to us that it is God's strength we rely on, not our own. But it will definitely mean a blessing, an exchange of the life we lead for the better one God offers. And, like Jacob, if we will finally give up our struggle, what we will discover is that the true nature and name of God is love, and that God has been with us all along. Amen.