

**Reading from Hebrew Scriptures****Genesis 32:3-8,22-30**

Jacob sent messengers before him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom, instructing them, "Thus you shall say to my lord Esau: Thus says your servant Jacob, 'I have lived with Laban as an alien, and stayed until now; and I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, male and female slaves; and I have sent to tell my lord, in order that I may find favor in your sight.'"

The messengers returned to Jacob, saying, "We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him." Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed; and he divided the people that were with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two companies, thinking, "If Esau comes to the one company and destroys it, then the company that is left will escape."

The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."

*Wrestling with God*

Jacob and Esau have not had a great relationship full of brotherly love. Instead, they seem to have spent their years at home engaged in intense rivalry. As twin brothers they are always competing against one another, for approval, for first place, for their father's blessing as the number one son. You see, Esau was born first, but Jacob had a firm hold on his brother's foot and has been in pursuit of Esau's birthright ever since. This has made it impossible for the two to trust each other. Instead they are always wary of each other, circling around like two lions without enough room on the savannah.

Jacob and his mother conspire to trick Esau out of his father's blessing for the firstborn son. Jacob pretends to be Esau and his father, Isaac, lays hands on him and blesses him as the first son. Esau discovers the charade and is so angry he just might kill his deceitful twin. Jacob must flee for his life and so he leaves home.

After many years of living separate lives Jacob and Esau's paths are about to cross. Jacob is returning to his homeland with two wives, two maids, eleven children, and a full assortment of household items and animals. He has done well for himself and he is not traveling light. Jacob knows he is about to encounter Esau and so he sends messengers to Esau in an effort to appeal to his compassion, saying, "I have lived with Laban as an alien, and stayed until now; and I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, male and female slaves; and I have sent to tell my lord, in order that I may find favor in your sight."

The messengers come back to Jacob and tell him that Esau is coming with four hundred men. Jacob resurrects his childhood fears and can only imagine that Esau is approaching with an army of four hundred to slay him. He begins to plot and scheme. There is no way that Jacob can

outrun Esau with his wives and children and livestock. He has no army to stand his ground and fight Esau. Instead, Jacob hatches a scheme that might save half of his family. He divides everything he has in half, and forms two traveling parties. He figures that if Esau attacks one group, the other will have a chance to run away and survive. It is a terrible gamble. Jacob, trapped by fear, can only devise a plan to save half of his family. He is a torn man, a divided man, a twin missing his other half, and ever since he decided to run away in fear of Esau, he has not been a whole person. In his fear, Jacob is going to tear his family apart, just like he has torn himself from his twin brother.

As the sun sets and Jacob's household is settling down for the night, Jacob makes one last adjustment. He sends his entire family across the river Jabbok and he spends the night alone on the other side. This is the awful calm before the storm and Jacob knows that he won't sleep soundly tonight.

Jacob's story is so familiar, so real, so frighteningly close to home. We have all experienced it ourselves or we know someone who lives a fractured life because of a broken relationship. It is usually a relationship with a close family member, maybe an ex-wife or husband. A relationship that is deep, tangled up in our heart and our guts, that's the kind of relationship that can eviscerate us when it goes bad. We tear ourselves away, running in fear, and we lose part of ourselves in the process. Jacob and Esau never had a peaceful coexistence, but together they were whole people. Once Jacob allows fear to rule his heart, he becomes half the man he used to be.

Jacob has no idea how exhausted he will be come morning on the shore of the Jabbok as a mysterious man wrestles with him all night long. I don't know if the author wants us to imagine a real wrestling match, or the kind of twisting and turning we do in the half-sleep of ferocious anxiety. Either way, Jacob is not going to enjoy a refreshing rest.

Jacob will not let go of this night time visitor, he seems to have recovered the tenacity of his birth when he emerged from his mother's womb with a tight grip on his brother's foot. When it becomes clear that they are deadlocked and neither one will win the wrestling match the mystery man touches Jacob's hip joint and pushes it out of the socket. Jacob must be in intense pain, but he still does not let go of his wrestling partner. He asks Jacob to let him go, and Jacob refuses until he gets a blessing from him. Here we are again, with Jacob trying to get a blessing. Only now, instead of using subterfuge and cunning, Jacob simply won't let go. Fear no longer ruling Jacob's heart in this encounter.

In the midst of this wrestling match, Jacob figures out that his partner is none other than God. This knowledge does not cause Jacob to back down or let go. He holds onto God in the darkness, sweating and struggling. I think Jacob is tired of running, tired of being afraid, tired of being homeless in a foreign land. He is finally ready to fight for something meaningful. So often, we imagine God far away and above it all. But God is present here, with us, with Jacob, ready to struggle and wrestle with us, if necessary. God wants to help us find a new way to live, even if it means that we have to fight for awhile before that blessing arrives. Every time we are angry with God, angry with the world, hurt, indignant, and feeling abandoned, that's when God is willing to get down in the dirt with us and duke it out. And no matter what we dish out, God can take it.

Jacob is demanding a blessing, and he gets it. But first he receives a wounded hip and a new name. Neither of these effects of wrestling with God will ever leave him. He is forever marked by a limping gait when he walks and he will now be called Israel. When we wrestle through a difficult time in our own lives, we are often marked by those experiences in a way that

will never leave us. These are our battle scars, our war wounds, proof that we have struggled hard to get where we are today. We don't need to be ashamed of the struggle we have endured. The scars remind us of how far we have come. In our own culture we talk about survivors. People who have faced an insurmountable hurdle and by the grace of God and their own tenacity, they have come out the other side, a stronger and more whole person. Survivors of addiction, survivors of domestic violence, survivors of cancer, survivors of rape, survivors of all the brokenness in the world. Instead of running away in fear, instead of becoming half the person we are, we wrestle with our fear, and discover that God is wrestling with us, helping us to be reborn with a new name, a new life. As survivors, we discover that we are not broken, but more whole and blessed by the experience we have suffered. We simply have to be willing to hold on ferociously and never let go of the God who loves us.

Though it is not part of our reading this morning, you might be relieved to know that Jacob and Esau have a reunion full of brotherly love. Esau gathered four hundred men so that he could rush down the road, reconcile and celebrate with Jacob – he was never looking for a fight in the first place. All of Jacob's fears about Esau are washed away in their tears as they hug each other and weep over the broken past. The two men journey on for awhile, side by side, catching up on each others lives and vowing to let nothing come between them again.

It is fear that threatens to wound us most deeply. It is fear that causes us to be broken human beings, beyond recognition. Fear causes us to forget who we are and in whose image we have been made. Our ancestor in faith, Jacob, is a survivor of that debilitating fear and he emerges from the ashes a more faithful, more whole, more blessed, Israel. We are invited to join in that legacy of faith every time that fear threatens to paralyze us. We are invited to grab a hold of our fear in the darkness of night and wrestle it to the ground until we discover that God has been with us all along, just waiting to bless us so that we might continue to live, a renewed people of faith. Amen.