



This morning we begin a series of messages titled *The Journey to Advent*. These are not Advent messages, per se, but are messages leading us to the season of Advent. I had been thinking about what to do after completing the brief series on the Reformation and Tanya mentioned to me that I should do something like the Lessons and Carols service we observe on Christmas Eve. I thought that was a good idea, and since I'm used to doing what Tanya tells me, I began working on creating a series of messages that have the kind of Biblical/historical sweep that we find in the Lessons and Carols service. That service incorporates Scripture readings that carry us from the beginning of time, telling us of the story of salvation as laid out in the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. My intent in offering this series is certainly not to hurry Christmas along as much as I am working to prepare us spiritually for the season of Advent, especially in the onslaught of the commercialized version of Christmas that is already upon us.

I will use four different Scripture texts for this series, beginning with a passage from Genesis, which tells the story of Jacob wrestling with God. The story of Jacob wrestling with God is, on the surface at least, a strange sounding story. What are we to make of a human being wrestling through the night with God, seeking to wrest away a blessing. And, at the end, God touches the hip of Jacob, knocking it out of place, resulting in a noticeable limp. (I understand that some may be thinking, *wait a minute Dave; isn't it a story about Jacob wrestling with an angel, and not God?* Most often, that is how the story is told, and it is how I have interpreted the story most of the time. In this message, however, I am speaking of Jacob wrestling with God because that is what Jacob himself implies at the end of the story, when we say in verse 30, *I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.*)

Follow along as I read this fascinating story, from Genesis 32:22-31 –

*22 That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok.*

*23 After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions.*

*24 So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak.*

*25 When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man.*

*26 Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."*

27 The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered.

28 Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome."

29 Jacob said, "Please tell me your name." But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there.

30 So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."

31 The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip.

The setting for the story is when Jacob is caught between two family members with whom he had very strained relations. In the previous chapter he is fleeing from his father-in-law Laban, whom he had also deceived, increasing his flocks at his uncle's expense (Genesis 30:25-43), and as this chapter opens he is about to meet up with his brother Esau. You will remember that Jacob stole Esau's birthright from him and the two brothers have not seen each other in quite some time. In fact, Jacob had long avoided Esau because of his brother's desire to kill him on account of the stolen birthright (Genesis 27:1-40). Jacob even tried to deceive God when he prays the night before he is to meet his brother Esau, claiming that God made a promise to him that God did not actually make (Genesis 32:11-12).

The setting for today's text is the night before the two brothers are to meet, and Jacob wonders if Esau is still planning to kill him. In order to gain his brother's favor, Jacob prepares a large gift for Esau and sends it to him. Jacob is hoping, basically, to buy his way out of a jam. Then he sends his family and all he has across the stream of Jabbok and spends the night alone, and it is then that he wrestles with God.

Jacob is, we should say at the outset, more than a little bit of a sketchy character. Jacob was, to put it bluntly, a cheat, a scoundrel, and a rascal. In fact, the very name of Jacob tells us something about his character. Jacob means *one who takes by the heel and supplants*, or, in simpler fashion, *deceiver*. People have long debated whether or not a person's character is a matter of nature or nurture. When I was younger – and not a parent – I tended to think that people's character was more a function of nurture than nature. Like most others, after becoming a parent, I decided it was more nature than nurture. In Jacob's case that was certainly true, as his name was predictive of his behavior, as deception was a way of life for him. But lest we be too hard on Jacob, we should also remember that we are not entirely unlike him, as we will see as we go through the story.

### 1. *Jacob attempts to bargain with God.*

In 32:11 Jacob begs God to save him from the hand of his brother, Esau. Now, I have two brothers, and I know how brothers can be, because we did not always get along, but when you are fearful for your life because of what you have done to your brother, you are indeed in dire straits.

What's important to note about Jacob's bargaining with God is this – he was attempting to bargain himself out of a situation of his own creation. Jacob was not a victim here. He had not fallen on hard times because of what someone else had done. He had not had a business downturn because of a changing economy. Jacob made a bargain with his brother that we call an *Esau trade*. An *Esau trade* is a bad decision, a bad choice, or, in this case, the pulling of someone into an unfair bargain in order to take advantage of them. Esau did indeed make a very bad deal, trading away his birthright, but Jacob set up the entire exchange in order to take advantage of his brother. It does not speak well of Jacob's character that he not only took advantage of his brother at a weak moment; Jacob created the weak moment and the snare in which Esau found himself.

And in this moment of reckoning, fearful of what his brother might do to him, Jacob seeks to bargain with God. Jacob has created his own difficulty, he has put himself in a very tenuous position, and then wants God to rescue him from a difficult situation of his own making. The reality is, however, that

Jacob does not have to bargain with God, because God is going to protect and care for him, but Jacob does not trust God. As the maker of his own difficulty Jacob assumes he's about to get what he has coming to him. He doesn't understand that God doesn't always give us what we have coming to us; instead, he gives us grace.

But here is how we are like Jacob – haven't we all bargained with God? How many of you have bargained with God? Who hasn't, actually? I have sought to strike a bargain with God on any number of occasions, and I must say that I am very grateful that God generally has not taken me up on those bargains, because if he had, I would have come out the poorer in the long run. The reality is, we do not need to bargain with God. Bargaining with God betrays our lack of trust, just like Jacob's lack of trust. Throughout the gospels Jesus reminds us that God is always working on our behalf, for our good. We do not have to convince him to do what is best for us, as it is already his will to do so. As Jesus says in Matthew 7:9-10, **9** *“Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? 10 Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? 11 If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!*

## 2. *Jacob was always grasping and striving for more.*

The image of Jacob wrestling through the night with God is such an apt image, as he was trying to wrestle away a blessing from God. In verse 26, in response to being asked to let him go, Jacob even says, *I will not let you go unless you bless me.* The only way Jacob believed he could get a blessing was to take it, to wrest it away. He wrested away a birthright from his brother Isaac, he wrested away livestock and other blessings from his uncle, Laban, and then, demonstrating his gall and desperation, he seeks to wrest a blessing away from God. What would satisfy Jacob?

Why Jacob feels he must wrestle a blessing away from God is beyond me, as God had already blessed him in many ways. It was never enough for Jacob, however, as he schemed and wrested his own way to blessings. Whatever he had – or took – never seemed to be enough. With Jacob, it always seemed to be about getting more. Why, in spite of all he possessed, was it never enough for him? Why was it necessary that he continue to scheme and claw his way to get more and more? So much of Jacob's life was built upon lies and deception, and those lies and deceptions helped him to become a wealthy man.

But look at what it did to him – Jacob was running from one place to the next, trying to outrun those whom he had deceived, and yet his life continued to be one of taking rather than receiving. It wasn't enough for him to receive his own blessing from his father Isaac; he had to take his brother's blessing. He then spent years fleeing from his brother and years estranged from his family because of his deception. He deceived Laban and had to flee from him as well and now, in a moment of crisis, wrestling with God, he is still trying to take rather than receive.

Again, we are not unlike Jacob, as we struggle to wrest something out of life. Maybe we don't scheme and deceive like Jacob in order to get what we want, but we can easily fall for the same deception that says *just a little bit more, just a little bit more.* I think one of the great myths of our society is the promise of satisfaction from what will not truly bring satisfaction. The myth says to *get this thing, or if you get a little bit more of this or that, you will be satisfied. You're not quite there; just a bit more.* But the bit more never is enough. We are so often promised satisfaction, but satisfaction so seldom comes, despite those promises. In our striving we find the law of diminishing returns. We buy something, hoping to find satisfaction, and enjoy what we have purchased, but after a time that satisfaction goes away, so we buy something else, trying to recapture the feeling. Unfortunately, we find less and less satisfaction as we purchase more and more. But we want satisfaction so badly that we seek and strive, and like Jacob, sometimes maybe we do scheme and seek to wrest that satisfaction from somewhere or someone else.

But we don't have to try and take anything from God; God wants to give and he wants us to receive.

### 3. *Jacob's struggle with God becomes a real wrestling match.*

I think it's interesting that this wrestling match takes place at night, because that is a time when we are more vulnerable. And perhaps this is where we are most like Jacob, wrestling at night with our worries and anxieties. It's hard to hide from our worries and anxieties in the middle of the night, isn't it? We can occupy our minds easier during the day, but at night, it's hard to hide from what worries us.

Who among us has not wrestled through the night with our worries and anxieties about a friend, a child, or a loved one? Who has not feared that someone they loved had become incorrigible, and worried, *can even God get through to them?* How many of you have been awake at night wrestling with your worries and anxieties? I go through patterns of wrestling at night with worries and anxieties. Sometimes I stay up, trying to occupy my mind, because there is something on my heart or mind that I just know is going to keep me up, and when I wake in the middle of the night I fear it will come alive in my mind and keep me awake.

With what are you wrestling? What is in your past or your present that consumes you with worry, with anxiety, and with guilt? Jacob spent one night wrestling with God but years wrestling with himself because of the things he had done. Don't spend your life wrestling with guilt, don't spend your life wrestling with the belief that you cannot change. Accept God's transforming love and power today.

### 4. *We come away from our encounters with God with a mark.*

I know people who have had very powerful spiritual experiences, as though the curtain between the temporal and the eternal is pulled aside for them, for a few moments. I have always envied people who have these types of experiences, those kinds of experiences when God breaks through the wall that separates the physical from the spiritual and something very powerful and very real happens to them. I've never had one of those very, very profound experiences that some people are fortunate enough to have, and I envy them for what they have experienced. Imagine the power of Jacob's experience, as he wrestles through the night with God.

But there is a rather odd part of the story that has always puzzled me – what is the deal with God touching Jacob's hip and putting it out of joint? Doesn't that seem strange? What does that mean? To be honest, every time I have preached or taught from this passage I have finished with the sense that I have never quite nailed down all that this story seeks to teach us. And I feel that way this morning as well. I don't know that I have completely captured all the meaning of this story, especially the part of God touching Jacob's hip, but here is what I have settled upon by way of explanation. First, why the hip? Why not some other place on Jacob's body. Why not the arm or the hand, the eye or the ear? I think it's because the hip would provide such a constant reminder to Jacob. How many of us walk anywhere out of necessity? We have to go out of our way to walk anywhere, but that was Jacob's primary mode of transportation. In Jacob's day travel was difficult because you walked. From this point on, every step Jacob would take was a reminder – a reminder, first, of his former self, the one who wrestled with God because he was trying to steal yet another blessing. Second, when Jacob limps away, what will happen when he encounters people? They are going to ask him what happened to cause his injury. *Hey Jacob, what happened to your hip?* What's he going to say? *Well, I was wrestling all night with God, trying to wrest a blessing away from him.* That doesn't cast Jacob in the most positive light, but it would cause him to have to confront himself about some of his decisions and the way in which he has lived and he would have to own up to some things in his life. By giving him a wound, God makes it impossible for Jacob to avoid dealing with his past. Third, there is some pain involved, physical pain, because Jacob has to confront his brother Esau, whom he cheated so long before. That's a painful experience, facing up to someone you have wronged. Jacob was certainly confronted with his own pain, festering in his soul over those many years, but also the pain he had caused his brother Esau. And, lastly, it was a reminder of the reality that no one comes away from an encounter with God without some kind of mark on them, and Jacob's mark was to give us a new insight on what it means to *walk*

*with God.* We use that phrase, but it had a very different meaning to Jacob. To us, it's just an expression, but Jacob walked with God. Where he had previously run from God, run from himself, run from his brother, and run from his past, he was now released and his literal walk was with God, and everyone saw it was different.

But let us note as well that Jacob was given a new name – Israel, which means *he who strives with God*, signifying that his nature had changed and he was a different person. Once Jacob acknowledges his nature, once he finally owns up to who and what he has been, God is then able to transform him. When we think of the patriarchs, we generally think of Abraham as the one who is primary, and in many ways he is, but Jacob is the one who will bear the name – *Israel* – of the nation that is formed by God's people. It is Jacob who will be the father of the sons who will bear the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. The change in name is tremendously significant for Jacob. In the past, I have had several nicknames attached to me. Some were very temporary while others – one in particular – stayed with me for many years. To be honest, I was always happy to divest myself of every nickname I have ever received. Most of the time, I was only able to escape a nickname by moving to another town or state. The problem with nicknames is that they define us according to one time in our lives, and that definition may no longer be true. For Jacob, the person he was – the schemer, the deceiver – had passed. Now he was someone new, and God gave him a new name to symbolize the change in his life.

I have known some people who have changed their names. They followed the legal process, for various reasons, to do away with their old name and to take a new one. In all the cases it is to get a new start, a new beginning in life. It is always a powerful moment for the person, and often their new name will be representative of something important to them, usually making a statement about their new life. Jacob was given a new name. I suspect that some people may have been hesitant to call him by that new name, perhaps because they could not accept that he had truly changed. Perhaps time demonstrated to them that he had changed, and they would be more accepting of his new name. People sometimes have a hard time accepting the reality that we change, and that we are no longer the person we once were. Don't be held back by those who are unable – or are unwilling – to see what God has done in your life.

Perhaps this is where we are most like Jacob – Jacob changed, and we can change too.