

Wrestling Spirit
By Rev. Todd Farnsworth
Genesis 32: 22-30



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,[a] 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."

A few weeks ago I introduced the Narrative Lectionary to you and for those who have been following along, you can see how we are progressing. The church year began with Adam and Eve being created, and that lead to

Abraham and Sarah who gave birth to a son Isaac who, with his wife Rebekah, gave birth to today's main characters, Esau and Jacob. You might have missed Esau because he shows up a little earlier in the story that we get this morning, but he is there...in the darkness...across the river, waiting.

You can see why it's called Narrative Lectionary then, because we are being given a story; the arc of a story. To understand this morning's segment of the arc our guest speaker for tomorrow night and Tuesday morning (Rev. Anne Robertson of the MA Bible Society) would say that it will help to have a little background. In her book *New Vision for An Old Story*, Rev. Robertson notes: *"The Bible is fundamentally a collection of stories--hundreds of them--arranged into 'books' of larger stories which themselves then are bound together to form one grand story of hope, redemption, and restoration...in order to properly understand the Bible, we need to know what stories are and what they're designed to do before we can learn to see the Bible through that lens or think about both the opportunities and the pitfalls of telling the story ourselves."* She also describes the Bible as "a raccoon."

I'll let Anne unpack all of that during our sessions with us. For today, I'd like to look at the GREATEST WRESTLING MATCH OF THE BIBLE in terms of story, because stories tell us truths.

This morning's story begins before the part thatread. It starts with the promise to Abraham and Sarah that they will be the forebears of generations of people who will worship God. Sarah laughs and begets

Isaac (whose name means, “he laughed”) and Isaac grows up to marry Rebekah and they have two children, Esau and Jacob.

From the start the two boys are in competition with one another. Esau is born first, but Jacob is born holding his brother’s heel. We will later find out that this is a theme in their relationship as Jacob wants the “stuff” that Esau is granted by being first born male. Jacob tries to pull Esau back, but Esau just does what comes naturally to him and is born into a birthright and promise of a blessing from his father.

But Jacob is not content being second fiddle. When the boys grow up a bit, Esau come home one day from hunting in the fields and he is famished! He begs Jacob (who is a whiz in the kitchen) for some of what he is cooking. Jacob seizes the opportunity and convinces Esau to give away his birthright (that is, his inheritance of Isaac’s property)in exchange for a hot meal. Did I mention that Esau is hungry? He accepts the offer without thought of the consequences because, who would believe that Jacob could be serious about trading land for a bowl of bean soup?

A few years latter, as their father Isaac is dying, Jacob demonstrates that he was not messing around. With the help of his mother Jacob tricks Isaac into giving Esau’s blessing (the thing that seals the deal and will make him the carrier of the promise to Abraham and Sarah!). Jacob dresses like Esau. He cooks another great meal. He even wears goat hair to give the illusion that he is his hirsute brother. Did I mention that Isaac’s eyesight is failing?

Well, the thing with a blessing is that there are no “takesy backsies.” God is now part of the promise and when Esau finds out what has happened, he is angry! He utters a threat that would nowadays have the law upon him.

Jacob realizes that he may have crossed a line, and runs away. He is afraid of his brother’s anger.

Jacob heads toward some relatives and falls in love with the relative’s youngest daughter. He asks to marry the daughter and with some wheeling and dealing on the part of her dad, the arrangement is made. Let’s say that the father is cut of a similar cloth as Jacob, and he takes advantage of the young man’s hunger. He get’s Jacob to work 7 years for him in order to marry, and then when the wedding happens, he subs out the older sister of the bride! Now Jacob is angry, but keeps his head enough to bargain for his true love a week later.

In the following parts of the story, Jacob has 12 boys and one girl with his two wives and their slaves. He is a pretty happy guy, but he has unfinished business...with his father in law and with his brother.

Through the miracles of modern genetics Jacob tricks his father in law out of his flock of goats. Jacob and his wives and family literally steal away with his father in law’s gods and goats and grandchildren. Jacob is afraid and on the run and somehow realizes that like Dorothy, there’s no place like home, so he sets off in that direction.

His father in law catches up, calls God to be a watchman between the two of them so that there will be no more shenanigans, and let’s Jacob go.

This is one of the first times that God's presence seems to matter in the story. God has been in the background up til now...the keeper of the promise.

Nowww, Jacob edges toward the part of the story thatread. He has gotten past his father in law with stolen property, but as he approaches home, he must come to terms with his brother, who is waiting for him.

Jacob still thinks that wheeling and dealing is the way to go, so he sends some livestock ahead to soften the meeting with his brother. Kind of a peace offering. Jacob's fear is rising and perhaps, with the introduction of God into his story, he is growing aware that maybe his life is not fully his own.

He separates himself away from his family and his flocks. He makes a small fire on the opposite side of the Jabbok River and settles in for what some commentators calls his "dark night of the soul."

Have you ever had one of those nights? When you know that what you've been doing with your life isn't good, or faithful, or anything to be proud of? Most of the early listeners to this story would have had one or two of those nights. The kind of night where sleep was interrupted with tossing and turning and wrestling with the seemingly endless sheets of deeds past...

The story teller describes Jacob's night.

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."

Even in the midst of his wrestling, Jacob relies on his old tricks. He seeks a blessing...but this time...this time he is tricked, because the blessing is not from a man, but from a higher power. The blessing comes with a reminder of his painful past behaviors. The blessing comes from a power that can change his name. And that is the punchline that would have caught the early listeners off guard!

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."

Israel. The listeners knew that name. They knew it to be their name. Their national name. This story wasn't just about some ne'er do well who persisted with God, it was about them as a people...as a nation!

I believe it is also about us as a people, as a nation.

In a flash the early listeners would have hearkened back to time they wrestled as individuals with conscience for things they had done...and then the story adds a layer of national reckoning: for taking what's not ours, for greedily pulling one over on others, for making everything a transaction that lead to an increase in national wealth...for dealing with others out of fear instead of doing what's right... what is godly.

As we sit by the campfire with our forebears listening to the story of Jacob wrestling in the darkness, we look around the night sky of this big world of nation's and see this story come to life for them, and for us.

- When we are at a place where the care of creation is weighed against our ability to make money off it...
- when human safety, care and compassion is weighed against a financial spreadsheet...
- when we choose our leaders based on who will make us richer at the expense of nurturing values of faith and our relationship with God...

When we believe that we can wheel and deal and outsmart people out of what is rightfully theirs, and we're tired of running away or living in fear, well, we've gotta cross that river of reckoning. We need to go off by ourselves. We need to huddle by the pathetic little fires we make to convince ourselves that everything is ok, and we've gotta wrestle. We've gotta grapple with what we've done and grapple with the One who's witnessed it all, and we've gotta try and hang on to what, to Who is important as the sun is setting. We've gotta brace ourselves for that unnamed wrestler to come a calling. We gotta wrestle through the dark night of our soul and try to hang on for redemption in the morning.

*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.*

Jacob understood by morning light that it was no man he'd been wrestling.

Jacob came to realize (and God later confirms) that it was the Holy who had held on with him even while he was running away.

Jacob realized that he would have to live with the pains of his past, but they would not prevent him from moving forward.

Israel realized those things, too. They needed the second chance that the story offered.

May we feel the pains of our past and as the morning breaks, receive the redemptive blessing of a new start that leads us into a deeper relationship with God.

May we have Jacob's strength to hang on through that night and come morning, arise with a new name, and a desire to build an altar to the One who holds our lives. May we worship that One and give our lives to living more closely in God's vision for us.

That's what Jacob did. That's what Israel did...anyway, that's the story.

I hope you'll join us in welcoming Anne Robertson tomorrow and Tuesday as we learn more about her new vision for these old stories.

Amen.