

Fallen Heroes Sermon Series  
Jacob – Gen. 23:22-32  
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We continue our Fallen Heroes sermon series today with one of my favorite biblical characters. He's not one of my favorites because of his heroism. He's one of my favorites because of his flaws. Jacob is one of the bearers of the divine promise, along with Abraham and Isaac, but acts more like a two-bit thief and coward than God's chosen one. In short, he is thoroughly human. I figure if Jacob can act the way he did and still be favored by God, there's hope for you and me.

Jacob's struggles started before he was even born, when he and his twin brother Esau wrestled in their mom's womb. He was born holding onto Esau's heel, trying to get the upper hand from their first breath. Jacob's name means both "the grabber" and "the one who deceives," because he tricks his brother Esau out of both his inheritance and their father's blessing before running away. Esau swears that the next time he sees Jacob, he's going to kill him. Jacob has spent his life scheming, conniving, manipulating to get ahead. Jacob knows what it is like to wrestle.

To escape Esau's rage, Jacob goes on the run, settling in the land of Haran. There, he gets married, builds a family, and starts his life. He still finds plenty of struggle – with his wives, with his uncle Laban, and with God. And he never fully stops deceiving and manipulating to get ahead. But 20 years of living can bring wisdom, and Jacob is not the same person he was when he swindled his brother and ran away. As we arrive at our passage for today, Jacob has one daughter and eleven sons (Joseph is still in Technicolor diapers, and Benjamin hasn't been born yet). God has spoken to Jacob and said, "Return to the land of your ancestors and your kindred, and I will be with you." It's time for Jacob to go home. So he takes his family and heads back to his country – and a reunion with his brother Esau.

Even after 20 years, Jacob hasn't forgotten how he wrong his brother and his brother's threat to kill him. Although God has promised Jacob that "I am with you," Jacob doesn't completely trust in that promise. He knows he has changed, but he also knows Esau doesn't know that! Jacob sends a scouting party ahead to see if Esau has any surprises waiting for him, and he learns that not only is Esau rushing out to see his long-lost brother, he's bringing four hundred men with him. Either Esau is planning a giant group hug or he's planning revenge. Jacob, who has been wrestling with people all his life, especially with Esau, is anticipating yet another struggle. And he gets it.

This impending meeting with Esau is weighing heavily on Jacob's mind when he lays down to sleep that night. He sends his family to the other side of the river night so he can be alone, but he isn't alone for long. Jacob does indeed have another struggle, but not with Esau. Instead, very abruptly we are told that someone wrestles with him until daybreak. The big question here is: who is it? The original Hebrew says it was "ish," which simply means "a man." Jewish commentaries say it was an angel. Jacob believed it was God.

We've all been in the same situation as Jacob because life is a wrestling match. Not a day goes by that we don't lock horns with our parents, or our children, or coworkers, or insurance companies, or neighbors, or store clerks. Not to mention the fact

that we're constantly wrestling with ourselves. We wage a war within ourselves that boils down to a battle of good and evil. We are so tempted to do things we know we shouldn't: to cheat, to lie, to be unfaithful to God and our loved ones, to be selfish and greedy. And we're only human; no one can resist all temptation. Jacob sure couldn't. So, we wrestle with our own humanity, striving to be good people in the face of the sin we know is within us. Simply put, life is a struggle.

And, like Jacob, we wrestle with God. Jacob has been struggling with God all his life. For those of us who are control connoisseurs, we know this struggle. The struggle for control, the struggle to make things go our way. Like Jacob, we have wrestled with God. We just know our plans our better, or timing is more perfect. So rather than submit to God, we wrestle with God. Have you ever won one of those wrestling matches? I have. I've gone through with my timing despite God's word to be patient. I've forced my plans when God had something better in store for me. And God has said, "OK, you think you know best, go for it." And I have, and I've come out the other side worse off. In this battle, God does not overcome Jacob. Instead, they battle to a stalemate, and the man gives Jacob's hip a wrenching blow, leaving him wounded.

As the sun starts to come up, the stranger asks to be let go. Why didn't Jacob let go? He's had a sleepless night, he's worn out from wrestling, his hip is on fire with pain. Why didn't Jacob let go? Barbara Brown Taylor says it's because Jacob got hold of someone who "smells like heaven," and the manipulator in Jacob knew there was something to be gained. "I will not let you go until you bless me," he says. Once again, Jacob strikes a deal that leans heavily in his favor. Once again, Jacob the anti-hero lives up to his name, "the grabber."

As if to confirm it, the ish asks him, "What is your name?" Jacob had been asked that before. It was by his blind father, as Abraham prepared to give his fatherly blessing. Then, Jacob had answered that question, "I am Esau," and stole what didn't belong to him. This time there is no pretense, no hiding his true nature. This time, he claims the dubious name he has spent his life running from: I am Jacob, the deceiver.

At that moment, Jacob, who is used to taking things from others, has something taken from him. The man takes his name. No longer is he Jacob, the one who deceives. He is now Israel, the one who struggled with God and who overcame. He is no longer Jacob the supplanter; he is Israel the survivor. No longer does he see himself as others see him, the heel-grabber; now he sees himself as God sees him, the one who perseveres.

The stranger departs, leaving Jacob with a blessing and a bum hip. Jacob couldn't have one without the other. God's blessing often comes through struggle, and the reminder of the struggle is also the reminder of the blessing, like the scar that reminds us of the successful surgery. Jacob has experienced what Frederick Beuchner called a "magnificent defeat."

This story took on special meaning to me during my last year of seminary. I preached on this passage for a class in the fall of 2000, and in the spring of 2001 I had my first symptoms that would lead to my diagnosis of multiple sclerosis. You know what those symptoms were? Weakness in the muscles on my left side, including my leg. The result of those symptoms was a limp. Through seminary I had struggled with God for understanding and control, and now I was preparing to leave that place to face the challenges of ministry. And I was leaving with a limp.

I was scared. Scared of my own body, scared of what the future held, scared for my family, scared about finding a job. Like Jacob fretting over Esau, our moments of struggle are the time when we are most afraid of what is to come, when we feel most alone. But it is also the exact time when we encounter God face to face.

Jacob's wrestling match reminds us that God is there in the midst of our struggles. Jacob tells us to hang on for all its worth, to ask for a blessing in the midst of the wrestling match, and to not let go until you have one. I was blessed through my struggle as I learned the power prayer can have in your life. In the midst of my wrestling match, God got so much bigger for me. Transformation doesn't take place when we're safe and comfortable and have everything under control. It happens in the midst of struggle. When we lose our grasp on control, our only choice is to move forward on faith, and growing in faith always means we will be changed. In the midst of our challenges, we can either fight against God, or ask God to fight for us. In the midst of the refining fire, the painful transitions, the magnificent defeat, we can choose to ignore it, we can run from it, or we can take it head on, wrestling with it until we emerge transformed. It's in those moments – the broken relationships, the unexpected job changes, the health scares, the moments we are walking through the valleys – that God is fighting for us. Our job is simply to radically trust and keep going.

It won't be easy. It will probably mean a struggle, maybe more than one. You may limp away from those moments. Anyone who dares enter deeply into life with God walks with a limp. Anyone who has raised children or cared for aging relatives walks with a limp. Anyone who has invested themselves in serving others walks with a limp. Anyone who tries to be Christ-like in their daily lives walks with a limp. If you dare to try and live by faith, it's gonna leave a mark.

But you will also leave with a new name, a name that describes you as God sees you. Can you hear it? Can you hear your new name? For me, it was "minister." For you, it might be "teacher" or "leader" or "elder" or "servant." Maybe your new name will be "survivor" or "benefactor" or "role model" or "friend." When you wrestle with God, you are transformed, you are no longer the same person.

Jacob's new name was Israel, for he had wrestled with God and had overcome. But there's more. The next morning, when he went out to meet his fate with Esau, his older sibling ran up to Jacob and threw his arms around him in a huge bear hug. Jacob's transformation from selfish trickster to man of God was complete. And Jacob heard another new name: "brother." And he was home. In the midst of our struggles, may we experience the same feeling as we remember that God is holding us close. May we persevere through our struggles. And may we limp away blessed.