

## Face to Face

Rev. Jeanne Murawski

July 31, 2011

Our journey with Jacob continues. If you've been away this summer, here's what you've missed. We entered the story weeks ago, as Rebekah, the wife of Isaac, is pregnant with twins. The two struggle inside of her, and seeking guidance, she is told "two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you will be divided, the one shall be stronger than the other and the younger will supplant the older."

Jacob and Esau are born, and from the start, they are different as can be. Esau first, with Jacob right behind, grasping onto his heel. Over the past few weeks we've watched as Jacob tricks his brother and his father into giving him a birthright and blessing he has no claim to. In fear of his brother's anger, Jacob runs away from home, and has a vision of God telling him he is part of the promise made first to his grandfather Abraham, his father Isaac, and now to him.

Unsure, Jacob continues to travel, meeting up with his uncle Laban, and his beautiful cousin Rachel. Jacob contracts with Laban to work for seven years for the ability to marry Rachel, but we soon see that the trickster is tricked into marrying Leah instead. Another deal is struck, and Jacob marries Rachel as well, bringing us to where we are today.

Whew! It's like a soap opera!

Between last week's reading, and the events of today's reading, much has happened. Jacob is caught in a war between his two brides, fathering child after child as the women seek to gain power and position through their offspring. The trickery continues, as Jacob and Laban make a deal about sheep, and Jacob ends up a very rich man through that endeavor. Good thing, too, with all those children to support!

Finally, after many years, Jacob decides that it is time to leave Laban's homestead and return to his family. Along the way, Jacob discovers that he is about to cross paths with his brother Esau once again. Jacob is terrified, and with good reason. The last words he heard from his family was the threat that Esau meant to murder him.

Jacob sends a messenger ahead, and is awaiting word back, when we enter the story once again and find this tale of Jacob wrestling with the stranger.

There is not much of a prelude or explanation given. Just, "Jacob was left alone and a man wrestled with him until daybreak." Who is this mysterious stranger, and why are they battling? We don't know. But as they struggle, the man asks Jacob's name.

You may remember that Jacob was given his name because he came into the world grasping his brother's heel as they were born. The name Jacob, yaaqov can literally mean "A Heel". And he has lived up to it. Jacob has lived his life as a heel, a trickster, striving to gain what is not his, to supplant the order set before him.

It's telling, then, that when the stranger asks his name, Jacob answers with no ancestors, clan or people. He wrestles alone, stands alone and names only one name, "Yaaqov – Jacob – A Heel."

As the night wears on, the wrestler grants him with a new name: "God-wrestler – Israel."

Jacob is finally given his blessing he has sought his whole life... and it changes his life. He leaves the encounter with a new name, and a new limp. He will forever remember this time. He is renamed, and renewed, but the encounter will leave an outward sign to all who meet him.

I have said again and again, that one way to look at the Bible is as faith's family album. As you look through the albums and journals your own family may have kept over time, you might find ancestors who are heroes, and worth celebrating. You may also find others who followed a difficult path or went off the rails completely. But all the stories together make up the tapestry of who your family is.

So it is with our family album of faith. Not every person in the Bible is a role model. I can't picture telling our Faith Circuit children, to try to grow up to be just like Jacob. But the truth is, he is part of the tapestry of our faith, and shows us part of who faith family really is. A band of youngest sons supplanting the expectations and systems in place. A dysfunctional family of tricksters. A gathering of disciples imperfectly following the call of God in our midst.

The same God who pursues Jacob, promises him blessing, and eventually turns his life upside down, is the same God we know through Jesus Christ. A God who turns table scraps into a feast at the feeding of the 5,000. A God who seeks out the beggar, the sinner, the weak, and the outcast. A God who overturns all expectations, conquering death through resurrection, showing that life and love are stronger.

As we hear these stories of Biblical ancestors who have come face to face with God and come out changed, may we see something of ourselves in the tapestry of this family album. These are not just nice stories, but glimpses into what it means to belong to the family of God.

During every mission trip, I encourage the travelers, whether youth or adult, to seek the face of God as they experience whatever adventures might come.

I am fully aware that it is a dangerous thing that I am asking.

So often, we think of God appearing in our lives as a pleasant thing. A happy accident that leaves us assured or otherwise content. I'm thinking of a recent book called "God winks" that suggested God is always sending us little messages that we are being watched from afar by a benevolent creator.

But for some of us, to see God face to face is to have our lives turned upside down. To experience the holy in the world is to see everything anew, and to be troubled by the way things are.

We wrestle. And we might just walk away with a limp.

After the last adult trip, Bruce Paul shared some of his God-wrestling in his worship reflection that his whole life he was taught that there are a limited amount of resources, meant for those who work hardest and best. And yet, a different view was seen in working with Back Bay.

My dear friend Betsy graduated seminary the same year I did. For her it was a second-career endeavor, and a life-changing choice to go to school and become ordained. Raised in a devoutly atheist family, she was told her whole life that religion was nothing but a crutch for the weak. And yet. And yet, despite being a strong, smart, capable woman, she felt the pull of something more mysterious and less straight-forward than the coolly rational arguments against God she had heard her whole life. She left her position in the corporate world, and became a student once more. It took ten years for Betsy to graduate seminary, as she wrestled daily with the

call she felt in her heart. Today, she is an amazing minister whose faith and understanding are inspiring.

His whole life, Jacob was literally called a heel. A second-rate striver. And he lived into his name, acting as a trickster and a thief. But as he traveled his path, he was continually reminded again and again that God's promise was with him. Until eventually, he wrestled with that truth, discovered who he really was, who God meant him to be, and through that striving, came out renamed.

Just in time to face his past. Esau is out on the road, and as you heard during children's time, they do eventually meet and reconcile. But that's another story for another day.

Next week, our Jacob's journey series will end.

Next week, a new adventure begins.

Next week, our youth mission trip team will return from Cincinnati, having sought the face of God for six days working and playing together in the city.

In the days ahead, I pray that each one of us does, in fact, seek the face of God in our midst, wherever we might find ourselves. And I pray that we come out the other side changed for the better.

As you seek God's call for you and your life, be open to all that comes your way. And it just may be a blessing.

Amen.