

## Struggles

When I was a little kid, I went to Sunday school. And when many of you were kids, you went to Sunday school. At your baptism, the congregation had promised to nurture you in the Christian faith and life, and to enfold you in their care. So you probably had Sunday school teachers who, as a part of that nurture and care, told you Bible stories. They loved to tell the stories! You learned about Noah and the ark. About Moses and the Ten Commandments. About David and Goliath. About Jonah and the whale. And lots of others.

But maybe it's been a while since you heard these stories from the Hebrew Scriptures, from the First Testament. And perhaps, when you first heard them, you heard them through the ears of a child. So today, I invite you to listen to one of them from a different perspective—to listen for what God could be saying to you and me in this story of a man called Jacob. You've already heard how it starts.

The struggle between Jacob and his twin brother Esau begins in the womb. Esau's born first. Then out comes Jacob,

grasping Esau's heel. Grabbing onto his brother for a free ride into the world. In fact, that's how he gets his name. *Jacob* means *grabber*!

Now this Jacob and his brother Esau don't seem to have a thing in common. Rebekah, their mother, can hardly believe how different her sons are. You know how sometimes siblings with the same parents can be as different as night and day? That's how it is with Jacob and Esau. Who is a sportsman, a hunter. Isaac, their father, relishes the wild game Esau brings home. Isaac loves Esau. But Rebekah dotes on Jacob. And there you have it—a recipe for a dysfunctional family.

Speaking of recipes. One day Jacob is—as usual—in his tent. Making lentil stew. Now, if you've ever cooked lentils, you know that when you boil them in the pod, they turn reddish-brown. Anyway, here comes Esau in from an unsuccessful hunting trip—hasn't eaten in days. Starving hungry. Begging for some of that red stew. So Jacob, the opportunist, hears the desperation in his brother's voice. And capitalizes on it. For a bowl of lentil stew, Jacob cons Esau into bartering his birthright.

Now you and I might wonder why that's such a big deal. But in ancient Near-Eastern culture, the birthright means that the

elder son—that's Esau—stands to inherit a double share. In other words, two-thirds of everything his father has. Which will now belong to the younger son, Jacob.

But that's not all. Isaac is nearing the end of life. His eyesight's almost gone. It's time for him to bless his son Esau. A father's blessing is believed to be powerful in determining the future. This blessing can be given only once. And it's reserved for the firstborn, assuring him of plentiful grain and wine. And making him lord over his brother.

Jacob the deceiver. With the help of his mother—remember, he's her favorite—Jacob puts on animal skins so he'll feel hairy and smell gamy, and Isaac will mistake him for Esau. And then he tricks poor old Isaac into blessing him instead of his brother.

Well. As you can imagine, Esau—mourning the loss of both birthright *and* blessing—is beside himself with rage and plotting the death of Jacob. Ever protective, Rebekah puts a bug in Isaac's ear about sending Jacob off to find himself a wife among her people, far away to the east. So Jacob packs up and leaves. What he's *really* doing, of course, is getting out of Dodge. ASAP! Running for his life.

On this flight into exile, Jacob is still in Canaan when he stops to rest for the night. He sleeps. He dreams. In his dream, a ladder reaches up into the heavens. And Jacob finds himself in the presence of God.

What's important to understand here—amazing though it is—is that God has not abandoned this liar, this cheater, this thief, this Jacob. Not for a moment! God not only appears to Jacob, but makes covenant promises to Jacob.

*I am...the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.*

And how does this schemer respond to such marvelous grace? Exactly as you'd expect—he attempts to strike a bargain. *Okay, God. It's you and me. If you'll feed me and clothe me and protect me until I get back home again, you can be my God. And*

*I'll call this place Bethel, which means God's house. And I'll give you back a tenth of everything you give me.*

My brothers and sisters, do you know someone who's tried to cut a deal with God? Maybe it went something like this: *Oh Lord, if you'll just get me out of this mess, I'll do whatever you want me to do. I'll go to church every Sunday. I'll even tithe. I swear!*

But in the meantime, Jacob continues on his journey and arrives at his mother's home place. At the well where the stock is watered. Now you probably know that some of the Bible's most tender scenes take place at a well. And this one's no exception. At this well, Jacob first lays eyes on Rachel and learns who she is. He loves her immediately and completely. Tearfully, he kisses her, telling her that he's the son of Rebekah, sister to her father Laban. And then Uncle Laban welcomes Jacob into his home, as blood kin.

A reading from Genesis, the twenty-ninth chapter, beginning with the fifteenth verse:

*<sup>15</sup>Then Laban said to Jacob, "Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall*

*your wages be?”<sup>16</sup>Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel.<sup>17</sup>Leah’s eyes were lovely, and Rachel was graceful and beautiful.<sup>18</sup>Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, “I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel.”<sup>19</sup>Laban said, “It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me.”<sup>20</sup>So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her.<sup>21</sup>Then Jacob said to Laban, “Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed.”<sup>22</sup>So Laban gathered together all the people of the place, and made a feast.<sup>23</sup>But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob; and he went in to her.<sup>24</sup>(Laban gave his maid Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her maid.)<sup>25</sup>When morning came, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, “What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?”<sup>26</sup>Laban said, “This is not done in our country—giving the younger before the firstborn.<sup>27</sup>Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years.”<sup>28</sup>Jacob did so, and completed her week; then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as a wife.*

<sup>29</sup>(Laban gave his maid Bilhah to his daughter Rachel to be her maid.) <sup>30</sup>So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah. He served Laban for another seven years.

The Word of God for the people of God.

Jacob yearns to marry Rachel, who he finds more beautiful than her sister Leah. But on the wedding night, Laban brings him Leah instead of Rachel. Why does Jacob not notice? Maybe it's because it's dark. Maybe because, even in the marriage bed, the bride is veiled. Or maybe because he's, uh, celebrated too much.

Whatever the reason, Jacob winds up having to serve Laban *another* seven years for his beloved Rachel. For the elder daughter is to be married before the younger. So—ironically—Jacob gets thwarted by a tradition of firstborn privilege, the tradition he so callously disregarded when he appropriated Esau's birthright and blessing. The trickster has himself been tricked! And we're tempted now to exchange glances and nod knowingly and say: *What goes around comes around*.

But the struggle between Jacob and Laban is far from over. Laban has met his match! Jacob becomes wealthy at Laban's expense. Still the conniver, Jacob manipulates the breeding of

the flocks and herds, and manages to acquire the lion's share of Laban's livestock. And Jacob now has two wives and their two maidservants. By these four women, Jacob's become the father of a large family, of numerous sons and a daughter. Twenty years have passed.

And one day Jacob again hears the voice of God. *Return to the land of your ancestors and to your kindred, and I will be with you.* So in obedience Jacob packs up his family and his animals and leaves Haran—with Laban in hot pursuit. For Laban considers all of them *his* property: *his* daughters, *his* grandchildren, *his* sheep, *his* goats. Jacob and Laban work out their differences, despite mistrust. Their covenant at Mizpah is a warning to one another: *The Lord watch between you and me, while we are absent one from the other...remember that God is witness between you and me.* And they take their leave.

The time has come for Jacob to return to Esau. And in humility, acknowledging a power greater than his own, Jacob prays. *O Lord...I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant...Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother...for I*



*am afraid of him.* Jacob sends gifts to Esau: flocks and herds, cattle, camels, and donkeys.

Jacob has good reason to be fearful of his brother—although they will soon reconcile with tears, with an embrace, and with a kiss. At the river, Jacob sends family and livestock across at the ford and remains alone. There, so near the border of the promised land, Jacob stands on the edge of all his tomorrows. Bidding good-bye to the way he's lived. Preparing to begin anew.

Then one whose name Jacob does not know appears on the riverbank. And all through the night they wrestle. When Jacob asks—as he once asked Isaac—for a blessing, he's told: *You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.*

This isn't the end of Jacob's story. I invite you to read or reread it for yourself in Genesis. But it's where we leave him for today. Jacob has struggled with people and with God. God has gotten hold of Jacob. And when God gets hold of you, you're no longer the same person you were before. Jacob's no longer the same person *he* was before. He has a new name. A new name signals a change of character. A change of heart. A life change.

Jacob the grabber has become Israel the patriarch, the father of twelve sons who become twelve tribes who become a nation. This is the story of the beginnings of a people, the beginnings of Israel, in whom we as Christians have deep roots. We imagine this ancient tale being told around a campfire, long before it was written down. Could Hollywood possibly have conjured up a screenplay more dramatic, more intriguing, with more twists and turns, than the story of Jacob?

Jacob's story is our story. Ordinary human beings, with flaws and with families who don't always get along—just like Jacob and just like us—have the high and holy privilege of being used by God to do God's work, to accomplish God's purposes. And even as we continue to struggle, this God is lovingly, graciously shaping us into exactly who we were created to be.

Just as—throughout this story—God has been there, shaping Jacob, who hears these words: *All the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring.* God who has promised is faithful! And today, your family and mine, and God's family all around the earth truly *are* blessed—in Jacob's offspring, Jacob's descendant: Jesus the Christ.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.