

A Sermon Preached by Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian on November 14, 2021

JACOB WRESTLES WITH GOD

Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. Genesis 32:24

Today we continue our focus on core stories from the Bible as we focus on an incident in the life of Jacob. Jacob's life can sometimes read like a television soap opera like "As the World Turns, Dallas or Dynasty." It is full of family intrigue, betrayal and scandal.

We learn that Isaac and his wife Rebecca, like Abraham and Sarah had a difficult time conceiving their first child. Isaac prayed for a long time for a child. Rebecca finally conceived twins. Isaac had two children to continue the covenant made with Abraham. The twins were name Jacob and Esau. Esau was the first to be born. As the first born he was entitled to be the successor of Isaac.

Esau and Jacob clearly were fraternal twins. They were completely unlike. They were different physically and emotionally. The parents had favorites. Isaac preferred the outgoing physically active Esau. Rebecca doted on her more cerebral Jacob. Jacob and his mother were not satisfied to allow Esau to inherit the rights of the first born. Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field famished. He asked Jacob to feed him. Jacob, thinking quickly, asked for Esau's birthright. Esau thinking, he was hungry now and that his Father Isaac would be alive for a long time, agreed.

Years later Isaac realizes his days were numbered. His eyesight is gone and his body is failing him. So, he tells Esau to go out hunting and then prepare a nice meal for them and Isaac would then pass on God's blessing to him. Rebecca overhears this and comes up with a plan. While Esau is out hunting, she had Jacob put on a hairy robe that would feel like Esau and he takes some food for his father. Isaac thinking it is Esau, gives his final blessing to Jacob.

When Esau returns and finds out what has occurred, his anger is such that Rebecca tells Jacob to get out of town. She tells him to go to her father and brother, in Paddan-aran. On his journey, Jacob has a dream in which he sees the famous ladder going up to heaven. Angels are going up and down the ladder. In this dream as looks at the ladder, God is standing beside him and promises that the Covenant made with Abraham would be fulfilled through him. Jacob gained hope for the future.

When he arrives in Haran he meets Rachel and wants her to be his wife. Laban makes a deal with Jacob, if he works for just room and board for seven years he can have Rachel for his wife. He agrees. The wedding ceremony takes place and when the bridal veil is removed, low and behold it is Leah, Rachel's older sister. Laban makes the excuse that he can't give his younger daughter in marriage first. So, Laban suggests that if Jacob works another seven years for free he can marry Rachel. Jacob is patient and works those years and marries Rachel. Jacob then begins to build a family with both wives. He

was good at managing the flocks and began to accumulate wealth.

Jacob's success caused envy among Laban's family. It was not always clear what was Jacob's and what was Laban's possessions. Tensions began to rise and God told Jacob to head back home. So, he leaves quickly with all his goods and family to travel home.

So, we come to our story for today. The night before he would return across the river home, Jacob sends his family across the river and spends the night alone. It was a night of tension and fear. While Jacob knew it was not completely safe to return to the land of his Uncle, he also was not sure how he would be received by his brother. Remember this is the brother that he had cheated and deceived. Yet God had told him to go back. What was God's will? Where would it lead? Would he be attacked the next day? Or would he be received with open arms. Was he making the right decision?

The emotional turmoil is presented as wrestling. Jacob wrestles that night with a man who comes to symbolize God. This wrestling becomes a blessing when he is told, **"You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed."** Jacob's wrestling with God makes another promise of the Covenant that he would be the Father of the twelve tribes of Israel.

What does this story teach us? It simply teaches us that struggling with God's will, intentions and the difficulties of life are part of the human experience. Christians do not passively accept the hard times in life. We question and wrestle with God's will.

The story of Jacob's wrestling reminds me of Jesus in the garden. When we read the story of Jesus' Passion we are reminded that Jesus was fully human as well as fully divine. The Passion underscores the humanity of Jesus. This is especially true in the story of Jesus' time of testing in the Garden. It is one of the most human experiences of his life. In this story Jesus wrestles with God. Jesus struggles to accept God's will for his life.

Recall again with me Jesus' experience. He had spent the better part of the week in Jerusalem. He entered with great fanfare on Palm Sunday. The crowds greeted him as a popular hero. They demonstrated great emotion as he entered the city. Jesus himself may have begun to believe that all of Israel might accept his message of the kingdom of God.

Yet as the week progressed the leaders began to work against Jesus. They conspired to find a way to arrest Jesus and put him to death. They had bribed Judas to betray Jesus. Jesus had celebrated the solemn feast of Passover with his disciples and then gone out to the garden to pray and wait. As he went with his disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus knew what would soon happen to him. The shadow of the cross filled him with gloom. Jesus spent time in prayer wrestling with the will of God

One of the most controversial films of the last twenty years was Mel Gibson's **The**

Passion of the Christ. It caused a great stir because of its graphic depiction of Jesus' death. It took liberties with the Gospel Stories as Gibson added details that are not found in the Bible.

In many ways I thought this movie should be approached as a work of art. I felt it was like a triptych painting found in Cathedrals. These triptychs have three paintings that are complete in themselves and yet related to each other. Gibson used film to present three basic scenes, first Jesus in the Garden, then his scourging and finally his crucifixion.

The most effective of these triptychs is the Garden scene. In his portrayal of Jesus in the Garden, Gibson is able to help us feel the turmoil and inner pain that Jesus endured in prayer wrestling with the will of God. Jesus did not want to endure the humiliation, pain and suffering that was before him. He asked God one last time to change the course his life. Jesus himself struggled with God's will. He prayed that if there was any other way, could not that bitter cup pass him. Jesus, in his agony, questions where God is in all this. His prayer was so intense that he sweated blood.

If Jesus needed to struggle with the will of God, how much more do we need to share our own questions, doubt, struggles, and even anger with God? You and I need to share our negative thoughts with God for one reason. He desires to be in a complete relationship with each one of us.

God wants our whole being. He does not just want that part of us that is sweetness and light. He does not just want our positive emotions and feelings shared with him. He does not want us to talk with him only when we feel good about Christ.

If we are honest for a moment we recognize that there are many
times when we question God's wisdom
times when we wonder about God's love for us.

When the company closes and we lose a job, we feel anger at the unfairness of life.

When a spouse is ill or dies, we wonder where God is?

When a child loses their way in addiction, we ask how the Lord could allow it to happen.

When we are sick or depressed or life seems without meaning, we question God's love for us.

Today when our whole world is suffering from sickness, death, and economic hardship from a virus we had not heard of two years ago, we wonder what God is doing.

This scale of human suffering makes us ask why? What does it mean?

Each one of us has understood more than once in our lives the words of Jesus **My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me, nevertheless, not as I will but as thou wilt.**

God wants us to bring our whole selves into God's presence. We are to bring not only our joy, and hopes before him in prayer, but also our frustrations, disappointments and yes, even our anger.

When we wrestle with God we are at least still in relationship with him. Every real relationship has times of anger, disagreement and tension. Is there any one that has never had a fight with their parents? Is there anyone anywhere who has not argued with his or her children or have never had a falling out with a friend? Every relationship has ups and downs. One of the worst reactions to conflict is shutting down and giving the silent treatment.

There are many people who have lost their faith, because they have given God the silent treatment. There are many men and women who have been wounded by something in life, who do not express their anger towards God, but rather merely turn God off. They cease to worship him. They stop praying. They no longer read the Bible. They give God the cold shoulder.

The Bible teaches us that our anger with God is not wrong in and of itself. The Scriptures remind us that instead of pretending everything is all right, the way to grow in our relationship with Christ is by sharing our struggles in prayer. We are to argue with God. We are to tell him our frustrations.

In the book of Genesis, Jacob spends a night wrestling with God. When the struggle was over Jacob was blessed. Each one of us has experienced the truth that crises in relationships can lead to deeper understanding and a stronger bond of love. If we hang in there in the struggles our love grows deeper. Arguments and disagreements often produce a stronger enduring bond.

When you and I argue, vent, contend, struggle and wrestle with God our relationship with him will grow stronger.

Friends, when you pray bring your whole being,
Bring all your feelings, good and bad and
Share them with Jesus and your relationship with him
will grow.