

8:15 Service

St. Luke, Evangelist  
Pastor John H. Brock

Sunday, October 17, 2004  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Genesis 32:22:31; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8

Grace to you and peace from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen

What I find so amazing about our first lesson this morning is that God uses Jacob, God **blesses** Jacob, in spite of the fact – almost **because** of the fact – that Jacob is a first class jerk. This guy Jacob, if you remember the story by reading the previous chapters in Genesis, Jacob is first of all, a twin. His brother is Esau. Jacob and Esau were born to their father, Isaac and mother, Rebecca. When they were in the womb, Rebecca felt their struggle within her womb. As she was birthing Esau came out first, ruddy colored and very hairy, but holding onto Esau's heel was Jacob. Jacob had hold of Esau. Jacob, *Yakkov*, in Hebrew, is "heel grabber." From the very first Jacob tried to grab onto something that isn't quite his.

Later on, of course, we have that story where Esau is out hunting and comes back and Jacob is there making this wonderful smelling stew. Esau says "Oh Jacob, give me some of that stew." And Jacob says, "Yeah, I'll give you some of this stew, but it's going to cost you. Sell me your birthright." Birthrights don't necessarily mean a whole lot to us, but it is basically, give to me the blessing that you would receive as first born, that I wouldn't get otherwise. Well, Esau, "I am famished," he says. "So yeah take it. What's it worth to me if I am going to die right now?"

Little while later father Isaac has lost most of his sight, and he's lying in bed. (Now, parents are not suppose to have favorites. We all know this, and we also know that is not always true. In this case Rebecca's favorite was Jacob and Isaac's favorite was Esau.) And so Isaac thought he was dying. He calls in his son Esau and says, "Go out hunting and make for me a wonderful meal that I can then give you this blessing that is yours." So Esau gets all excited, he quick grabs his stuff (he's a great hunter) and off he goes out into the wilderness. Now Rebecca had been outside the tent and she heard this and so she quickly calls Jacob over and she says Jacob, "Go out to the field and kill two of the fattest kids that you can find and bring them to me and I will make a succulent supper for your father." Well, Jacob might be crafty, but he's not stupid. "Mom, what do you mean here? I don't sound like my brother, I can't cook like my brother and sure I am nice and smooth skinned and my brother is hairy." She said, "Don't worry about it, get me the kids, get in your brothers clothes." So mom does just that. She makes this wonderful meal, she skins the goats, she puts the goat skins on the back of Jacob's hands, he dresses in his brother's clothes. He goes to his father, he serves him his meal. Now dad's blind, but he is not stupid either. He hears the voice and he can't quite reconcile the situation. So he calls his son closer. And he quick reaches out and grabs him. "You have the voice of Jacob, but you have the hairy hands like Esau." And he pulls him closer and he smells his clothes "You smell like Esau, so it must be my hearing that is going as well," and so he gives to his son Jacob, the blessing that is suppose to go to Esau.

Jacob no more than cleans up supper and gets out of the tent when Esau comes in bearing this wonderful, wonderful meal. And dad very quickly realizes what happened and explains this to Esau (who is not so quick on the uptake). And Esau is enraged and he wants to kill his brother.

Once again mom is ease-dropping and hears this and sends Jacob off. Now good is as good gets. Jacob goes to his Uncle Laban and through a wonderful series of events ends up marrying the wrong girl and then marrying the right girl and finally ends up with **four** women in his life (I have a difficult enough time getting along with **one** spouse). But Jacob ends up with these four women (who between them eventually bear him twelve sons), but he is still on the run from his brother all this time. Finally he comes to the realization he needs to reconcile with his brother. And so he heads back to find Esau.

The closer he gets, though, the more second thoughts Jacob starts to have. Now Jacob has been a very good farmer because he now has all kinds of goats and cattle and sheep now, even though he kind of “appropriated” them from his Uncle Laban from whom he married these two sisters. He sends in front of him, to appease his brother, gifts: gifts of cattle; gifts of sheep and goats; gifts of servants. He sends these gifts on ahead to find his brother. Then he sends first the two maid servants who bore some of his children. Then he sends Leah his first wife and finally he sends Rachel, the wife that he loved. Until finally we get to the point, as we heard in our lesson this morning, when Jacob’s all alone on the one side of the river. He sent everybody else across the river because he is so afraid of what Esau is going to do to him. As we would say, rightly so.

And there, all alone on his side of the river, Jacob has an encounter. Possibly with a human, possibly with an angel, maybe even with God. The Hebrew is vague and so we are not exactly sure, and the whole story is written in that way that it might be a person and it might not be. But Jacob wrestles with this person all night long. Jacob doesn’t prevail, but then again neither does this other individual, until finally daylight is coming and Jacob gets a hold on this other one, a hold that cannot be broken and Jacob wants a blessing. He wants to know the name of this one, with whom he had been struggling, and he is told “No longer will your name be *heel grabber*, but your name shall be Israel, *God with you*.” Jacob – this guy who I wouldn’t be all that sure that I want as a friend, this guy who has messed over his brother, who stole him from his uncle -- receives the benefit of the covenant, the promise that God made with Abraham and Sara: “I will be your God and you will be my people and from you I will make a great nation whose descendant will outnumber the stars in the sky.” The covenant made with Abraham and Sara passed to Isaac and given deceitfully to Jacob and **still** God upholds that covenant, that promise. Now it came at a cost to Jacob, because he wrestled with God all night long. But he came away from that wrestling a changed person, for he was no longer Jacob, but Israel.

Now I am sure almost all of us at some point in our lives have wrestled with God. We don’t call it “wrestling with God,” it’s more politically correct to call it “soul searching.” (We really don’t want to **talk** about God, we’re Americans, we keep our faith private until it is going to profit us to talk about it.) But we’ve all wrestled with God at some point. Maybe when our spouse gets cancer. Maybe we wrestle with God when we lost our job. Maybe we wrestle with God when we get that phone call from the police saying that our child is under arrest. Maybe we wrestle with God when that *other* political party – which obviously does not follow God – gets elected to the majority of power. Maybe we wrestle with God when our parents die. Maybe we wrestle with God when our child is stillborn. But we wrestle with God. And wrestling with God . . . is good. It’s not always painless, Jacob limped away, his hip out of socket. Wrestling with God is not easy; Jacob was there all night and there was no clear cut winner. But wrestling with God, is good.

Now we don't go looking for a good wrestle, because that takes away from the struggle. To go looking for a fight – that's coming from our head and not our heart. But we wrestle to know God's will in our lives. We wrestle with God to strive to understand the persistence that God is in our lives. Like the judge in the gospel story this morning, "why is she doing this?" we say to God as God wrestles with us, "what is it that you want me to do?"

Sometimes in that wrestling we **do** get a clear cut answer. For Jacob, he received a change of name. But usually wrestling with God is not so clear cut, and that's part of the struggle. But it is in that struggling, in that wrestling, that we find God. In that wrestling that we know God, in that wrestling that we never beat God, but we come to know God. Usually not all at once, not some enlightened epiphany, and not very easily, but in that God inspired knowledge – or as the Greek in our Timothy lesson says, in that *God breathed* knowledge – we go forth from that wrestling holding on to the light that is Christ. Holding on to the joy that is God, holding on to the wisdom that is the Spirit. We go forth having wrestled, knowing who we are, and whose we are. We go forth from that wrestling a better person to tell others of our struggle and to help them with theirs.

Amen.