Sunday, February 22, 1981
EAST OF EDEN
Genesis 25:24-28, 37:3-4

A few weeks ago, John Steinbeck's novel, "East of Eden" was shown on television. As I watched part of it on several nights, I found myself thinking of the stories of Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, and Joseph and his brothers; all Old Testament Bible stories. John Steinbeck must've had these stories in mind when he wrote his novel. The title itself is taken from the story of Cain and Abel in the book of Genesis 4:6, "Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord (this was after he had murdered his brother Abel) and dwelt in the land of Nod, East of Eden."

As I watched the television dramatization of the novel, my mind kept going back to the story of Jacob and Esau, and particularly the character of Jacob in the Old Testa-ment. He is one of the genuine heroes in the Bible, and one of the patriarchs of the Jewish people — yet in the Bib1ica1 accounts, no efforts are made to cover up his faults or to picture him as a perfect gentlemen. In fact, the Bible treats all of its heroes in this fashion. We are told the bad as well as the good.

Thus, Jacob is portrayed as both weak and strong, sometimes trustworthy and at other times deceptive, he is courageous and cowardly. He is like all of us, yet the good news of the story of Jacob and others like him is that God is willing to work with such people and use them for the good. Furthermore, we can learn much from the experiences of one like Jacob and maybe even avoid some of the mis-takes he made.

It's also easy for us to identify with a man like Jacob because he possessed inconsistencies of behavior right up to the end of his life. In some areas he was able to learn from his mistakes, and improve his character, yet in other areas he stumbled on and repeated the mis-takes over and over again. So, the sermon this morning is not really so much about East of Eden as it is about Jacob.

1. Note first then, that in the earlier stages of his life, Jacob, like most of us, developed an "escapist" method for trying to handle his problems. Again and again, he attempted what we might call a "spatial solution" to difficulty; that is, to turn and run whenever he felt threatened or frustrated or felt that he couldn't deal with a situation.

It's a method we all use at times. If our job is not working out as we thought it might, or if we cannot get along with someone, or if our marriage or home life seems unbearable or is not what we dreamed it would be, then like Jacob we are tempted to run; to use a "spatial solution."

Jacob discovered, however, that such a solution was really no solution. Merely to run away from a problem rarely solves the problem. For one thing, we usually take the germs of the problem with us into the new situation, and then after a time we reproduce the same set of circum-stances all over again. In other words, when we run we take ourselves with us.

Furthermore, when escaping is our only concern, we rarely pay much attention to the situation into which we are fleeing and it often turns out to be worse than where we were. The prophet Amos spoke of "fleeing a lion, only to run into a bear." A person runs from a bad marriage into a worse one.

Jacob had tricked his brother and his father and had to run away. He fled to his uncle in Mesopotamia, only to get in trouble in the same way and had to run again. Jacob, whose name in Hebrew literally means “the trickster,” was forever getting into things which he had to get out of.

2. But note secondly, he finally began to learn an important lesson about life. As he fled from his Uncle Laban and heard that his brother Esau whom he had defrauded was coming to meet him with four-hundred armed men, somehow the ‘escapist’ came of age.

Running from a problem is usually no solution, it only puts off a solution and makes the ultimate solution more diffi-cult. Thus, Jacob came to the realization that most of the time the only way out of a problem is through it; or as one person put it, “The good news comes from facing up to the bad news, not in running from it.” Thus, for example, the way to deal with an illness is not to run from it, but to face up to it, do something about it then and there — that’s going through it. The best way to solve any prob-lem is not to run from it, but to work it through. It means coming to terms with the reality of the situation — -this is the first step in dealing creatively with any problem. Jacob began to handle his problems in this way.

But it wasn’t easy. Much of the old trickster was still in Jacob. He sent his wives and children and several gifts ahead in the hopes of softening up his brother Esau. At the same time, however, Jacob now intended to face his brother no matter what the consequences.

Having resolved to meet his brother, Jacob then spent the night alone by a brook and there found himself wrestling with an experience of God. And he learned another important lessons. It is when we decide to face the problem squarely and honestly and not run from it that we most often find God. That’s what happened to Jacob. In trying to run away from his problems, in trying to find tricky solutions and not honest ones, Jacob had also been running from God.

Time and time again, I’ve known people who have had the same experience — whenever they stopped running from an issue or a problem; whenever they faced up to the situation, they found a Power which they had not experienced in quite the same way before. Jacob described it as wrestling with God and the end result was that he was blessed. A new quality emerged in Jacob which is revealed in his words--"I will not let you go until you bless me,” until I have learned from this experience what there is to be learned.

Doesn’t this suggest a way of coping with difficulty in each one of our lives? The way out is the way through, not around or away. The good news does come by facing the bad news. We can learn from the problems of life and become different in the process. But remember as an old saying puts it, “There is no gain without pain.” The good news is we will meet God in the process, and we will be changed for the better.

3. But for all of his learning and facing up instead of running, there was another area in Jacob’s life in which he never did learn from the mistakes of the past. Again, most of us could tell the same story.

Jacob and Esau grew up in a home where the father and mother each had a favorite son, and the favoritism was blatant. As the book of Genesis puts it — “Isaac loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob.”

That was also one of the main problems in the story — East of Eden. The father had his favorite son and every-one knew it. Jacob knew the kind of problems such favori-tism caused, but when he became a father, he made the same mistake himself and proceeded to work the same kind of havoc among his children.

Again, in the story "East of Eden," Adam who had been the favorite son of his father, repeated the pattern and had his own favorite son when he became a parent.

Some mistakes are repeated from generation to generation. An abused child often becomes a parent who is a child abuser. The children of an alcoholic become alcoholics themselves. Some patterns are hard to break. At times we seem to have extreme difficulty in learning from the mistakes of the past.

Most of us, like Jacob, never achieve perfect consistency in our behavior, but the good news is that God did not abandon Jacob, nor does God abandon us. I know that I have a number of bothersome inconsistencies in me, but at the same time I'm sure that God has not given up on me, nor will God ever give up.

4. There is yet one additional lesson we can learn from the story of Jacob. He was tempted at the points of his greatest strengths, not at the point of his weaknesses.

Most of us make the mistake of thinking there is a vast gulf which separates good and evil, or we think it is easy to tell the difference between good and evil. But the Biblical stories remind us that good and evil are subtly intertwined, which means that precisely where one can do his or her best work or the most good, is also where one is capable of doing the most harm, or the worst evil. Any virtue pushed too far can become a vice.

Thus the person who has remarkable public speaking ability so that he or she can move vast audiences to action can do so for good or for evil; he can be a Jim Jones or a • Martin Luther King, Jr.; an Adolph Hitler or a Winston Churchill.

Our ancestor in the faith, Jacob, knew of his family's destiny. The promise and covenant had been made with his grandfather Abraham. The descendants of Abraham were to be a people by whom all the nations of the world would be blessed. Jacob knew these stories and was inspired by them. Esau, on the other hand could've cared less. Un-doubtedly Jacob worried about this especially since Esau was the oldest and by tradition it was his responsibility to carry on the family name and destiny.

So here is Jacob, filled with energy and by nature more interested in the spiritual side of life and his family's covenant with God. That was Jacob's strength and it was precisely this strength and drive which posed a temptation, not any weakness.

Jacob's drive and energy and concern for the things of God led him into some very questionable processes of manipula-tion and deception that left both Isaac and Esau furious with them and even made Jacob run for his life. I think it was Richard Nixon's drive and desire to be a strong and effective President of this country that led him into the Watergate tragedy. It happens so many times to so many people. We are tempted at the point of our greatest strength and thus cannot see the evil it may lead to.

I have no doubt that God intended for Jacob to become the spiritual leader of the family for that was his special gift. But Jacob never gave God a chance to work things out in God's own way.

Jacob was so impatient, so intent on doing good in his own way that he wound up doing bad things in the process. Jesus Christ often warned against this kind of human impatience to straighten out all the messes we think the world is in by using our methods and not waiting to see where God is working. When we begin to play God, we can wind up doing more harm than good.

So, ask yourself today, “What is my greatest strength?” It might be a strong sense of love and care for others. Then be aware of it, use it of course, cultivate it, develop it, but do not let it become a source of evil. Any virtue or strength overdone becomes a vice.

One of the deepest meanings of Jacob’s struggle when he spent that night alone before meeting Esau his brother is this — he had to face up to having run ahead of God, and in his zeal to do right, doing wrong.

But having faced the issue squarely, his life was changed, and he was given a new name — Israel, which means in Hebrew, “The One God rules.” Jacob discovered that the only safe place for our highest potentials is giving them back to God for instruction and guidance, and then using them in this way. Otherwise, we tend to misuse our gifts, especially our finest powers.

And the overall good news of the Jacob story is that God somehow can make straight our mixed-up lives, if we let God into our lives. Jacob became Israel and his sons became the foundation of the Hebrew tradition. God seeks always to bring order out of chaos. God can take one kind of thing and turn it into something else. Is not that the best news you have ever heard? Amen.