Sunday, August 4, 2002
JACOB
Genesis 32:22-31

According to the latest research on the most popular names for boys born in the United States in the past three years, Jacob has been number one. Emily has been the most popular name for girls born during the same period. How many parents named their sons Jacob in 1873 (109 years ago), I do not know, but that was my grandfather's name. He was born on January 7, 1873 — Jacob Young. He died on May 28, 1940. Now we have a grandson named Jacob Young, born on February 4, 1996. Maybe that's why Jacob is one of my favorite Biblical characters. According to my sermon archives, this will be the third sermon based on the life of Jacob in the past three years.

Here's a quick review of the highlights in the life of Jacob. In the Bible stories, Jacob, the second-born twin of Isaac and Rebekah, is considered one of the patriarchs even though he was not always the best role model. His twin brother was named Esau. Although they were fraternal twins, they were as different as brothers can be in personality and appearance. The Bible describes Esau, the firstborn twin, as being a "hairy man," a man's man. He preferred the outdoors and was a skillful hunter, a "macho" man, and he was his father's favorite. By contrast, Jacob is pictured as being a "smooth" man. He preferred the indoors and was his mother's favorite.

According to the Bible story of Jacob's birth, he was born grasping the heel of his twin brother Esau. As he grew and matured, he never stopped his grasping. He was the kind of person who thought that when you saw something beautiful or something you wanted, the natural thing to do was to buy it, steal it, or cheat someone out of it. He withheld a bowl of stew from his hungry brother until Esau gave up the only thing he had going for him — his birthright. Not long after, Jacob played a trick on his nearly blind father, with the help and encouragement of his mother Rebekah, by dressing up in an animal skin to feel like his hairy brother. Then, in the shadows of the tent, he lied to the old man and stole a blessing that wasn't his.

When his trick was discovered, Esau wanted to kill Jacob, and Rebekah never saw her favorite son again. To save his life, arrangements were made as quickly as possible for Jacob to go live with his Uncle Laban in another territory. One way to solve a family problem then, as now, was that when there's big trouble in the family, especially between siblings, you put as much space as possible between yourself and your brother.

Jacob did very well in the far country. But that's to be expected. People like him either end up on the Fortune 500 list or in jail — or both. While still a relatively young man, he had two wives (who were sisters), two mistresses (who were the maidservants of the two sisters), twelve sons, and a daughter from these four women. He had servants and livestock, and everything else a young man could ask for in those days.

In today's terms, Jacob knew the art of the deal. He could've written the book on power negotiating. The ad for the book said, You Don't Get What You Deserve, You Get What You Negotiate. In his day, Jacob dealt with issues the way a lot of so-called high-powered people do today. He practiced the time-honored formula for success: be long on ambition and short on ethics.

It seemed to work for Jacob. Everything he touched turned to gold. He seemed to be able, one way or another, to come away from every deal with his trunk full of more stuff. He had millions of stock options. People who knew him shook their heads and wondered how he did it and when, if ever, he would get caught.

But something still wasn't right. There was a restlessness in his soul. Then, according to the story, he gets the word from God that it's time to go home — back to his roots, return to Isaac, and repair the relationship with Esau, his twin brother. Now, he was afraid.

One reason I like the story of Jacob so much is that it is filled with information about how God works in the lives of people. We learn from this story and others like it that God does some of Her best work in the Bible when people are scared. It is when people are about to have a nervous breakdown, before they knew what to call it, that God is at work in them. There was Elijah, filled with fear, pleading with God to take his life. When Mary, the mother-to-be of Jesus, became aware of God's plan for her life, she was afraid. God is asking people like Elijah, Mary, and Jacob to do things that they don't necessarily want to do.

This is a very different picture of God than that which some forms of popular Christianity portray, where God is one who only soothes and comforts and helps you to get what you want. In Jacob's spiritual journey, God is an antagonist as well as a comforter.

Maybe this is why this story of Jacob wrestling with God has never been made into a movie like The Ten Commandments, starring Charlton Heston as Moses. In the Jacob story, this is no "macho" God coming in the earthquake, wind, and fire, killing all the bad people and saving all the Israelites. The God in this story is one you know much better outside of the movie theater — hidden, subtle, wrestling with you in your struggles. The God that Jacob came to know is One who has him in a headlock called conscience and who slips into his dreams to wound him by grace.

What better metaphor is there to describe what is going on in Jacob's soul than to say that he wrestled with God? It's another way of saying that he was wrestling with his destructive behavior of the past, with his fears of the future, with his conscience, and with what God wanted him to do with the rest of his life. Most of you listening to this sermon are familiar with that kind of "wrestling with God."

The story of that night by the river, as he is preparing to meet his brother, is filled with ancient symbols. Here are a few of them. The struggle takes place in the evening near the river as day turns into night. There was an ancient belief that spirits and deities hovered near rivers and often manifested themselves at night.

Even today, many people do most of their worrying at night when you can't sleep, or you wake up at 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning and can't get back to sleep. Then your mind runs wild, and your deep fears come to the surface. You wrestle with problems and decisions and memories that seem to fade away during the light of day. You are fighting with yourself, or the shadow of yourself, or a figure you can't identify, or all of these mixed together. Frequently it is the Spirit of God that is at work in you.

During the day, Jacob had been able to manage and take initiative. But at night, he turns out to be vulnerable, and things rush around powerfully beyond his control. According to the story in Genesis, someone or something is on Jacob's back. The text is intentionally ambiguous, concealing the identity of the adversary, although in the end, Jacob concludes that his

assailant is God. Jacob is quoted as saying, “I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.”

But at first, we are told that he wrestled with a man. Could that man be Esau, who haunts Jacob’s dreams in the night as well as in the daytime? The outcome of the wrestling match is this: Jacob is told, “You have striven with God and with man, and you have prevailed.” So which is it, man or God?

My longtime friend and Old Testament scholar Walt Brueggemann has this to say about Jacob and his night-time struggle: “At night, things are not sorted out. We never get God alone without all the complexities and unresolved issues of the neighborhood. And we never get the wronged brother alone, without the threatening face of God. The storyteller understands that there is something of the divine in our deep human conflict and something of humanness in the holiness of God.”

In other words, you cannot separate your relationship with your sister, brother, neighbor, or enemy from your relationship with God. You cannot love God without loving others. To attempt to separate love of God from love of neighbor is a fatal step, a deception that can lead to the kind of religion that is not only meaningless but dangerous.

Here’s another revealing truth in this story. The one with whom Jacob is wrestling asks Jacob to reveal his name. This time, Jacob answers honestly: “My name is Jacob.” Remember, years ago in his father Isaac’s tent, Isaac asked Jacob, “What is your name?” And he lied. He said, “My name is Esau.” Evidently, Jacob has learned that he might have deceived others, but he cannot fool God. When God asks you your name, you had better tell the truth.

When you get to that moment in your life when you can open your whole messy life to God, and to yourself, then you can begin to change for the better. Then God can say to you, as God did to Jacob, “From now on you will have a new name,” which is symbolic of your new life.

The story tells you that some of your greatest conflicts are internal. Your most dangerous enemies can be within. When you wrestle with God, you are coming to grips with yourself. Wrestling with God is facing what you prefer to flee, admitting what you’d rather deny, letting the long-separated, alienated parts of yourself have it out with each other.

Since you are created in the image of God, which means, among other things, that the Spirit of God is always a part of you even when you are not aware of it, many of your deepest inner struggles are truly wrestling with God. Will your own self-centered will win, or will it be God’s will that guides your life?

Although there is always mystery in this wrestling with God, Jacob is now maturing. He is no longer an escapist. A new quality has emerged in him, which needs to emerge in you and me. He said to the one who wrestled with him, “I will not let you go until you bless me.” In other words, “I will not let go of this experience, of this soul-searching, of this inner questioning, of this struggle, until I have learned from it what there is to be learned.”

It is possible for you to let go of difficult struggles and painful experiences too soon, before you have learned from them what needs to be learned, and then you miss the blessing. Some incidents are so earth-shaking, so painful, that you try to get away from them too fast, and you allow the experience to be wasted.

There's another revealing metaphor in this story of Jacob wrestling with God. Jacob is wounded in this encounter. At daybreak, he is left with a permanent and visible limp. What is the inner meaning of his limping? I believe it is a reminder that he can never run away from himself or from God again. He is "wounded" by God's grace. His limp is an indication that he can trust in God's strength in addition to his own strength. Later in the Bible, the Apostle Paul wrote, "God's strength is made perfect in weakness." Or as a minister friend of mine said, "To be sure, faith in God is a crutch, but who says you don't limp?"

After his wrestling with God, a new humility begins to appear in Jacob. He is now able to confess his wrong to Esau, ask for forgiveness, and start anew. He is not sure how his brother will receive him. But it turns out better than he could have imagined. He discovers that Esau has already forgiven him. Now, when Jacob looks upon the face of his brother after twenty years, he sees something else — the face of God.

In this Jacob story, Esau doesn't get enough credit. In some ways, he's the real hero of this story. He's the one who doesn't hold a grudge. He receives his brother, who has wronged him, with open arms. No wonder Jacob sees in Esau the face of God. Amen.