

Genesis 32:22-31

²² The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³ He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. ²⁴ Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. ²⁵ When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. ²⁶ Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." ²⁷ So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." ²⁸ Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." ²⁹ Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. ³⁰ So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." ³¹ The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.

Matthew 14:13-21

³ Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴ When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. ¹⁵ When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." ¹⁶ Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." ¹⁷ They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." ¹⁸ And he said, "Bring them here to me." ¹⁹ Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass.

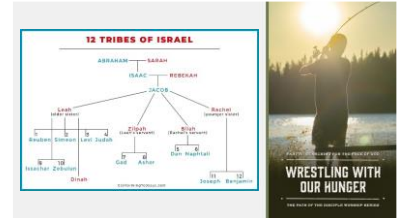
Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ²⁰ And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. ²¹ And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.



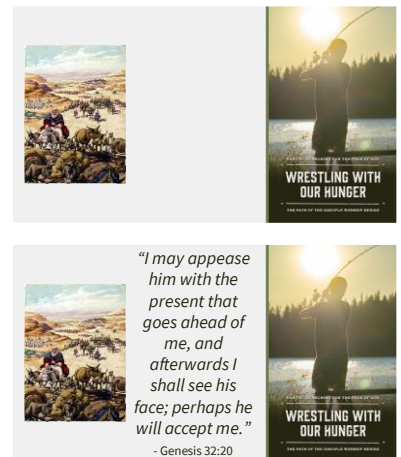
Today we begin Part 4 of our summer worship series, “The Path of the Disciple.” Part 4 is called “Searching for the Face of God.” Jacob finds the face of God in today’s Genesis 32 text as he wrestles with a “man.” We each have likely found the face of God as well. Whether you call them “God sightings” or “God moments,” we become acutely aware of the presence of God at times in our lives. These encounters help us to continue to walk faithfully along the path of discipleship. They are what keeps us going at times. And our “God moments” are often places of renewal or refreshment. And they can simply be reminders that our God is with us. As we enter into this time together, let us pray...

So, my friends, what are we hungry for? That is the question today. Jacob was hungry for belonging, for a return to his home. He had been away for 14 long years. He had fled home long ago after stealing not only the birthright but Isaac’s blessing as well. Jacob has done really well during these 14 years. He has two wives, two maidservants, and many concubines. He has many children, including 11 sons. He has oodles and oodles of servants and huge herds of livestock. Jacob has become very wealthy. In the culture of the day, such abundance meant that God was surely blessing Jacob. It is with this assurance that he begins the journey home. If God is blessing him, then surely Esau can too... right?

Connecting the dots from last week, when Jacob worked 7 years to marry Rachel, his beloved, to this week, we look at the story as it unfolds in Genesis 29-32. Jacob had many sons – 12 in all. He has 4 sons with Leah then 2 sons with Rachel’s servant Bilhah. He then has 2 sons with Zilpah, Leah’s servant. Jacob then has 2 more sons with Leah. Then he finally has a son with Rachel, and he will have another son with her very late in life. Yes, it is quite the sorted affair. Meanwhile, Jacob prospers at Laban’s expense, which angers Laban. The old Jacob, the schemer, is alive and well. Jacob and all that is his flees the scene, but Laban catches up with him. God intercedes in the night, though, instructing Laban not to speak a good or bad word to Jacob. After some back and forth, Laban and Jacob make a covenant with each other, and they part on good terms. It is at this point that Jacob heads for home.



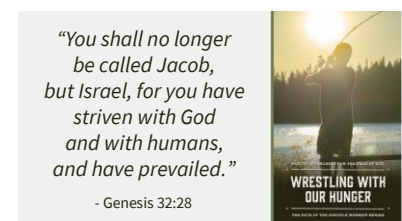
Turn with me to Genesis 32 as we continue the story. Jacob begins by sending some messengers to Esau, seeking favor in his sight. The messengers return to report that Esau has set out to meet Jacob with 400 men. After offering up a desperate prayer to God in verses 9-12, he sends “gifts” to Esau – goats and sheep and camels and cows and bulls and donkeys. He has his servants space themselves out so that they present each herd to Esau at intervals. Jacob is still scheming. He is hopeful. In verse 20 he thinks to himself, *“I may appease him with the present that goes ahead of me, and afterwards I shall see his face; perhaps he will accept me.”* Jacob is sending



Esau a gift so large that no one could stay mad at the giver. The last half of this thought foreshadows Jacob’s wrestling match with God.

To perhaps further hedge his odds and to have some time to think and to ponder his fate, Jacob then sends his wives, his two maidservants, sons, servants, and all else on ahead of him, across the ford of the Jabbok, to meet Esau and his 400 men. He splits them into two groups, thinking that if Esau attacks one, at least the other might escape. Jacob is so worried about hanging onto his stuff. The old Jacob hungers for the things of this world.

Turn with me to verse 24 as we get to the heart of our Old Testament text for today. Jacob is left alone on the far side of the stream. As he is alone in his thoughts, we read, *“A man wrestled with him until daybreak.”* They wrestle all night long. Jacob will not give up. The man of God cannot prevail. He strikes Jacob on the hip, putting it out of joint. Jacob still will not give in. Finally the man says, *“Let me go, for the day is breaking.”* Jacob refuses, instead saying, *“I will not let you go, unless you bless me.”* The blessing does come, in the form of a new identity. The man says to Jacob, *“You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.”*



The schemer Jacob will now be known as “Israel,” which translates to ‘the one who strives with God.’ Jacob receives a new name and with that name a new identity. The new name implies an ongoing and developing relationship with God. At some point in your faith journey, you too took on a new name: child of God. How did this new name shape you and influence you? Jacob also left with a limp. It too was a sign of the change that had taken place. What signs do others see in you or in your life that reveal your new identity as a child of God? What sets you apart from the rest of the world?

After this long night, Jacob was now Israel. He had wrestled, he had striven with God. That's what our NRSV translation says. So some scholars say the man was God. The text also says that Jacob strove with humans. So others say that the man was simply a representative of God. And some even say that God sent Esau to wrestle with Jacob, to help him work through things. This sounds a little "out there" – until one reads on and sees that Esau is in a much better place than Jacob, both spiritually and emotionally. In chapter 33 Esau runs to meet him; he hugs Jacob and weeps at their reunion.

After asking about all the gifts that Jacob sent, in verse 9 Esau says, *"I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself."* Again, what a stark contrast to the deep concerns that Jacob had for his "stuff." Adding assurance, Esau leaves some of his men to escort Jacob and his family and flocks the rest of the way into Canaan.



Before we turn to our gospel lesson, let me ask you these two questions. First question: Have you or do you ever wrestle with God? I think it is important to wrestle with God from

time to time. It is when we wrestle that we find space and opportunity to grow in our faith. As I thought about Jacob's situation and about the real fears that he had about his reunion with Esau, I thought about times when I was afraid and unsure of what to do. Jacob is not the only one that has crossed another or stolen from another or schemed to get something that really wasn't his. Jacob is not the only one who has had to wrestle with God as he or she tried to discern the best way forward. If you are wrestling with something or with someone, I encourage you to go to God for guidance and direction.

Second question: What blessing do you seek? Or put within the language of today's message, what are you hungry for? Jacob wanted God's blessing so that he could return home, so that he could have a sense of belonging. That is what Jacob hungered for. As I thought again about Jacob and his situation, it occurred to me that blessings do not usually come to us when we are at ease. Blessings usually come when we have expended ourselves, when we have given ourselves in service, when we have sacrificed for the other.

I know that it sometimes feels as if we were wrestling with those who we are trying to serve. Yet, over my years, I have found out that when I have kept at it, as Jacob did as he strove with God, when I have refused to let go of someone or of some cause, that these encounters will really bless us. In spite of the pain and rejection, in spite of the struggle and the draw upon our energy, the blessing will come when we are faithful. When we refuse to give up, when we dive in deeper and walk on with the ones we are striving to help, it is there that God blesses us too.

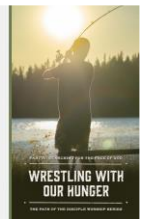
That's the message we hear in the rest of Psalm 17. As David calls upon God with confidence in an answer, he asks God to "*Wondrously show your steadfast love, O savior of those who seek refuge from their adversaries.*" David's confidence comes from his past relationship with God. Even in this current place of uncertainty, David has a faith in God. As we help others to find refuge and relief and rescue, with faith and trust we believe that they will experience God's steadfast love. This too is our promise and our hope. Trusting in God, David too experiences what Jacob experienced. In verse 15 we hear of this blessing: "*As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness... I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness.*" God was present and God provided the way.

This same God was present and showed the way as the disciples wrestled with a hunger in Matthew 14. Turn with me to Matthew 14 as we see how the disciples do a little wrestling. Leading into today's passage, Jesus has just heard about the death of John the Baptist. That is what causes his action in verse 13. He withdraws to a deserted place to mourn and spend time with God. But, as was often the case, the crowd hears that Jesus is nearby and they gather in masse. Seeing the great crowd, Jesus has compassion for them. So he comes ashore. And having compassion for them, he cures the sick. The day goes by and soon is about over – evening comes.

The disciples approach Jesus with a concern. They say to him, *"This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves."* Have you ever thought such a thing? Has an event or a gathering you were hosting ever grown long and you've thought you better send folks home before they think you're responsible to feed them? Or, at the very least, have you ever planned an end time so that this won't even be a question?

*"This is a deserted place,
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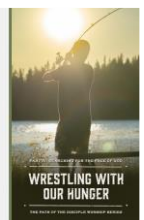
- Matthew 14:15



As I have done and perhaps you have done, the disciples are asking Jesus to send the crowd away to care for their own hunger, to deal with their own needs. Jesus has a whole other way of looking at the situation. Jesus says to the disciples, *"They need not go away; you give them something to eat."* This is Jesus' way of telling the disciples to hold onto the hungry ones until they have been blessed and until the disciples have been blessed in return.

*"They need not go away;
you give them
something to eat."*

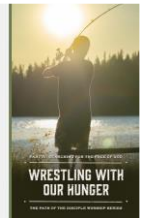
- Matthew 14:16



The question that we usually first ask in these types of situations is this: What will it cost us? For the disciples, the whole question was this: what will it cost us to feed this crowd of 5,000 men plus women and children? When someone calls needing help or when there is a chance to do some good for another, I can ask this type of question. And the cost is not always monetary. Sometimes it is time or energy that I do not want to give up to God or to that person or group of persons. Jesus would flip that question and these thoughts to sound something like this: What will you miss out on if you do not take this opportunity that God has placed before you? That is the real cost.

The disciples offer up that they have nothing here but two fish and five loaves of bread. It is a pretty meager offering for 5,000 men plus women and children, isn't it? We can sure think that when God presents an opportunity, and we look at what we have to offer. Like the disciples we often think that we do not have enough or that we couldn't possibly meet such a great need. Whatever the need, I believe that Jesus would say to us: *"They need not go away; you give them something to... drink, wear, drive, get better..."*

*"They need not go away;
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...drink, wear,
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Jesus takes the fish and loaves and blesses them. He gives them to his disciples, and they give them to the crowds. We read that they all ate until they were all full. And then here's the kicker: the disciples gathered up 12 baskets full of leftover pieces of bread. It is pretty easy here to say that it was one basket full for each disciple that doubted that they could ever feed such a crowd with such a meager offering. My friends, this is how God's economy works. My brothers and sisters in Christ, I do not believe that one can outgive God. The more you give yourself away, the more you find and receive.

The people were fed and went away full. Yes, that was a blessing. But the greater blessing came to the disciples. They had little faith that the crowd could be fed with what they had. A couple of fish and a handful of bread? Impossible! Not with Jesus, my friends. Not with Jesus. Imagine their thoughts as they each stood there with a basket full of bread as the crowd went on their way home.

In Genesis 32, as Jacob wrestled and struggled with the man, in the end he came to realize that he had seen the face of God. His deep hunger for God was met and then his other hunger was filled as he reunited with his brother Esau, once again finding a sense of belonging and a place to call home. When we meet someone who has a need or a hunger, as we offer a drink of water or some food or a little help with a bill or a ride to an appointment or whatever their need or hunger is, we too will see the face of God. When we give of ourselves, when we have a little less so that another can have some, when we step into the opportunities that God provides, yes, we will be a blessing to the other. But God will bless us far more.

As we wrestle with our own hungers for our time, energy, and resources, and when we doubt that we have enough or that we are enough, may we remember that with Jesus nothing is impossible. I encourage you to roll up your sleeves and to prepare to wrestle this week with all that usually holds you back from meeting and stepping into those opportunities that God places before you. But watch out – you might just end up holding a basket full of something when all is said and done. May it be so for you and for me. Alleluia and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. When have you most recently wrestled with God? What positive changes or new growth did you experience as a result of this encounter with God?
- 2) *Pray*. Inside all of us is a little Jacob – scheming, greedy, worried. What do you need to give up to God to walk more faithfully in the weeks ahead?
- 3) *Study*. Read Genesis 35:1-4. God leads Jacob back to Bethel, where he first met God. What does God ask Jacob and family to do to prepare to return to Bethel?