

Sunday, July 25, 2021

Genesis 26:19-34; Genesis 27:1-29 and Genesis 32:22-32

### “Jacob’s Faith and Family”

We continue our summer series “At Your Request” with requests of topics from some of our church members. Today’s focus is “Jacob’s Faith and Family”. Jacob is known for his struggles with his twin brother Esau but also as the father of 12 tribes of people who eventually seek the help of one of the sons who becomes an Egyptian leader. It is Jacob’s story as a faithful man of God in spite of the challenges he faced that call us to reflect on his life and that of his family.

Who is Jacob? Abraham and Sarah had Isaac. Isaac married Rebekah. Rebekah had difficulty conceiving a child and when she did get pregnant she was carrying twins. Genesis 25 tells us that the children struggled within her. Even before birth the twins caused anguish which lead Rebekah to ask God, “If it is to be this way, why do I live?” God’s response described the twins- two nations, two peoples which shall be divided, one stronger than the other and the younger will lead. When the baby boys were born- the oldest one was hairy and named Esau, the younger was hold on to the heel of the other and was named Jacob. It is also told to us that Isaac is 60. As they grow up Esau is a hunter and was loved by Isaac; Jacob lived in the tents and was loved by his mother. One day, Jacob was cooking and Esau coming in from the field was famished. Esau wanted to eat and Jacob’s deal was that he sell his birthright. The birthright was automatically given to the first born son entitling him to the possessions and lands of the father. But as Esau pointed out, he was going to die so what use was it and agreed. Jacob gave him stew; and Esau swore to him and sold his birthright.

This part of the Jacob’s story may cause us to wonder what was so important about the birthright and whether giving it up was worth a bowl of stew. Was this Jacob’s way of getting closer to his father or just the means by which he would inherit his father’s estate? We know that Isaac was 60 when they were born so when Esau was willing to give up his rights to ownership for a bowl of stew, did he realize what was at stake? Was Jacob really just swindling Esau out of this birthright and for what reason?

We read in Genesis 27 the story that is often shared with regard to Jacob and Esau to point out their differences, their parents’ preferential treatment of one son over another and the lost blessing of a dying father. Isaac liked wild game meat and so asked Esau to go and get something and prepare it and then he would receive his blessing. However, their mother overheard this conversation and set up Jacob to actually be the one who would receive the blessing. The difference between the sons was their hair and with Isaac’s failing eyesight he would not know which some came to him. Isaac’s blessing was given to Jacob. The blessing stated that he would be blessed by God with plenty of grain and wine. But also people would bow down to him including his brother’s family. Thus Jacob’s family would be the one to rule over Esau’s family. When the deception was known by all, hatred grew between the two

brothers. Esau wanted to kill him but Rebekah again overhears and sends Jacob away for his safety.

We do not know why Rebekah favoured Jacob over Esau and why she set up the deception between the sons. All we do know is that they struggle together over who owns the land and its possessions and how hatred arose between them. As a result, Rebekah sends Jacob to live with her brother and his family. And it seems that Jacob leaves one family struggle to enter into another one.

Jacob meets Laban's daughters Leah and Rachel and agrees to work for him for 7 years in order to marry Rachel. But because it was custom for the older daughter to marry first, at the time of marriage deception occurred because Jacob ended up with Leah. But he loved Rachel. So he worked another 7 years for Laban in order to be married to Rachel. In order to be with Rachel he worked for Laban 14 years. Was this payback for his deceiving his father? But what is the result of this situation? A part of one man's wealth is in the number of sons and offspring they have. We learn that Leah was able to conceive and had several sons but Rachel could not. After several children are born to Leah, Rachel does bear sons but it is Jacob who struggles between his wives and maid servants in order to be prosperous. Eventually there were 12 sons and a named daughter Dinah. But the problem was that he was still under the watchful eye of Laban and wanted to leave. Jacob has become prosperous and wanted to be on his own.

After another deceptive act took place eventually Laban and Jacob have it out. It is Jacob who tells Laban what has occurred over 20 years. Serving 14 for 2 daughters; 6 for his flock and during that time changing wages 10 times. But what Jacob then states tells us why he pursued and stayed with Laban. He says, "If the God of my father, the God of Abraham, and the Fear of Isaac had not been on my side, surely now you would have sent me away empty handed. God saw my affliction and the labour of my hands and rebuked you." In spite of all the deception, hatred and vengeful acts he did and received in return, Jacob still had faith in God.

It is then that Laban offers to Jacob a covenant, whereby they witness each other's placing of stones on a heap called the Mizpah. And he said, "The Lord watch between you and me, when we are absent one from the other." This place marks the place where Laban and Jacob resolve their issues.

Jacob then prepares to go back to his home country and sends presents to appease his brother Esau. But he is not able to rest worried that his brother will send an army to destroy his family. He then moves his family from where he is and he is left alone. The text then states that 'a man wrestles with him until daybreak.' The identity of Jacob's wrestling opponent is a matter of debate: it could be named variously as a dream figure, a prophetic vision, an angel (such as Michael and Samael), a protective river spirit, Jesus, or God. In Hosea 12:4 Jacob's opponent is described as malakh "angel". But modern Protestant theology interprets that "Jacob wrestled with God or that this angel was really a pre-incarnational appearance of Christ in the form of a man. Depending upon commentary writer, some others state that Jacob saw

God face to face and referenced this encounter as the Angel of the Lord. Charles Wesley's hymn "Come, O Thou Traveller Unknown", often known as "Wrestling Jacob", is based on the passage describing Jacob wrestling with an angel (which we will sing in a few minutes!) But no matter the interpretation of who it was that Jacob now Israel wrestled, it meant that Jacob was torn within about what to do with his brother.

Jacob now Israel and Esau meet and they embrace, kiss and weep together after all, it is over 20 years. They talk and share stories and together they lived in the land. They lived near each other so that when Isaac now 180 years old died, they buried him together.

Jacob had 12 sons which became known as the 12 tribes of Israel (after Jacob had received his new name). Jacob lived in the land of Canaan and out of his sons, Jacob loved Joseph more. And of course this sets up the animosity between Joseph and his brothers which leads us to the coat of many colours and favouritism amongst the family!

But when we think of Jacob we often don't think of him as aggressive—as he lived amongst the tents as a young man. He knew how to care for livestock as opposed to going out and hunting wild game. Jacob had received the birthright and blessing from his father Isaac which named him as the owner and master of the land even though Esau was born first. But Jacob had wrestled and struggled with many things in his own life while he lived and worked for his uncle /father-in-law Laban. Not only was he deceived to have been married to Leah first, he had to work more years in order to have Rachel as his wife as well. Was the manipulation he had put in place come back to him in a different way? Was this God's way of teaching him about right living?

We have many choices each day. We can choose one path or another path—one which leads us to follow God's laws and ethics based on love and fairness or the other path which is filled with deception, wrong choices and just sinful acts! Jacob and Rebekah his mother deceived Isaac and Esau- but we do not know what happened to Rebekah after Jacob left. Was she wrestling and struggling with her life's choices? We know that Jacob did struggle because in his wrestling with the angel/ man there is a known discontent. Maybe this was also prevalent even at the time of birth when he held on to his brother's foot? One can only speculate but it seems this need for power and possessions was what Jacob and his mother wanted where as Esau and Isaac lived as they could.

Today we have many choices in our lives- to walk the way God intended for us all- a good wholesome life filled with love, relationships and hope. Or to go our own way where one is alone in thought and action, in beliefs not in God but in self-preservation at the cost of others. What are you struggling with? I've tried to capture some of the struggles of Jacob's life today but it is worth reading for yourself the text from his birth ch25-37 when Joseph's story and struggles begin.

We may not be exiled to live in another country by relatives; or forced to work for a spouse and not get the one chosen; or have spouses taunting each other for attention but one

thing is clear, we will struggle. From loneliness, losses, hurt, pain, anger, revenge and even self-sacrifice and pity. But what is important that we note from Jacob is what he says to Laban, "IF the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac had not been on my side, surely now you would have sent me away empty handed. "For in these words to Laban, Jacob tells him that he knew that God was with him through it all for he trusted God to lead his life even though he had manipulated and hurt others. He knew that God forgives. This became evident when the brothers meet 20 years later and they and all their family live together for all to prosper in Canaan.

How do we understand Jacob's life as being good? Because he was determined to live, to be prosperous and to love Rachel. He did accomplish this but at a high cost- losing his family in deception and anger for many years. But he also had that night of struggling with the angel/man which reflected his inner struggle of who he was and is in God's eyes. And maybe just maybe, Jacob saw in this 'angel/man' someone who turned his vision to God in a new and forgiving way. It was after he wrestled through the night that he met Esau and embraced him as family once again.

How often do we wrestle and struggle through things in our sleep only to wake up and realize that there are things on our minds that need settling? Sometimes it is simple to fix, other times it has nothing to do with us personally but we are involved vicariously and indirectly. And when this happens we need only to witness the reconciliation or resolution to come forward and then peace is restored. But when we are directly effected, sometimes these moments of struggle are not easily resolved—grief and loss is not something quickly resolved. IT is a process of remembering and loving and recovering the part of you that went with the one who has died. But it takes time- and yes there will be times to wrestle, cry, be angry and most of all there will be moments of tears and laughter because when there are tears—we know that love continues.

Jacob and Esau reconciled with tears and embraces. One can only imagine how Isaac felt when he could hold his son and hear about his grandchildren and family. Jacob's wrestling lead to this time when they realized the love that they shared and the Love that they experienced in God.

We too have this gift of love offered by God but we must be willing to open our hearts to love others and follow God's path of a life filled with hope. Jacob taught his family to live in faith taught to him by his parents. We too must remember what Jesus teaches us to and how to treat others. Tis love. Tis love. It is because of love that Jesus died and we hope. Thanks be to God.

PRAYER God of love we thank you for Jacob's story of faithful living even when he manipulated others as well as when he was deceived in return. He did not give up his love for you God nor did he stop believing. Help us O God to learn from his errors and to be strong in faith as we seek your love and to know in our hearts how much you truly love us. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.