

So who is Jacob wrestling with here? It's a little like the identity of the three visitors to Abraham and Sarah in the story we read last week... kind of vague. Jacob's opponent is just called a man...Jacob wrestled with a man.

When people read and study this story, they come up with four possibilities.

The first is that Jacob is wrestling himself, or his conscience. This isn't a bad choice. Jacob is Isaac's son – the grandson of Abraham and Sarah.

Jacob has a twin brother, Esau. Esau was born first, so as a firstborn son he should have inherited his father's property and received the blessing of the first born son.

But Jacob was a liar and a cheat. He manipulated Esau and lied to his father so he could steal both the property and blessing which should have belonged to Esau. Then he ran away because Esau wanted to kill him.

Today's story picks up about 14 years later. Jacob is married to two women. He has two slave women who are the mothers of some of his children. And he has 11 sons. He's manipulated his father-in-law and cheated him out of some of his property as well. He has become very wealthy.

Now he's running away from his father-in-law. He realizes it's time to go home.

But he's still pretty nervous about his brother Esau. What if Esau still wants him dead?

Jacob knows he'd deceived and manipulated people. So as he waits for daybreak, there by the river, maybe it's his own conscience he is wrestling with...maybe he knows he deserves to get smacked down a bit. Maybe he's not really sure how to approach Esau or even whether he should go forward. He wrestles with himself all night.

The second possibility is that he is somehow wrestling with Esau, or Esau's spirit or something. Esau certainly has every right to be angry at Jacob. So as Jacob wrestles, maybe he sees the face of his brother.

Or maybe Jacob's opponent is an angel – a being sent by God with a message to Jacob. If that's the case what is the message? That he's kind of a jerk? That his brother is still angry? Or not angry?

Or...is the man wrestling with Jacob in fact God? Can you imagine? Seriously, Wrestling with God?

And yet, that seems to be who Jacob decides the man is. Note that the scripture passage still is a little vague.

But Jacob believes he has come face to face with God, grappled with God in the dirt and sweat and blood. And not only did Jacob not die, God did not really beat Jacob. Jacob ends up wounded, but the match is kind of a draw.

So which is it? Who is Jacob wrestling with – himself, Esau, or at least Esau’s spirit? Or is it God, or God’s messenger?

Well, what if it’s all of the above? What if the man represents all of them?

We use the word wrestling as a metaphor for things we struggle with. We’ll say things like I’m wrestling with whether or not to ask for a raise or promotion.

I’m wrestling with myself over watching TV or getting my homework done.

Some of our biggest wrestling matches happen when our lives have gone off track...and we know it.

That’s the situation Jacob is in. From a material standpoint, he’s successful beyond imagination.

But he’s estranged from his family. He’s gained his wealth through not completely ethical practices. And of the four women who are the mothers of his children, only one is really loved by him. The result has been a bitter rivalry among the women. And he’s managed to tick off his father-in-law as well.

From a relationship standpoint, his life is kind of a dumpster fire.

So he is wrestling with himself...he’s wrestling with his past...he’s wrestling with what needs to happen to set things right.

He’s wrestling with who he is and what kind of person God wants him to be. He is supposed to be the one to carry on the promise God gave to his grandfather – Abraham...the promise of land, descendants and the promise that through his family the world would be blessed. But so far, he’s been the opposite of a blessing to many of those he’s encountered.

So he wrestles with himself to understand who he needs to be to carry that promise, especially the blessing part.

His brother Esau is perhaps the person he has most hurt. He knows that at one time Esau was angry enough to kill him. And he knows Esau has every right to still be angry. He is wrestling with his memory of what he'd done to Esau.

He's wrestling with the fear that Esau might still be that angry. Will Esau forgive him? Or kill him and his family? So in a sense he is wrestling Esau.

And of course he is wrestling God. Only God can bless him like that. Only God can change his name.

Names were really important in Jacob's day. They said something about who you were.

Jacob means usurper. A usurper is someone who takes a position of authority or power from someone else, either by force or illegally. It describes Jacob pretty well.

As the wrestling match draws to a close, Jacob's opponent makes him say that name aloud. He makes Jacob own up to who he has been.

But then, Jacob's opponent does what only God can do...God removes that name...God removes the stain of a life lived in pursuit of his own selfish aims.

And God gives him a new name...Israel. Israel means the one who has gone up against God and humans...and has prevailed. This isn't just about a name change. It's about one of God's chosen being shaped – through the wrestling – into the person God needs him to be.

It's in the wrestling itself that Jacob's blessing comes.

At Bethlehem, we have a small youth group that will meet once a month. Worship on the day they meet will be a bit more focused on their faith questions...which I'm pretty sure will end up being helpful for everyone.

At the end of last year, I had them complete four sentences to help me shape these Sundays. One of the sentences read "I wonder what God thinks about _____."

Three of them in some way or another said I wonder what God thinks about me, or us, when I do something wrong.

This story about Jacob gives a pretty good answer. God will wrestle with us.

God will make us face the things we've done or not done, things we've said or not said.

God will bring the person or people we've hurt into the ring and make us face how we've hurt them.

But then God blesses us. We might limp away a bit...facing yourself can be a painful experience. But it's in the midst of that struggle the blessing comes. It's in that wrestling that God shapes us into more of whom we were called to be.

This is the second of three stories about God appearing to the characters in the Bible stories. Last week God appeared as three mysterious visitors to Abraham and Sarah.

Next week we'll hear about God appearing to Moses in the burning bush.

This week, God appeared to Jacob in a wrestling match. The promise for us in this story is that whatever we are wrestling with, God is somehow in it with us.

The invitation for us is to look for God in in the midst of those wrestling matches.

So I'd invite you to think for a minute about something or someone in your life you feel like you're wrestling with. Who or what has come to mind as we've worked through Jacob's story? I'm going to give you a couple minutes to reflect. As you do, think about who you're wrestling with. Is it your own conscience? Is it a particular action you think you are maybe supposed to take? Who else is in the wrestling ring? Take just a couple minutes...

Now, in what way has God joined the wrestling match? What does God want you to face? What might the blessing be?

No matter who or what we wrestle with, God is there in the midst of it. While we can trust that God always wants good for us, sometimes that means God will actually wrestle against us and our selfish aims.

But then, while we may limp a little, we will walk away with God's blessing. We will walk away assured of our name...assured of our identity as God's beloved. And we will walk away just a little more ready to take on the role of being a blessing to the world.