

Sermon – August 9, 2020
“Israel”
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Genesis 32:22-31

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, fill, and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word. Amen

Good Morning! It is great to see people and to be joined by those on the live stream. I am excited to share with you this morning more of the story of our ancestors and their interaction with God as they become His people, a people who are to bless all the families of the world. I want to take a moment this morning and remind everyone that we will be holding a third Sunday fellowship meal at Afton next Sunday, August 16th at 6:00 pm via Zoom. If you are able, please join with us on Zoom as we eat together and share a time of fellowship while we maintain social distancing and use technology to keep us safe yet bring us together.

Can we all give God praise this morning for the protection in the storm this past week? Please pray for recovery for those who did experience damage. Let me remind us to look for opportunities to help those who were not as fortunate in the coming days, and let me share that you can send a donation for use in local hurricane relief by sending a check to Afton and marking your check with “VAUMC Advance Special #5037 Disaster Response.” One hundred percent of those funds go to those in need, and they are stretched by the volunteers who provide labor.

I hope that you are making time to read the rest of the story each week in Genesis as we progress through the story of our ancestors. This morning we will need a time machine to catch a glimpse of all that occurs between last week’s stop and this week’s stop on our journey. So, let’s jump into our time machine, strap ourselves into our seats, and fly through about twenty years and watch the action out the window. We will start our time leap at the point when Laban, Jacob’s uncle, has just deceived him into marrying Leah, his older daughter, and then secures seven more years of labor from Jacob for his younger daughter Rachel. In our time machine we see Jacob working another seven years to earn Rachel, and over the years, he is also given

Leah's and Rachel's maids as wives who also bear him sons. Altogether we will see eleven sons and a daughter arrive into Jacob's household during these twenty years. We will also witness Jacob working six more years for Laban's flocks, and see God's hand at work in this time as Laban seeks to deceive Jacob by repeatedly changing his wages. We will see that God intervenes and blesses Jacob and protects him from harm with the result that Jacob's flocks grow mightily. We will see Jacob flee from Laban, taking his family and flocks and leaving while Laban is away from home. We will see Laban and his neighbors pursue Jacob to get back what Laban thinks is his, and we will see Laban testify that God speaks to him in a dream in which he is told not to harm Jacob. We will see Jacob and Laban pile up rocks to witness their separation, and we will witness Jacob and Laban part, not on the best of terms, but with the agreement not to harm each other. Finally, we will witness Jacob traveling with only his family and possessions and arriving at the Jabbok, a tributary of the Jordan, and we will see that they are ready to enter the Promised Land and to face Esau. We will see Jacob send his brother a message, and, after Esau learns that Jacob is back, we will witness Esau deciding to go and meet Jacob with 400 warriors. This is where we stop our time travel and pick up the story of God's people today. Jacob has received the news that Esau is coming with an army, and he is anticipating and dreading the arrival of his brother. Jacob is afraid that his brother is coming to make good on his threat to kill him. It seems that Jacob has fled from Laban and his army only to encounter the anger of his brother. In the morning Esau and his army will arrive, and Jacob may face his death and the death of his family. Jacob is afraid and wonders where is God? Will God protect him from Esau? Will this unseen God take care of him, or should he act on his own? But Jacob has seen the hand of God in his life before, and while he still is named Jacob, one who supplants, he has learned something of this God who goes before him, and so Jacob bows in prayer. Listen to the words of his prayer, "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O LORD who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your kindred, and I will do you good,' I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan; and now I have become two companies. Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children. Yet you have said, 'I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted because of their number.'" Can we hear the distress in Jacob's prayer? Can we catch the sense that he is crying out to God for help

but is fearful that God will not respond? Can we find our own fears in Jacob's cry? Will we trust God to protect us in our times of need? Will God show up in this hour of need? Does something still remain in Jacob's character that God needs to deal with before God can act in Jacob's life?

After praying, Jacob begins to act, to implement some strategies to help minimize the impact of an encounter with an enraged brother. He sends a gift before him to his brother, animals for Esau to add to his herd. Then he separates his family into two groups with Rachel and Joseph separated from the others. He then sends everyone across the river Jabbok and into the Promised Land. First, he sends his wives across the river. By doing this he is surrendering them to God's care in the Promised Land. Jacob is giving up control of those he loves and is sending them on into the Promised Land. Next, he surrenders his maids into God's hand and sends them across the river to the Promised Land. Then he sends over his children, surrendering them to God, and finally he sends his possessions into the Promised Land. The idea of surrendering what we think we hold in our hand to God's care is a powerful statement of one's trust in God. God is the source of everything we have, and God has placed all into our hands for our stewardship. When we realize that our only hope for the protection of what is in our hand is to surrender what has been given to us back to God for protection and care, we make a powerful statement to God and others about our trust in God. All that Jacob has now is in the hands of God and has been sent ahead into the Promised Land, and Jacob remains alone in the wilderness. Jacob realizes that only the hand of God can keep them safe in the face of the oncoming warriors of Esau. Jacob understands that he is powerless to protect his family and surrenders them to God. So, that which God has given him he returns to God and he remains alone on the other side of the river, not yet in the Promised Land himself.

Jacob is alone at night trying to decide what he can do to prevent disaster. He has promised God that if God will protect him, he will return to the land and worship God, but Jacob has not yet returned. Jacob is still clinging to his self-reliance, trying to develop a plan to allow him in his strength to find a way out of this approaching disaster.

In this dark and empty place where Jacob is all alone, he is attacked and must wrestle with a man. In the midst of his struggle to find a way out of the coming disaster from the arrival of Esau and the 400 warriors, and following the surrender of all that is dear to him to God, Jacob finds himself engaged in a wrestling match with a man. The match seems to be equal. Jacob struggles with all of his strength and the man also responds with equal strength. Neither prevails

and overcomes the other. As the morning stars rise in the night sky, the man, seeing that he cannot prevail over Jacob, touches Jacob's hip and it is put out of socket. At this act, two things happen. The "man" asks Jacob to release his hold and Jacob realizes that he is holding on to more than a man, yet Jacob clings to the divine with all of his strength. This is how we are to respond in our times of crisis: set aside everything else and hold on to God with all of our strength. When Jacob realizes he is holding on to a divine being, he asks for a blessing before he releases his hold. And then comes the key moment in today's scripture, if not in Jacob's life. For the second time in his life, Jacob is asked his name. The first time Jacob was asked was by Isaac, his father, when Jacob sought by deceit to take away his brother's blessing. At that time, he was asked if he was really Isaac's son Esau and he replied "I Am." Here, an angel acting as a messenger for God, asks Jacob his name, and Jacob responds, "Jacob." Do we see the change that has occurred in Jacob? Here, at the breaking of a new day, as the light drives out the darkness, Jacob finally owns who he is, Jacob, the one who grasps the heel, the one who with his self-reliance seeks his desire, the one who at his core is what his name implies; and here in the presence of this stranger he admits who he is, Jacob. Jacob, in the grasp of an angel whom he is holding on to with all his strength, admits who he is and, in this moment, Jacob's surrender is complete before God. Jacob knows at the core of his being that he is the one who strives in his strength to get his desire, to take the place of those before him, to move out of the way obstacles that prevent him from obtaining what he wants. But now, after all of this time of seeing God work in his life, of seeing the hand of God protect him and bless him, of trying to trust God, but holding back that one thing that he sought to hide from God, Jacob admits who he is. He owns his self-reliance and in owning it he gives it up in surrender to God. He knows who he is and tells the angel, "Jacob." His answer marks the completion of owning who he is, the nature of who he has been, the last aspect of his life to surrender to God. Jacob's answer of his name marks this episode in the wilderness as a significant place and time in Jacob's life. Here Jacob has clung to God and not let go of who he truly is until he has caught a glimpse of how God sees him and, in that recognition, he sees his self-reliance and the ruin and pain it has brought and will bring if he holds on to it. He owns what his life is, and he chooses to release his self-reliance and instead cling to God. With this answer, the man, or the angel, or messenger of God, changes Jacob's name to Israel, which means "God sees." In this moment, God, who has always seen Jacob as he is but has walked with him, now sees something new in Jacob. God sees him not as

he has been, but as he is striving to become, one who seeks God and God's will. Now, after all of these years of striving with God and men, Jacob has striven with God and held on to the divine and will not let go of God. Jacob has struggled with man and prevailed. He is at the point where he can be transformed into one whom God can use. Now he receives the blessing he asked for marked by a new name, Israel, God sees. Now Jacob is changed from one who supplants, one who is constantly seeking in his self-reliance to get his desires, to one who sees himself as God sees him, Israel. Now Israel can go into the Promised Land and meet Esau and the 400 without fear, for he knows that God is with him. Israel is no longer striving to supplant others, but is transformed into one who looks to God, a God who sees. Israel does not go forth into the Promised Land unchanged. As he goes forth, he goes with a new name, Israel, and a limp. The limp is a mark of having clung to God until he sees himself as God sees. Israel has encountered God and the encounter has a cost, yet brings a blessing.

Now I will tell you that I have never wrestled knowingly with an angel. But what does it mean for us to wrestle with the divine? It means we encounter God's actions in our lives to guide us to the point where we can be transformed and reformed. It is a point in our lives when we can resist all of God's loving actions and seek to prevail and reside in our sinfulness, or, like Jacob, we can dare to grasp on to the Holy and not release our hold until we also receive a blessing, the transforming power of Jesus Christ in our lives. This is not a small baby step change to reformation, but a moment in time when the core of our nature is transformed, conformed, to the life of Jesus Christ. This is our struggle to hold on to God and come to the point where we can see ourselves as God sees us, as a Father sees the child he loves, and we are enabled to see the obstacles that separate us from God's love and release them to God. Each of us seeks to stand before God and look him in the face, but to do that, we like Jacob will need to come to understand what it is about ourselves that separates us from God and be willing to sacrifice whatever it is so that we may look upon the face of God. It may be self-reliance, vanity, possessions, greed, covetousness, addictions, not loving our neighbor, unforgiveness, or some other sin that we have yet to surrender to God. When we can see ourselves as God sees us and surrender that which separates us from God to God, we too can be blessed through the sacrifice of Jesus and through him see the face of God. Jesus came that he would make a way for us to be reconciled to God. Jesus came not in the might of God, but in the weakness of man that he might die on the cross and in that weakness overcome sin and its consequence, death. Jesus comes to

each of us and pours the steadfast love of God into our lives and enables us through the Holy Spirit to see ourselves as God sees us and enables us in that moment to have the strength to confess with our lips who we are and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and receive the free gift of salvation. The question for each of us becomes, “Have we wrestled with God, clung to Jesus with all of our strength, and allowed transformation to reach into the depths of our soul, to remove all of the sin that we have clung to and then gone forth in the light of Christ to face our raging brother and 400 warriors?” At the break of day as the sun rises, Jacob, now Israel, crosses the river Jabbok and goes into the Promised Land unafraid of the coming day, for he knows that God is with him.

Pray with me: Lord, we have wrestled long with angels and have held on to our sin. Lord, we hear you asking us our own name. Let us be enabled to see our sin and surrender all that still separates us from you and then go forth with you into the Promised Land. Here we are, Lord. Speak, for your servants are listening. Amen.