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Genesis 32:22-31

Wrestle-mania, With God!

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Our text from Genesis 32 reads “The same night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maids, his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream and likewise everything that he had. He was left alone...”

Do you know what was on Jacob’s mind as he sat there alone on one side of the stream as his family, servants and all his worldly possession had crossed to the other side?

He is thinking about Esau, his twin brother. The last time he saw Esau he was running from him because Esau was looking to take his life. This was years ago right after Jacob had done Esau wrong. Esau was much stronger than Jacob. Had Esau caught Jacob before he escaped those many years ago he could have easily killed him.

Jacob is now returning home and he is hoping and praying that Esau will forgive him. Jacob is looking for forgiveness.

As we go through this ancient narrative I would like each of us to bring it into the present day as we think of a time when we were in great need of forgiveness. That would be the Jacob side of the story. On the flip side of the coin, the Esau perspective, I would invite you to think of a time you were faced with forgiving someone who had done you wrong. Please think of a time when you have wrestled with needing forgiveness or a time when you have wrestled with granting forgiveness to another. Wrestling with the different aspects of forgiveness in our lives will prepare us for the wrestle-mania that is going to break out in our biblical lesson today.

Let’s go back just a bit in the story to understand what started all this conflict. The biblical narrative tells us that Esau was born first but as he was coming out of the womb that Jacob was grabbing at his heel. That projects a consciousness upon an infant that I don’t believe newborns possess but it is a symbolic statement about that patriarchal society. At that point in time in the middle-east, some 4,000 years ago, the oldest male received birthrights that entitled him to great stature and the largest share of the family inheritance.

We are told that as the boys grew up that their father (Isaac) loved Esau because his was a burly outdoorsman whereas their mother (Rebekah) loved Jacob because he was quiet and lived in the tents. Here we see the parents playing favorites, which is not healthy stuff in any day or age.

There are two stories in the Biblical narrative in Genesis involving these twins that help us understand the conflict between them. In each instance, Jacob rips off his older brother Esau.

Story one is found in the final verses of Genesis 25, verses 29-34:

“Once when Jacob was boiling pottage, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. And Esau said to Jacob, “Let me eat some of that red pottage, for I am famished!” Jacob said, “First sell me your birthright.” Esau said, “I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?” Jacob said, “Swear to me first.” So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and pottage of lentils, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way.”

Does anybody think that Jacob will be in need of forgiveness once the older brother realizes what his heel grabbing younger twin did to swipe away his birthright? I think so.

Story two is found in chapter 27 where we find an extended story where Jacob and his mother collude so Jacob can receive his father’s final blessing that was meant for Esau before the father dies. Jacob and his mother trick the dying and now blind father so Jacob can receive the paternal blessing.

Once again, does anybody think Jacob will be in need of forgiveness once his older brother finds out that he stole away his paternal blessing? You better believe it. When Esau finds out about this he is ripe for revenge and that is when Jacob flees to his mother's homeland for refuge and to seek a wife.

Now we find ourselves years later and Jacob is going home with his family and possessions and he is looking for forgiveness. He has sent waves of his servants before him to offer gifts to soften up his brother Esau before he finally arrives. This is what is happening when we read, "He took them and sent them across the stream and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone..."

Jacob has done the shrewd thing. He has sent his servants before him to his homeland. He has sent his family before him to his homeland. The servants are going to try to soften up his older twin brother by giving him a multitude of gifts. Jacob hopes the years have drained some of the anger from Esau. Jacob hopes the gifts will be seen as an appropriate apology. Jacob hopes that when Esau meets his wives and children that his twin brother will have some sympathy on him. Yet, Jacob also remembers that last time he was home his twin brother wanted to kill him and for good reason.

Even with all this advanced planning Jacob is left alone before he travels home the next day. That night he is wrestling with his fears and anxieties. He is thinking that he might be like a punching-bag a wrestle-mania match. Have you ever watched "professional" wrestling matches made for T.V.? There is the superstar, who is sometimes the villain, that ruthlessly brutalizes the undersized and mismatched opponent. It is at this point in our biblical narrative that wrestle-mania breaks out.

Yet, before we watch the wrestle-mania action I invite us to stop for a moment. Let's wrestle with a forgiveness question. Why might Esau forgive Jacob? Why might Esau choose not to forgive Jacob? Please think about that for a moment.

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Now let's take a moment to greet one another and please share with those you greet the reasons Esau might forgive or not forgive Jacob.

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Now that we have wrestled with the pros and cons of forgiveness in this situation let's get back to the biblical text. We see in Genesis 32 that Jacob goes through his own wrestle-mania the night before he returns home. We are told that a man wrestled with Jacob until the breaking of the day. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and Jacob's thigh was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then he said, "Your name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Tell me, I pray, your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his thigh. (Genesis 32:24-31)

This is a strange passage, to say the least. Let me draw your attention to two items.

-First, as a result of this full night tussle with God we see that Jacob receives a new name, Israel. He had no idea what that meant at the time. With hindsight we now know that as he is called Israel that his twelve sons will become the patriarchs of the 12 tribes of Israel.

-Second, he is blessed. The blessing and promise given to Abraham, his grand-father, and Isaac, his father, he now hears from God will be carried forth by him.

How does this wrestle-mania event between Jacob and God impact our lives? I have two suggestions.

-As we face our fears like Jacob was about to do when he met Esau and we look to God as we try to understand how we are going to survive the terrifying situation we find that *God gives us that which we don't even know we need*, in this case, the powerful name Israel.

-As we face our fears like Jacob was about to do when he met Esau and we look to God as we try to understand how we are to survive the situation *we hear the reassuring promise of a future that lies beyond the present challenge* as Jacob heard the promise that he was blessed as Abraham and Isaac before him.

God will help as we wrestle with the challenges in our lives. God will provide us with a vision that will enable us to see a future beyond the challenge at hand.

Well, after wrestling with his fears and anxieties and after wrestling with God how does it all turn out for Jacob? Well, he finds what he has been looking for.

Esau turns out to be a grace filled man. In the 33rd chapter of Genesis we read that as Esau sees his younger twin Jacob back home he runs out to meet him, he embraces him, kisses him and they weep. Esau chooses to forgive. Forgiveness, what a gift that is!