

**“WRESTLING MATCHES”**

**A SERMON BASED ON THE OLD TESTAMENT  
BOOK OF GENESIS (32:22-31) AND  
PRESENTED FOR ORLEAN UMC ON  
AUGUST 2, 2020----- (THE NINTH SUNDAY OF  
AN ELEVEN WEEK SERMON SERIES THAT  
WILL TAKE US THROUGH SOME OF THE  
MAJOR THEMES IN THE BOOK OF GENESIS)**

**WE ALL KNOW THOSE KIND OF PEOPLE . . .**

**OH.....YOU KNOW THE ONES..... THEY ALWAYS**

**COME OUT ON TOP; THEY'RE THE TEFLON-**

**COATED LUCKY ONES, THE EXACT OPPOSITES**

**OF THOSE POOR SOULS WHO CAN'T GET A**

**BREAK.**

**OUT OF ALL THE CHARACTERS IN THE HEBREW  
SCRIPTURE THERE'S NO ONE MORE SLIPPERY  
THAN JACOB..... WHILE ABRAHAM IS REVERED  
AS THE FATHER OF A NATION, WE MOSTLY  
REMEMBER JACOB FOR STEALING THINGS AND,  
REPEATEDLY, GETTING AWAY WITH IT.**

**BY THE TIME WE CATCH UP WITH JACOB TODAY  
HE'S IMPROBABLY MADE HIS WAY OUT OF  
YET ANOTHER STICKY SITUATION AND IS READY  
TO SAIL INTO THE PROMISED LAND TO CLAIM HIS  
BIRTHRIGHT.**

**REMEMBER LAST WEEK, JACOB HAD FINALLY ARRIVED IN THE CAMP OF HIS UNCLE LABAN AND FALLEN IN LOVE WITH THE BEAUTIFUL RACHEL.**

**WELL, NOW, 20 YEARS LATER, JACOB IS MARRIED TO BOTH RACHEL AND HER SISTER LEAH . . . HE HAS TWO CONCUBINES IN ADDITION, AND THIRTEEN CHILDREN ALTOGETHER..... GOLDEN BOY THAT HE IS, HE'S EMERGED FROM HIS FORCED LABOR A VERY WEALTHY MAN.**

**BUT WEALTH AND CHILDREN ASIDE, JACOB KNOWS FULL WELL THAT HE'LL NEVER BE TOP DOG AS LONG AS HE HANGS AROUND LABAN'S CAMP..... AND, ANYWAY, DON'T FORGET HE HAD THE BIRTHRIGHT—THE BLESSING OF HIS FATHER ISAAC, TAKEN OUT FROM UNDER THE NOSE OF HIS BROTHER ESAU.**

**SO JACOB DECIDED IT WAS TIME TO PACK UP ALL HE'D AMASSED AND SET OUT BACK TO THE PROMISED LAND, BACK TO CLAIM THE BIRTHRIGHT THAT WAS RIGHTFULLY, OR DECEITFULLY WE SHOULD PROBABLY SAY..... HIS.**

**BUT IT'S NO SMALL THING TO BREAK APART A  
DESERT COMMUNITY LIKE LABAN'S CAMP.**

**JACOB'S DEPARTURE MEANT A HUGE HIT FOR  
THE WHOLE COMMUNITY, AND LABAN WAS NOT  
HAPPY IN THE LEAST..... HERE HE'D HAD A SON  
IN LAW BOUND BY FAMILIAL DUTY TO WORK FOR  
HIM, HELPING "GOOD OLD UNCLE LABAN" TO  
BECOME A VERY WEALTHY MAN INDEED..... WITH  
JACOB AND ALL OF JACOB'S FLOCKS AND  
HERDS AND SERVANTS GONE, WELL, LABAN'S  
STATUS WOULD DIMINISH AS WELL.**

**LABAN AND JACOB, YOU SEE, WERE CUT OUT  
OF THE SAME CLOTH.**

**THEY WERE EACH DEEPLY COMMITTED TO THEIR OWN SUCCESS, AND NOT AFRAID TO DO WHATEVER IT WOULD TAKE TO GET IT. YOU COULD SAY THEY DESERVED EACH OTHER, BUT LABAN WAS STILL MAD THAT JACOB HAD LEFT.**

**CAN'T YOU CAN JUST HEAR HIM NOW:**

**“AFTER EVERYTHING I’VE DONE FOR HIM . . . !”**

**AND SO LABAN RAN AFTER JACOB AND HIS WHOLE CARAVAN, DETERMINED TO GET THEM BACK.**

**BUT WHEN WE COME UPON JACOB TODAY HE HAS, ONCE AGAIN, SKILLFULLY SLIPPED OUT OF THIS STICKY SITUATION. AFTER SOME NEGOTIATION, A LITTLE BIT OF POSTURING AND A WHOLE LOT OF SNEAKINESS (TOO MUCH TO EVEN DETAIL HERE!) LABAN AND JACOB COME TO A TRUCE..... PROMISE TO BE NICE TO EACH OTHER..... AND JACOB TURNS TO GO ON HIS WAY . . .**

**.....ONLY TO GET WORD THAT MORE TROUBLE AWAITS HIM ACROSS THE JABBOK RIVER.**

**JACOB'S BROTHER ESAU, YOU REMEMBER  
ESAU.....THE ONE JACOB TRICKED OUT OF HIS  
INHERITANCE? -----WELL-----HE'S OVER ON  
THE OTHER SIDE, QUICKLY ADVANCING TO MEET  
JACOB, WORD IS WITH 400 MEN.**

**TRUE TO FORM, OUR HERO—HIS CHARACTER  
MARKED BY A DISTINCT LACK OF INTEGRITY—  
DECIDES THE BEST WAY TO TRIUMPHANTLY  
RETURN TO THE PROMISED LAND,**



**EMBRACE GOD'S BLESSING FOR HIS FAMILY  
AND CLAIM HIS STOLEN BIRTHRIGHT IS TO SEND  
HIS KIDS AND HIS WIVES IN AHEAD OF HIM WHILE  
HE HANGS BACK AND WAITS TO SEE IF ESAU IS  
STILL MAD ABOUT THAT WHOLE LITTLE  
BIRTHRIGHT MISUNDERSTANDING THEY'D HAD  
SO LONG AGO.**

**IT'S SUMMERTIME NOW AND YOU KNOW WHAT  
THAT MEANS-----AT LEAST FOR MANY OF US IN  
MORE NORMAL TIMES -----IT MEANS FAMILY  
REUNIONS.**

**YES---FAMILY REUNIONS.....BIG FAMILIES OR  
SMALL ----IT DOESN'T REALLY MATTER-----WHEN  
ELSE COULD YOU SEE ALL THOSE FOLKS  
GATHERED IN ONE PLACE, KISS ALL THOSE  
BABIES AND TELL AND RETELL THE OLD FAMILY  
STORIES OVER AND OVER AGAIN? THERE'S  
SOMETHING ABOUT COMING HOME TO THE  
PLACE YOU BELONG WITH THE PEOPLE YOU  
COME FROM THAT MAKES ALL THE CRAZINESS  
WORTH IT . . . IT IS A TIME WHEN YOU LOOK OUT  
OVER THE WHOLE CROWD AND THINK ABOUT  
THE MANY WAYS IN WHICH YOUR LIFE HAS BEEN  
BLESSED AND BLESSED AND BLESSED AGAIN.**

**AND, SO, TECHNICALLY SPEAKING, JACOB WAS ON HIS WAY TO A FAMILY REUNION. THIS WAS THE PROMISE . . . THE REAL BLESSING . . . HE'D BEEN WORKING TOWARD HIS WHOLE LIFE. TWENTY YEARS AFTER HE'D LEFT UNDER THE COVER OF DARKNESS, SNEAKING AWAY WITH HIS FATHER'S BLESSING, HE WAS ON HIS WAY BACK TO SEE ESAU, HOPING THERE WAS SOME WAY HE COULD SAIL INTO THE PROMISE EVEN AFTER ALL THE PAIN OF THE PAST.**

**BUT THIS IMMINENT FAMILY REUNION MUST  
HAVE BEEN WEIGHING ON JACOB'S MIND, WHICH  
EXPLAINS A LITTLE MORE ABOUT WHAT  
HAPPENS NEXT..... WE'RE TOLD JACOB DOESN'T  
GET ANY REST AT ALL THAT NIGHT IN HIS  
CAMPGROUND NEXT TO THE JABBOK..... A  
STRANGER INTERRUPTS HIS SLEEP, AND ALL  
NIGHT LONG THEY WRESTLE IN THE DARKNESS,  
NEITHER ONE QUITE ABLE TO OVERCOME THE  
OTHER.**

**BIBLE SCHOLARS DON'T KNOW FOR SURE WHO  
THIS PERSON WAS WHO WRESTLED WITH JACOB  
ALL NIGHT LONG.**

**IT IS A STORY THAT HAS PUZZLED  
COMMENTATORS FOR MANY CENTURIES....AND  
IT IS ONE OF THOSE STORIES THAT ----IF YOU  
READ 10 THEOLOGIANS OPINIONS ON IT----YOU  
WILL COME UP WITH 12 DIFFERENT  
INTERPRETATIONS!!-----THERE IS AIR OF  
MYSTERY SURROUNDING THIS TEXT ...IT IS A  
STRANGE ENCOUNTER AND WE ARE LEFT WITH  
MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS.....**

**ALL WE KNOW FOR SURE IS THAT JACOB HAS A  
HABIT OF ENCOUNTERING GOD IN THE MIDDLE  
OF THE NIGHT, SO WHOEVER THAT PERSON  
WAS—AN ANGEL, OR YAHWEH HIMSELF—WE  
KNOW THAT JACOB LEFT THAT CAMPSITE ON  
THE EDGE OF THE JABBOK THE NEXT DAY  
HAVING HAD SOME KIND OF ENCOUNTER WITH  
THE DIVINE.**

**BUT IT'S NOT WHAT YOU'D EXPECT FROM AN  
ENCOUNTER WITH GOD.**

**FAR FROM A COMFORTING VISIT, THE WHOLE EXPERIENCE TURNS OUT TO BE ONE BIG STRUGGLE, A BIG WRESTLING MATCH WITH THE DIVINE, AND EXPERIENCE THAT LEAVES JACOB SCARRED FOR LIFE.**

**JACOB IS A MAN, YOU SEE, WHO HAS MANAGED HIS WHOLE LIFE TO WRESTLE THE BLESSING OUT OF ANY SITUATION..... HE'S A SCHEMING, CONNIVING MANIPULATOR..... BUT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT, WHEN THERE'S NOBODY AROUND, JACOB HAS TO FACE HIS DEEPEST FEARS OF POWERLESSNESS, DARKNESS, VULNERABILITY AND PAIN.**

JACOB DOESN'T KNOW IT YET, BUT . . . HE'S  
BEEN TRYING TO LIVE HIS LIFE AS IF IT WASN'T  
TRUE . . . . THERE'S NO EMBRACING THE  
PROMISE, YOU SEE, WITHOUT FACING THE PAIN.

WHAT WOULD IT TAKE, I WONDER, FOR YOU AND  
ME TO FACE THE TRUTH OF OUR LIVES? NOT  
THE TRUTH THAT EVERYONE ELSE SEES, BUT  
THE TRUTH THAT'S RIGHT THERE OUT IN THE  
OPEN WHEN EVERYONE ELSE IS GONE, NIGHT  
HAS FALLEN, AND IT'S JUST ME AND GOD?-----OR  
JUST YOU AND GOD?

I CAN'T THINK OF ANYTHING MORE SCARY, TO  
BE HONEST.



**BUT AT THE END OF THE DAY, IT'S GOING TO TAKE FACING THE TRUTH, IT'S GOING TO TAKE GOING TO THE MAT AND WRESTLING WITH THE HARD REALITY OF WHO WE ARE FOR US TO FULLY LIVE INTO THE PROMISE GOD HAS FOR US.**

**JACOB TRIED FOR YEARS TO DO IT HIS WAY . . . HE STOLE AND CONNIVED, HE MANIPULATED AND DECEIVED . . . AND TO BE PERFECTLY HONEST, HE DID PRETTY WELL FOR HIMSELF. THERE CAME A POINT, THOUGH, WHEN HE WAS ON THE EDGE OF REUNION, HEADING BACK TO TAKE POSSESSION OF THE PROMISE GOD HAD MADE TO ABRAHAM,**

TO FILL THE WORLD WITH HIS DESCENDENTS  
AND ESTABLISH HIS NAME FOREVER, WHEN GOD  
INSISTED THAT JACOB FACE THE TRUTH AND  
WRESTLE WITH GOD LIKE HIS LIFE DEPENDED  
ON IT.

*THERE WAS NO WAY HE COULD EMBRACE THE  
PROMISE, YOU SEE, WITHOUT FACING THE PAIN.*

*THERE WILL COME A TIME, IF THERE HASN'T  
ALREADY, IN YOUR LIFE AND MY LIFE WHEN WE  
ARE GOING TO HAVE TO FACE THE PAINFUL  
TRUTH ABOUT OUR LIVES,*

**ALL THE LITTLE SECRETS AND FAILURES THAT**  
**NOBODY ELSE CAN SEE IF WE WANT TO GO ANY**  
**FURTHER TOWARD THE PROMISE OF WHO WE**  
**ARE.....AND WHEN THAT TIME COMES, WHEN WE**  
**FIND OURSELVES ON THE MAT, UP ALL NIGHT**  
**WRESTLING WITH GOD**

**THIS WE KNOW: IT'S NOT OUR DECISIONS OR**  
**OUR POSTURING OR OUR PLANS THAT**  
**DETERMINE THE FUTURE. IT'S GOD . . . WHO, NO**  
**MATTER WHAT MISTAKES WE'VE MADE, WILL**  
**NOT ABANDON US TO OUR OWN DEVICES.**

**NO..... GOD WILL WRESTLE US DOWN, OVER AND**  
**OVER AND OVER AGAIN, ALL NIGHT LONG IF**  
**THAT'S WHAT IT TAKES, DEMAND THAT WE**  
**SURRENDER EVERYTHING ABOUT WHO WE ARE**  
**AND WHO WE HOPE TO BE, UNTIL THE SUN**  
**RISES AND WE'RE READY TO FACE THE TRUTH**  
**AND WE GRAB THE HAND OF GOD TO PULL US**  
**UP AND WE LIMP TOWARD THE PROMISE OF OUR**  
**LIVES.**

**AS WE PAUSE AND REFLECT TODAY ON THIS**  
**GENESIS PASSAGE WE MIGHT AS WELL LAY**  
**DOWN ALL THE BAGGAGE AND PAIN WE CARRY,**  
**GIVE UP THE STRUGGLE AND SURRENDER TO**  
**GOD'S LOVE.**

**AT GOD'S INVITATION WE ARE INVITED TO COME**  
**WITH ALL THE PAIN OF WHO WE ARE. LIKE GOD**  
**DID FOR JACOB, GOD WILL NOT LEAVE US TO**  
**OUR OWN DEVICES, NO MATTER HOW**  
**SUCCESSFUL THEY APPEAR TO BE. GOD WILL**  
**MEET US IN THE REALITY OF WHO WE ARE,**  
**WRESTLE US DOWN, AND LEAD US TO THE**  
**PROMISE OF EVERYTHING WE WERE CREATED**  
**TO BE.**

**PRAISE GOD AND MAY IT BE SO FOR YOU AND  
FOR ME.....AMEN.....**