

**Revealing Moments**  
**Preached by**  
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**MEDITATION AND PRAYER**

**For Reflection**

*“Any life, no matter how long or complex it may be, is made up of a single moment—the moment in which a man finds out, once and for all, who he is.”* Unknown

**Introduction to Scripture**

Our story telling about one of faith’s patriarch's –Jacob continues. Last week, we heard of his flight across the desert and a dream about the protection of God. Since then, he has worked with his Uncle Laban, while cheating him out of livestock. His uncle returned the favor: Laban extracted seven years labor from Jacob in exchange for his desired wife Rachel. Then his uncle swapped in his other daughter Leah—whose face was hidden by a veil—the reason veils are lifted before the vows in this house. 😊 Since that time, the sisters have been played off one against the other—Leah apparently rewarded for a loveless marriage with great fertility and the production of ten sons and an unclear number of daughters. Rachel was finally graced with the birth of a son. After yet another argument with Laban, Jacob is now between lands having determined to return to the land God promised him—if his brother Esau will allow it. On the way out of town, his wives stole their father's household gods—just to keep the family tradition of trickery and deceit in tact. Jacob is rich in children, wives and flocks as he makes his way to the place of his birth.

In this penultimate portion of the story of Jacob’s life, he sent word to his brother Esau that he has returned and received a report that his brother was coming to meet them. Sending his caravan ahead, with Rachel and her son at the very rear of the line so that she might be most protected, Jacob waited alone on the shore of the River Jabbok for morning. In an altogether rare moment for Jacob, who seemed to sense vulnerability and the possibility of recompense for former bad deeds, or perhaps simply wanting to savor the moment until his final triumph, if that is what was to be, Jacob prayed that God would preserve him, while admitting he had done nothing to deserve God’s protection.

As it was in the beginning of our story, Jacob was once again alone in the desert night. While much of the text is obscure/unclear, it is, nonetheless, one of the most famous stories and images in art, in language and in spiritual reflection. Let us listen for the words of Scripture and how they might inform our lives today.

### **Hebrew Scripture Reading: Genesis 32:22-32**

<sup>2</sup>The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. <sup>23</sup>He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had.

<sup>24</sup>Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. <sup>25</sup>When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. <sup>26</sup>Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." <sup>27</sup>So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." <sup>28</sup>Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." <sup>29</sup>Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. <sup>30</sup>So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." <sup>31</sup>The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. <sup>32</sup>Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle.

### **Epistle Reading: 2 Corinthians 12:2-10**

<sup>2</sup>I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. <sup>3</sup>And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows—<sup>4</sup>was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. <sup>5</sup>On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. <sup>6</sup>But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, <sup>7</sup>even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. <sup>8</sup>Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, <sup>9</sup>but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. <sup>10</sup>Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

### **Meditation**

### ***Revealing Moments***

Rev. Dr. Linda D. Even

Jacob, now a rich man with wives, children, servants and flocks, has returned to the place of his first, but certainly not his most recent, major deception. The story suggests, only by its report of Jacob's actions (moving family and wealth away) that he is nervous about this reunion. Yet, it's never been suggested that Jacob suffered fits of conscience—only a desire not to bear the full brunt of his deeds. Truth be told, Jacob went his whole life without suffering due (or undue) consequences of his choices. He was a curious person for the faith to name as a patriarch and hero; on whom to found a nation—one who skated around the edges of propriety and crossed the line of ethics more times than we can count, with never a come-uppance. If we've looked for fairness or a moral lesson in this story, we have looked in vain.

Now we have a crude, roughly-told story, which is the only way stories of great danger can be told. There can be no eloquence when life is on the line—only a brutal flow of events to be reported in jagged fragments. While Jacob waited alone in the desert for the morning reunion, he was attacked by another being— a man? an angel? God? Whoever it was, it was a powerful frightening stranger who arrived in the dark, never gave his name and was, at most, half-seen.

We have to give Jacob credit for, of all things, strength of character. For as terrifying as this must have been, Jacob did not give up the battle and did not yield his life. Rather, he struggled all night long. But if Jacob did not lose, neither did he win.

Near dawn, the Other realized Jacob would not be overcome by his own fear or lack of endurance—both greater than the Other had imagined Jacob to possess—certainly more than Jacob's life had given evidence of so far. The Other struck a crippling blow. In an instant, it was over. Jacob had to have realized his attacker could have beaten him any time in the night—could kill him even now—still Jacob did not yield.

As daybreak came, the One who had not been seen and would not be known, struggled to free himself from Jacob's grasp. Here was the Jacob we have come to know and love. He demanded a blessing from the stranger—as though sparing his life was only his due and there was more to rightfully demand.

In response, the stranger asked his name. Curious. Surely, even if he was stranger to Jacob, Jacob was not stranger to him, attacked for no reason apparent in the darkness. The question, however, became the hinge point in Jacob's life and in the history of the nation of Israel and our faith. The stranger in the dark gave Jacob a new name. In so doing, he gave us a hint of who he must have been—for only One of great power can grant or change a name. So it was that Jacob became Israel—one who withstood wrestling with God and so would be strong among humans for the rest of his days.

If the new name was a blessing, it came at great cost—crippling cost—for neither spiritually nor physically would Jacob be the same person ever again. Presbyterian preacher and author, Frederick Buechner calls it *The Magnificent Defeat*. This was a revealing moment for Jacob, now Israel—for in the desert, if the stranger learned more about him than he knew before, it was Jacob who left the encounter with a new understanding of who he was—as a man and as a human being in relationship to a holy God.

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It is a strange story and yet familiar to us—a powerful story lurking at the edges of human darkness and consciousness. It is a story from our own lives. For who among us, awake or asleep, has not wrestled in the dark with powerful strangers who remind us of those we have wounded; those who remind us we are vulnerable; or those who embody our fears about the future?

Perhaps, more importantly for us today, this is not just a tale of individual challenge, but one of national identity. This is a revealing moment as we wrestle in the dark with one whose face we cannot see. We catch only rapidly shifting jagged glimpses of a fearful time: violence on campuses and in city streets; peace officers gunned down; hate speech with a national forum; the environment tossed by the wayside; little compassion for people who have even less; education and health care only for the rich—and let's not kid ourselves about where we fall on that spectrum; a desire to paint those who disagree as enemies and evil; lulling ourselves to sleep, even in the daytime, by telling ourselves that we are not the ones using out of control violence or speech—snapshots of terror without continuity.

This is our dark night in the desert and we wrestle with what we can only glimpse. For those of us tempted to give up and let go; to excuse ourselves from accountability or work toward solutions; to tell

ourselves it is bigger than us, too complicated, too unsolvable for us to make a difference; for those of us tempted to give up the wrestling match and lie down in defeat—one that is not remotely magnificent; for those of us who would want to separate ourselves from those whom we see as being the source of the problem; for those of us who have never understood how Jacob came to be a patriarch of the faith, this is our moment to test our strength of character against the stranger who confronts us. It is our moment to see if we are made of as much as those whom we have disparaged as cowards or cheats or bullies or tricksters—to see if we can stand up, endure and overcome.

As with those who participate in any great battle, we will be wounded, perhaps crippled; we will carry scars; we will likely be cured of hubris; we may even get a new name. Yet, the history of our faith, and our nation, for that matter—is one that tells us such moments, such wrestling matches are the ones worth engaging. We wrestle in the night with an unknown future, knowing only that every value we hold dear, everything we hope for and love is at risk. It is in these revealing moments that we will once again find out who we are. In such moments, taking time for blaming or finger pointing is sure to lead to defeat, for we dare not take our eyes, our energy from the moment at hand and the problems before us.

Until we have had that experience and named it to ourselves, we can have no hope of understanding a riverside wrestling match. For until we too have seen that dawn break, exhausted from the battle, knowing that we cannot wrestle God or the future into submission; until we lie gasping from exhaustion with bruised egos, humbled spirits, and the brutal self-knowledge that even in strength, we are weak -- until then, like Jacob, we will never see that the just-glimpsed face of the stranger departing in the dim half-light is the face of One who claims us with a terrible fierceness—in spite of or because of who we are and what we are capable of. Until we too have been deeply wounded by our own pride or self-reliance; until we have wrestled in the night and stagger into the future, knowing who we really are and who we have become by the terrible grace of God, we will never see the face of Love.

### **Prayers for Others and Ourselves**

God of mercy and justice: We confess that we go from day to day thinking we have seen the worst of which people are capable and yet find new things to make us appalled and afraid day by day. As we pray this day, we pray with awareness that we too are capable of falling short of the goodness of our creation and your purposes for us—so as we pray for the world, we pray for ourselves.

As nations make war and rattle swords of every technology, and other nations attempt to lower the temperature, for ourselves the people of every nation, we pray...

As media fills with scenes of violence and hate speech, for victims of violence, and their survivors, for police officers and other servants of public peace, for ourselves and our nation, we pray...

As our nation is shredded into factions and sides, when rhetoric has become not a tool for the upbuilding of community, but a weapon of humiliation; when education, healthcare and jobs are agendas not human rights, for ourselves and our nation we pray...

We pray for our president, for our elected leaders of every party and opinion, for ourselves; for those who would be elected, and for ourselves

That in these revealing moments, we may discover who we are and walk once again into the future with you, striving ever to overcome the ways that we allow our frail humanity to overcome the spark of your image in each and every human being... For we ask it in Christ's name, who taught us to pray...

## **The Lord's Prayer**

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day, our daily bread.  
Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors  
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,  
for thine is the kingdom and the power  
and the glory forever. Amen.**