

READ

Genesis 32

REFLECT

Jacob was finally free from Laban, was surrounded by four wives and a whole cadre of children, was fabulously wealthy, but there was one thing that was still missing in his life – forgiveness from Esau. So, Jacob sought to set things right. He sent messengers ahead of him to Esau to announce his coming (along with his wealth), hoping that it'd ease the tension when he got there. Esau agreed to meet Jacob, along with 400 of his closest friends, and that made Jacob very nervous. He split his camp into two hoping that if it were a trap, and Esau planned revenge, not everything would be lost. Then he prayed. He remembered that God told him to go back home, but he still didn't trust that God's promise would be true. He came up with another plan – buying off Esau. He sent messengers ahead of him with lavish gifts, enough to make one fabulously wealthy in that day, hoping that would assuage Esau. Then Jacob took his family across the river Jabbok. After getting them settled, he crossed back to the other side to be by himself. While he was alone, something strange happened.

In the night a man approached Jacob and they wrestled until dawn. Neither could defeat the other, so the mysterious man grabbed at Jacob's leg and tore a muscle in his thigh, but still Jacob wouldn't let go. So, the man commanded Jacob to free him, and again Jacob refused, but with a caveat - if he could receive a blessing, he would let go. This is a very strange and specific request to a strange man you've wrestled with for hours. It makes you wonder – did Jacob know who the man was? The man's response only makes things stranger, he asked for Jacob's name and, upon hearing it, renamed Jacob. His new name was "Israel" because he had "struggled with God and with men and won," though literally it means "God strives." Jacob wanted to know the man's name, but he refused to tell it. Jacob took that encounter to be one with God, as he renamed the site Peniel, or "face of God." Whether or not the mysterious encounter really was one with God has been debated for centuries, but Jacob was changed from the encounter – both physically and emotionally.

REACT

- Fear makes us do crazy things. Jacob, in fear, divided his life, even though he knew being divided made him weaker. Have you ever made poor decisions because you were scared? What were the ramifications? How have you changed your approach?
- We've all experienced the kind of dread that Jacob felt in preparing to be reunited with Esau. Maybe it's because we're being forced to confront our own wrongs, or maybe it's something else entirely. When you're overwhelmed by dread, what is your usual practice? Do you go away somewhere by yourself? Do you try to take your mind off it by engaging in another activity? Do you face it head on? Does whatever you do work for you?
- We're told that Jacob wrestled all night with who we presume to be God. It was a fight that had lasting effects on Jacob. We, too, have had our own wrestling matches with God – though they've probably been less physical than Jacob's. And like Jacob, we are changed by them. How have you been changed in your wrestling with God? Have you been more trusting? Less? Does it soothe your anger or make it more intense?

RESPOND

Letting Go: When Jacob wrestled God, he wouldn't let go until God gave him something. That thing, though, was already his for the taking. He had already been blessed by God, it was Jacob who wasn't yet ready to accept it – he first had to let go of his fear. We are often held hostage by our emotions – anger, fear, jealousy, etc. What is holding you back from accepting God's blessing? Whatever it is, practice letting it go. If you need a physical act to ground you – try writing whatever is holding you back on a piece of paper. While saying a prayer for release, burn the paper (in a safe space!), and watch as the words you wrote are consumed. Reflect on how you feel watching that emotional impediment disappear.