



Back to the Beginning

Week 6: Jacob

Brian Mattson - 05/24/2026

There's an old cliché attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson that may be overused, yet still retains much wisdom: Life is a journey, not a destination. The same sentiment is not used as much for vacations. Generally, we travel to new places to escape other places or situations. For example, people travel *to* Walt Disney World, *to* Cancún, or *to* the mountains. The goal is to get to the destination as quickly as possible so we can soak up as much time in that place as possible. Who wants to get to Disney World slowly? No one. But have you ever taken a vacation where the actual journey was the destination? I'm not talking about a trip you took that had twists and turns along the way, and when you look back on it now, the actual travel and adventure was better than the destination. I'm talking about trips when the entire vacation *was* the journey. The final destination was just a bookend, not the reward for the trip.

I made one of those trips back in 2017. It took a little convincing with my wife, but eventually she relented. I proposed the idea of driving Route 66 from Springfield to Santa Monica. 1600 miles down the Mother Road through seven states with nothing but a travel guide, hours of windshield time, and the promise of pie at every diner we stepped into. To sweeten the deal further, I tacked on another five days of camping in Yosemite National Park. She was still a little on the fence, but decided that the promise of unlimited

homemade pie from quirky diners along the way was too good to pass up. We made the plans, I bought us matching shirts, and we loaded up our Volkswagen Jetta. One Sunday after church, we headed to Steak 'n Shake on St. Louis Street to eat lunch and get our strawberry milkshakes to go.

We spent the next eight hours driving to Oklahoma City and stopping at all the Route 66 oddities along the way—the inspiration for Tow Mater from the Pixar Movie *Cars*, the Catoosa Blue Whale, and the Arcadia Round Barn. Yes, those are all real things. And if you know your geography, that drive to OKC usually takes just over four hours on the interstate. We made it in eight. That was the story of our entire drive to California. Each day consisted of seeing ghost towns, old bridges, historic theaters, and quirky roadside attractions on two lane highways. None of those things by themselves would be a reason to take the trip, but each stop along the way added together to create one of our favorite vacations ever.

When we finally made it to the Santa Monica Pier—our “destination”—that leg of the trip was really over. Vacation wasn't just beginning. Truly, in the spirit of Ralph Waldo Emerson, we experienced the beauty of savoring the journey rather than the destination. Now, if you ask Jess about this, she will concur, for the most part. She will, however, be sure to point out that we only got pie one time. How was I to know that so many diners would be closed on Sundays and Mondays? I wasn't trying to deceive her, though she still feels like I owe her some pie.

The Genesis story we are going to look at today is about an actual deceiver. A trickster. A clever character who went by the name Jacob—the father of all Israelites. Last week we talked about Abraham and his son, Isaac. Jacob is the son of Isaac, the third generation living within the covenantal relationship with God, and the next heir to God's promises to Abraham.

There are several events in Jacob's life that we could look at, but to truly get a sense of the story, we need to view his entire character arc. In fact, the

writers wanted us to look at it that way. It's arranged in a common literary framework known as a Chiastic structure, where the events in the story mirror each other, with the first element relates to the last one, the second element to the second from the last and so on. Understanding this helps us get a better grasp on Jacob's story as a whole, rather than just one or two episodes. Because Jacob is not the most likable character, especially at the beginning. He has an especially contentious relationship with his brother, Esau, even in the womb.

The children struggled together within Rebekah, and she said, "If it is to be this way, why do I live?" So she went to inquire of the LORD. And the LORD said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other; the elder shall serve the younger." When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle, so they named him Esau. Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel, so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

- Genesis 25:22-26

The brothers were quite different growing up. Esau was a hunter and farmer. Jacob was quiet and preferred being inside. And in a moment of Esau's weakness, Jacob shrewdly cut a deal. In these ancient cultures, the firstborn received the lion's share of the inheritance, which meant Jacob, as the second born, was in line to get a reduced portion. So, when Esau came in from the fields tired and hungry, Jacob saw a chance to improve his future.

Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!" (Therefore he was called Edom [which means *red*].) 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 lentil stew, and he ate and drank and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

- Genesis 25:29-34

These two passages paint a picture of siblings who live in tension. A duality of personality. This is a common theme in ancient literature and it is prevalent in Genesis, too. It was introduced with Cain and Abel, but we see it in Noah’s sons, Abraham and Lot (who were called brothers), and Isaac and Ishmael. It will pop up again with Jacob’s children and even Jacob’s wives. It’s a common theme with Israel’s ancestors because these are all family stories—the basic units of society. Even larger groups of people like tribes, clans, kingdoms are modeled on an ancient family structure. And when the status quo becomes upset, social stability is threatened. So these ancient stories were very relatable to the audience, providing entertainment, but more fundamentally these stories reiterate that social conflicts are better solved through peaceful means and reconciliation than violence. Maybe that conclusion will come up again in our story?

We pick it up again years later, knowing that Esau sold his birthright to his tricky younger brother. Still, Isaac intends to bless his firstborn, not knowing of the deal between the brothers. Isaac tells Esau to go hunt game and make a meal before he dies. Rebekah overhears these words, and, ever the trickster herself, hatches a plan to fool Isaac and get the blessing transferred to her favorite son, Jacob. We don’t have time for me to read the entire passage to you, but here’s the gist.

Rebekah tells Jacob to get a couple of young goats from the flock so she can make a savory meal the way Isaac likes it. Jacob responds that Esau has a lot of hair, while he himself has smooth skin. Even though Isaac is old with bad eyes, he would still be able to tell the brothers apart. Jacob wants a blessing,

not a curse, which would surely come if he was found trying to trick his own dad. Rebekah tells him to trust her and he obeys.

She gets some of Esau's clothes and puts them on Jacob. She takes the hairy skins from the goats and places them on his arms and neck. Dressed for the part, Jacob goes into Abraham's room and flat out lies. Jacob claims he's Esau when asked, and the clothes and goat's hair complete the deception. Isaac proceeds to bless Jacob instead of Esau. Basically, if you were on the fence about Jacob, this story sure does make it seem like *he's* the bad guy.

As you can imagine, the news doesn't sit well with Esau, even though technically, he already sold his birthright for a bowl of soup. Esau makes plans to kill his brother, but Rebekah intervenes again and convinces Isaac to send Jacob away to find a wife in her homeland rather than one of the Canaanite women, which he does. Jacob falls in love with Rachel, and in an ironic twist, is deceived by his uncle and tricked into marrying a different sister, Leah. The trickster has now been humbled by his own family. Then, with two wives, and the two concubines, a competition between the women to have the most kids gets underway. More sibling rivalries are afoot!

All the family dynamics in the Jacob arc play like a multi-part episode of *The Jerry Springer Show* with fewer chairs being thrown. There are liars, cheaters, hot-heads, love triangles, and the main man, Jacob, is at the center of it all. This story has everything daytime TV could want! But to the later audiences who got the final edition, all this would've actually been good news. Here's Pete Enns and Jared Byas:

Given Israel's less-than-stellar history later on, an ancestor like Jacob who still meets with God's approval despite his shortcomings would be most reassuring. Jacob, like every one of his ancestors, is a flawed hero. Screwing up is deep in Israel's genes; God carrying them along regardless is deeper still.

- Pete Enns and Jared Byas

Jacob worked for years and became exceedingly wealthy in the land of his uncle, much to the chagrin of his cousins. The time had come for him to flee again, back to his homeland in Canaan. But what was awaiting him at home was an angry brother. Jacob makes the prudent decision to send messengers ahead with gifts for Esau: oxen, donkeys, and slaves to gain favor and apologize. The messengers return and tell Jacob that Esau is coming to meet him with 400 men. It would appear that violence is how their score will be settled.

This greatly distresses Jacob and he fears for his life and the lives of his family. He worries about his servants and herds. Jacob prays for God to remember God's promises. He prays for deliverance from this mess. He continues to send gifts ahead of him, and at nightfall he sends his family across the river. Once he's by himself, separated from all of his family and belongings by the water, we get one of the more random and puzzling stories in scripture—an all night wrestling match. I'm not making this up.

**Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.
- Genesis 32:24**

We aren't given a name for this "man", but the two are locked in an even match. The visitor, seeing that he can't prevail, strikes Jacob on the hip, injuring him. Still, Jacob won't let go. He's holding on for dear life.

**Then the man said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." 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." 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.
- Genesis 32:26-29**

This strange story is a seminal moment for the Hebrew people. The father of the twelve tribes—Jacob—is renamed Israel, which means “he wrestles with God.” A fitting name for Jacob and for all future Israelites. These people see themselves, not as victors, but as wanderers and wonderers. People who wrestle with their faith. People who aren’t perfect. But people still seeking God.

Like their fathers of old, the Israelites are defined by their struggle with God. And like Jacob, they intend to hold on to God so they can be blessed. Israel is determined to stay in their struggle with God for as long as it takes.

- Pete Enns and Jared Byas

This wrestling match and new name sets up the final scene where Jacob—now Israel—and Esau reconcile through peaceful means, representing the full circle moment for Jacob/Israel. When he left Canaan, he was a cheater and at strife with his brother. Now, he and Esau will be reunited and Jacob is a new man with a new name, changed by his journeys and struggle with God.

Jacob’s story is an interesting one, for sure, and I’m glad it’s captured. As I said in the beginning, this is a story where you can’t just open up and read a small section and think you understand the character. You have to step back and see the entire journey from beginning to end.

Overall, this story may be viewed as a God-initiated exercise in human becoming—shaping and sharpening the faithfulness of human beings for the challenges to be faced; and God promises to be at the side of those going through such struggles.

- Terence Fretheim

After last week’s sermon, I heard from a couple of you about your own wrestling with the story of Abraham and Isaac. *What’s the point?* you wondered. *Why is it in the bible at all?* Those questions—and many more

about scripture—are not reasons to throw the entire thing away, but an invitation to dig deeper. To linger longer. To wrestle with your thoughts. That is part of the journey each of us is on with God.

I don't have all the answers—none of us do—but I'm not afraid to tussle with God. If reading scripture, overcoming doubts, or answering life's questions was meant to be easy, God would've made it easy. It's not. We are wrestling with who we are, and who we are becoming as God shapes and sharpens our faith. And if we refuse to let go, we'll find blessing on the other side. I've found it. A faith that offers freedom. A love for people that has no room for selfish pride. A care for creation that understands we all will have enough if no one takes too much.

I can look back now at this point in my life and know that faith is a journey, not a destination. And yes, there are a whole bunch of roadside oddities and quirky characters along the way, but through all of those things I continue to be remade more and more in God's image.

I'm reminded of the continual process, the journey, of wrestling with God in the words of the Apostle Paul. In Philippians, he advises Christians to: work on your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure. William Barclay adds that: **the truly Christian life must be a continual progress, for it is a journey towards God.** So the question, then, is are you still wrestling with God, or have you grown tired of the work? Have you given up on striving and are instead spectating? God is inviting you, even now, to wrestle with these words. To wrestle with your thoughts. To wrestle with God's own self. And through the striving God is continually transforming you into something new. You don't need to be a hero to continue the journey—Jacob was no hero—just a human. A human who realizes that the journey *is* the destination.