

**Genesis**  
**Genesis 32:22-31**  
**The Transforming Encounter - Jacob's Moment of Destiny**

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Today is the first Sunday of Advent. For most of America, Christmas is no longer a holy day. Instead, the season has been commercialized and trivialized. It has become a time for shops to get in the black. The month is full of hustle and bustle, with everyone scurrying around to finish the year, go to the parties, make the food, buy the gifts, with all the pressure that this year everything will be just right. But historically for the church, Advent is a time of slowing down. In fact, the word “advent” means waiting or arrival. You can’t wait in a hurry. Even waiting to open the gifts under the tree calls for patience from the children. The language of Advent is connected to the days when the people of Israel were in exile, *waiting* for a messiah to come. *Waiting* to be delivered. Our Advent boxes encourage families to use Advent wreaths and light candles during this season. Purple is a color that symbolizes royalty: the King who came is coming again. It’s also a color that symbolizes pain and suffering. Advent meets us in our longing for Jesus to come again and set things to right. Each of the Advent candles has meaning. The first is a symbol of hope—hope for God to bring healing to the sick, wellness to the suffering, reconciliation to broken relationships. Where things are not right in my life, Advent is my crying out to God in a minor key:

*Oh come, Oh come, Emmanuel  
and ransom captive Israel.*

Even the candles are not quite right. Each week you burn one as the others wait their turn. It doesn’t seem quite right to have unlit candles. It’s disorienting, like exile. Yet as the fullness of time draws near, the light begins to increase. One week at a time: faith, peace, joy. With joy, the color changes to pink as a reminder that joy is often intermingled with suffering. Then love and—finally—we light the Christ candle on Christmas Eve.

As the days darken and the nights grow longer, we light candles, slowly increasing the light, as a reminder that God comes slowly—and then suddenly!

Advent is a window of time when we watch and wait and wrestle and pray for God to come again. Today we find ourselves in the book of Genesis with the story of Jacob in the middle of the night, in the darkness, in need of God to come. Indeed, God does come, but it is not at all what Jacob expected.

In 2009, our family returned to the States after serving for a while in India. We spent six months trying to discern what was next. We visited 23 states, explored church planting, and interviewed at several churches, all while we were living out of suitcases as we tried to figure out where we were going to go and what we were going to do with our lives. During Advent that year, a season of waiting for God to come, I was wrestling with him. “Where did we go wrong? Why can’t we figure things out? Where are you God?” My wife, Adrienne, was on temporary bedrest with our third child when I received the call that I was hoping would be a job offer at a church I was so excited about. Instead, I heard the all too familiar words, “We’ve decided to go another direction.” I have a vivid memory of standing under the pear tree at my in-law’s house when I got off the phone. I was crushed. Now what? Almost instantly, I received another call. This time it was a call from God. It was not audible, but it was vivid:

“Jeff, it’s time to stop trying to figure out where you are going to go and what you are going to do. It’s time to discover who you are going to be.” During my own dark night of wrestling, God would ultimately give me a fresh vision of who he called me to be.

Today in Genesis we find Jacob in the darkness, wrestling with God, and God giving him a vision of who he would become. If you have your Bible with you, please open it to the book of Genesis.

The last two weeks we have been learning about Jacob. If there is one theme with this man, it is that he is a wrestler. A review of the last couple weeks reveals this.

### *Jacob wrestled with Esau*

The babies jostled each other within her, and she said, “Why is this happening to me?” So she went to inquire of the Lord. The Lord said to her, “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger.” (Genesis 25:22-23)

The entire story of Jacob comes back to this word from the Lord: two nations are in your womb. Esau will be one nation and Jacob will be the other. One nation will be stronger—that’s going to be Jacob. The older will serve the younger—again, Jacob will be the one who has the position of authority.

Remember this promise. We will come back to this again.

“When the time came for her to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb. The first to come out was red, and his whole body was like a hairy garment; so they named him Esau. After this, his brother came out, with his hand grasping Esau’s heel; so he was named Jacob” (Genesis 25:24-26).

The name Jacob literally means “he grasps the heel” (or figuratively, “he deceives” or “he takes”). As Pastor Dan preached two weeks ago, Jacob did take the birthright from Esau. The birthright meant that Jacob would carry spiritual authority, that he would receive a greater inheritance and place of leadership in the family. Jacob wanted the authority and the mantle of leadership. But instead of trusting God to fulfill his promise, he took matters into his own hands and stripped the birthright from Esau.

### *Jacob wrestled with his father*

“The boys grew up, and Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was content to stay at home among the tents. Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob” (Genesis 25:27-28).

You can sense the resentment building as the story goes along. Jacob knows that his father Isaac loves Esau more, then he realizes Isaac wants to bless his brother more than he blesses Jacob. But Jacob was his mom’s favorite, and you just know that she told him the promise: “Your brother will serve you and you will become a great nation. God promised me this.” But here is the problem: instead of Jacob trusting that God will make good on his promise, he keeps jostling, wrestling for the promise God said he would give him.

Eventually, he “wrestles” his father, deceiving him and taking the blessing that Isaac wanted to give to Esau. His brother Esau is so angry that he wants to kill him. His father sends him away to marry someone from their own kin. Jacob does get married. But it turns out that...

#### *Jacob wrestled with his father-in-law*

Jacob’s father-in-law deceives him by giving him Leah as his wife, even though Jacob had worked for seven years to marry Rebekah. Laban changed his wages ten times. Meanwhile, Jacob schemes ways to build his own flock with healthy animals and make the flocks of Laban weak. It’s a twenty-year wrestling match.

#### *Jacob wrestled with God*

His final wrestling match, a match with God, is the climax of Jacob’s life. God gives him a new name and sets him on course to live into God’s destiny for him. The story is about Jacob, but it’s also a powerful picture of how transformation takes place. In these ten verses, Genesis 32:22-31, we find six features that God uses to transform our lives and prepare us to live into God’s vision for our destiny.

#### *Feature #1: Darkening*

God’s work of deepening our maturity is in the time of darkening our world.

“That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons” (Genesis 32:22).

It was night. Most of the deepest spiritual transformation happens in what some spiritual forefathers refer to as “the dark night.” There is something unsettling about the dark, when we can’t see. Do you ever feel like when you are most alone, when everything feels dark, that God wrestles with you? The night is darkest just before the dawn. The dark night is not the absence of God; it is the canvas God uses to form what we cannot yet see.

We recently took a retreat with several folks from the Creek to Newfields Art Museum. Mike Griffey, who attends the Creek, works at the museum and he curated an incredible formation experience for us. He took us to an exhibit called “Acton,” envisioned by artist James Turrell, a pilot who for years flew in and out of an airport in the San Francisco Bay area. Often the fog was so thick he could hardly get his bearings. He wanted to create an art piece that would invite people to see what he saw and felt in the airplane on those days. When you walk into the Acton exhibit, the light is low and there is an enormous dark, gray, cloudy canvas on the wall. There are instructions to come close to the canvas and reach out and touch it. As you stretch out your hand toward the canvas, your hand moves toward what you think is a painting on the wall. But your arm actually stretches through an open space and into an entirely different room. The “canvas” is simply an *opening* in the wall. The lighting creates an illusion. Suddenly your perspective changes and you begin to see what the artist knew all along.

This is a picture of what God wants to do in the darkness. God invites us to come close, to reach out our hands and our hearts and step beyond what we can currently see and into an entirely new reality.

On Christmas Day 1939, Britain had just declared war on Germany and the darkness of WWII had come upon the world. King George VI inspired the Commonwealth with these words from a Minnie Louise Haskins poem:

I said to the man at the gate of the year,  
“Give me a light that I might tread safely into the unknown.”  
And he replied,  
“Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God.  
That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.”

### *Feature #2: Crossing*

The threshold invites us to leave behind what was and cross into what will be.

“That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons and **crossed** the ford of the Jabbok” (Genesis 32:22).

The crossing at Jabbok is the moment between the life Jacob has built and the life God is calling him into. Jacob had been striving to build a family and build a business, but God wanted to birth a nation and ultimately a savior from his line.

Destiny always requires a crossing—from fear to courage, from control to surrender, from striving to trusting.

### *Feature #3: Soloing*

Being alone sharpens my focus and strengthens my resolve

“After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. So Jacob was left alone” (Genesis 32:23-24a).

Solitude is the place where we can meet God with no other voices distracting us.

### *Feature #4: Wrestling*

“...and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob’s hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, “Let me go, for it is daybreak” (Genesis 32:24b-26).

Right in the moment you would expect that Jacob wants God to come and comfort him. God does show up, but it’s not like Jacob wanted. Have you found yourself in a wrestling match with God in your life?

Before God births a future, he disrupts the present. We rarely recognize God in the struggle. We think we’re fighting circumstances, people, obstacles—but the real battle is with the God who is wrestling the false self out of us. God is not wrestling Jacob to ruin him but to renew him.

You must step into the fight if you want to lean into the future.

#### *Feature #5: Becoming*

Then the man said, “Let me go, for it is daybreak.” But Jacob replied, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” The man asked him, “What is your name?” “Jacob,” he answered. Then the man said, “Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome.” Jacob said, “Please tell me your name.” But he replied, “Why do you ask my name?” Then he blessed him there. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.” (Genesis 32:26-30)

This is the pivot—Jacob finally stops wrestling and starts receiving. Transformation happens when we stop demanding control and start longing for God.

In “Mere Christianity,” C.S. Lewis writes,

Your real, new self (which is Christ's and also yours, and yours just because it is His) will not come as long as you are looking for it. It will come when you are looking for Him...The principle runs through all life from top to bottom. Give up yourself, and you will find your real self. Lose your life and you will save it. Submit to death, death of your ambitions and favourite wishes every day and death of your whole body in the end: submit with every fibre of your being, and you will find eternal life. Keep back nothing. Nothing that you have not given away will be really yours. Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in.

Isn't this what the Prophet Jeremiah calls us to when he says to the people in exile, “Seek me and you will find me when you seek me with all of your heart” (Jeremiah 29:13), and what Jesus calls us to in Luke 9 when he says, “Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me.”

The blessing isn't what God gives you—it's who God makes you. The new identity is not just a title; it's an invitation to step into a whole new way of living.

#### *Feature #6: Limping*

“The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip” (Genesis 32:31).

Jacob limps forward—but the limp doesn't weaken him; it strengthens him. Gaining the limp is the defining moment in his life and proof of the encounter, and the encounter ushers him into his future. Everyone who has wrestled with God walks with a limp and the limp is our badge of humility and honor.

What is your limp?

Some of you are standing at your Jabbok today. You feel the darkness of winter in your bones. Perhaps you feel alone and afraid. The wrestling match you are in has worn you down. But this is the moment. This is where your faith is formed and your future is forged. This is where God meets you in the most vulnerable place and whispers a new name.

Don't run from the struggle. Lean into it. Cling to God. Ask for his blessing. Step into the identity he is speaking over you.

As you are waiting this Advent, your destiny is also waiting for you—on the other side of the wrestle.

Today, we will be sharing communion together. In preparation for communion, please reflect on these questions:

1. If God were to give you a new name that depicts a new destiny, what would that name be?
2. What needs to be true in you for you to cross over into the life God has for you?

This entire account is not just a story about Jacob. It is also a story that points us to Jesus.

Jacob was God's chosen one of blessing.  
Jesus was God's chosen one of blessing.

Jacob needed to be wounded.  
Jesus was wounded for our transgressions.

God gave Jacob a new name, Israel. This name would shape his future.

Names are important. And there is one name that is above every other name: at the name of Jesus every knee will bow and every tongue confess.

The world would be blessed through the offspring of Jacob.  
Jesus would be the one through whom God would bless the world.