

2 August 2026 Readings and Sermon

Genesis 32: 22-31

22 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. 23 He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. 24 Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. 25 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. 26 Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." 27 So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." 28 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." 29 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. 30 So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." 31 The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.

Psalm 17.1-7, 16

- 1 Hear my just cause, O Lord, give heed to my cry:
listen to my prayer, that comes from no lying lips.
- 2 Let judgement for me come forth from your presence:
and let your eyes discern the right.
- 3 Though you search my heart, and visit me in the night-time:
though you try me by fire, you will find no wickedness in me.
- 4 My mouth does not transgress, like the mouth of others:
for I have kept the word of your lips.
- 5 My steps have held firm in the way of your commands:
and my feet have not stumbled from your paths.
- 6 I call upon you, O God, for you will surely answer:
incline your ear to me, and hear my words.
- 7 Show me the wonders of your steadfast love,
O saviour of those who come to you for refuge:
who by your right hand deliver them from those that rise up against them.
- 16 And I also shall see your face, because my cause is just:

when I awake and see you as you are, I shall be satisfied.

Romans 9: 1-8

9 I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit— 2 I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. 3 For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh. 4 They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; 5 to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen. 6 It is not as though the word of God had failed. For not all Israelites truly belong to Israel, 7 and not all of Abraham’s children are his true descendants; but “It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you.” 8 This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as descendants.

Matthew 14.13-21

¹³ When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴ When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick. ¹⁵ As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a remote place, and it’s already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food.” ¹⁶ Jesus replied, “They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat.” ¹⁷ “We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish,” they answered. ¹⁸ “Bring them here to me,” he said. ¹⁹ And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. ²⁰ They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. ²¹ The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Sermon

(Personal story) that led me to ask, “Where is God in all of this?”

I am certain that I am not the only person to ever ask that question.

Over the last couple of months our readings from Genesis have followed the story of: Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Esau, Laban and his daughters Leah and Rachael. By any standard a very dysfunctional family.

Today Jacob has left his cunning uncle Laban and gone his own way. Jacob has taken his wives, Laban's daughters, Leah and Rachel, their handmaids, his children, and nearly all of the best animals from Laban's flocks and herds.

By any measure, Jacob, "the cheater", is a wealthy man, head of a large family, with a substantial entourage. A man to be reckoned with.

Just before today's reading, Jacob is told that Esau his twin brother, "is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him," Jacob's first thought is that Esau is still angry because of his cheating and is coming to extract retribution. Jacob schemes once again to avoid accountability. Jacob sends a bribe of: 200 female goats and 20 male goats, 200 ewes and 20 rams, 30 milk camels with their young, 40 cows and 10 bulls, and 20 female donkeys and 10 male donkeys, in an attempt to buy Esau off. (Gen.32:7-21)

After sending his servants with the bribe, Jacob is at the "ford of the Jabbok", an east-west tributary of the Jordan River. Jacob is heading south, while Esau is heading north.

After sending his wives, his children, his servants and his large flocks across the river, Jacob is alone.

Then we are told, "A man wrestled with him until dawn". The identity of the "man" has been the subject of much debate.

This encounter has been called "Jacob wrestles with an angel" or "Jacob wrestles with God."

But those descriptions aren't found in the story itself. Jacob's opponent is described as "a man". To be sure, he is an unusual man. A man afraid of the dawn. (Gen.32:27).

So who is this "man"?

When I was in college the Old Testament lecturer suggested that the "man" was in fact more than one person. The "man" was a procession of those Jacob had cheated in his lifetime: Esau, Isaac, Laban. Struggles that Jacob had apparently "won". It could be argued that Jacob wrestled with his conscience.

In the end neither Jacob or the "man" prevail. Yes, Jacob is wounded, but the match ends in a draw. This is a life-altering moment for Jacob. Jacob demands a blessing, and as the "man" departs he announces that Jacob's name will no longer be Jacob but Israel.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, a name change often signifies a change in character. Jacob is no longer the "cheater" he is Israel.

The meaning of his new name is "he has wrestled with God and human beings,". (Gen.32:30)

But in the rest of the saga he is known as both Jacob and Israel, which to me indicates that his “change of character” was not complete. Israel sometimes continues to act like Jacob!

And in his new name, we find a clue to what the story is about.

Jacob has in fact wrestled his whole life. And for the first time he has met his match.

Standing beside the Jabbok, amidst the glow of the rising sun, Jacob announces that he has “seen God face-to-face and has come out alive.” (Gen.32:31)

This story has often been called, “God wrestling,” but only Jacob makes the claim that he has “seen God face to face,” and since he is one of the least trustworthy figures in the Hebrew Scriptures, why should we believe him?

I suggest it is later when he comes face to face with his brother Esau that Jacob “sees” God. When Esau welcomes him, Jacob announces, “seeing your face is like seeing the face of God, since you have received me with such grace”.

(Gen.33.10)

When Jacob meets Esau he experienced the overwhelming and amazing gift of his brother’s grace. A moment of forgiveness and reconciliation. In the end it is Esau’s grace that opens Jacob’s eyes to God’s presence.

Jacob’s journey continues, but that is for another time.

What does the saga of Jacob tell us?

First, we need to understand that each of the characters in the saga act out of their own desires, and ambitions. Their actions are often questionable. The family dynamics are complicated, and dysfunctional.

But in all of that dysfunction, God is present. God is not active in the family dynamics. God does not cause or condone the actions of the characters.

We learn that God is present in all the ordinary, mucked up, difficult and challenging moments that make up our lives.

We learn that God does not cause or override the decisions we make and the actions we take. To do so would negate God’s gift of free will.

In the aftermath of the wrestling match, we learn that wrestling with our past and conscience is not easy but it can lead to change.

In the meeting of the brothers, we learn that God’s grace is often conveyed to us in the face of others, especially in the face of those who forgive us.

We learn that God’s grace is available to all sorts of people; scoundrels, rogues, saints and sinners alike, even us.

I pray that each one of us experience grace in our lives. A grace that stills the many wrestling matches that tend to consume and compel us to believe we have to win in order to be worthy.

I pray that we learn to recognise the presence of God, in the challenging moments we encounter, and in those who welcome us with grace.