#1. OPENING DISCUSSION

In our previous study, we saw Jacob preparing to reenter the Promised Land—twenty years after he had originally left. This time, as he makes his way back, he encounters something truly extraordinary: a camp of angels. What a strange and wonderful sight that must have been! After all the turmoil with Laban and the uncertainty about facing his brother Esau, Jacob is comforted by the profound knowledge that God is nearby, "just over yonder," camped with him on the journey.

But peace doesn't last long. When it depends on us, our faith is always fragile. Shortly afterward, Jacob receives unsettling news—Esau is approaching with a force of 400 men. That must have sent alarms through Jacob's camp. Fear and anxiety weigh heavily on him. It's easy to imagine the dread he must have felt, picturing what a vengeful Esau could do with such a formidable group.

In response, Jacob takes quick, strategic action. He divides his people into two groups and sends them safely across the river. Then, in a clever attempt to pacify Esau's, Jacob orchestrates a procession of livestock and treasures to be sent ahead—wave after wave of valuable gifts intended to soften Esau's heart, and perhaps slow him down.

As night falls, Jacob is left alone. Fear gnaws at him—he worries about what the coming encounter might bring and about the safety of his wives and children. In this moment of vulnerability, he turns to God in prayer. Then, something utterly unexpected happens. Read Genesis 32:22-33.

What is the meaning behind this mysterious encounter? Why does God choose to wrestle with Jacob in such a raw and physical way? What lesson might be hidden in this strange, rough-and-tumble meeting? What does this story suggest about the nature of God? Does it challenge any preconceived ideas you may have about divine encounters?

#2. A NEW IDENTITY

This happened to Abraham as well. God changed his name from Abram, meaning "exalted father," to Abraham, which means "father of multitudes." This renaming signified Abraham's inclusion in God's covenant and affirmed God's faithfulness to His promises. Living with this new name and promise transformed Abraham's life and shaped the course of his future. The new name was a constant reminder of his identity before the Lord.

In Jacob's case, however, the renaming is even more striking. Rather than a slight modification, his name undergoes a radical change. Jacob, whose name means "heel-grabber" or "supplanter" — reflecting his nature as a deceiver and trickster — is given the name Israel, meaning "he who wrestles with God." The stark contrast between these two identities reflects what we see in chapter 32—the double-minded nature of Jacob. On one hand, he is comforted by the sight of angels and the camp of God; on the other, he takes extraordinary measures to appease Esau with gifts & bribes. Also, consider how Jacob offers a heartfelt prayer for help, yet he spends the night

consumed by worry and despair over what Esau might do to him. This tension reveals his struggle to trust in God's promises rather than rely on his own efforts.

Read Romans 6:1-11. Through our Baptism into Christ, how might our own identity and personal struggles or "wrestling" with God in faith be similar to or different from Jacob's experience?

#3. Do you think it is necessary to "wrestle" with faith or spiritual questions to grow? Why or why not?

#4. Read Genesis 33. Based on Jacob's interactions with Esau, what lessons can we conclude that Jacob has learned? Psalm 113 says, *"Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity! It is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes! It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion! For there the Lord has commanded the blessing, life forevermore."* Like the psalm, what is so wonderful and fulfilling about this chapter?

Answer Key

1. Jacob is coming back after twenty years… I'm in my early forties. I've been married twenty years. I've been a father for over seventeen years. I've been a pastor for fifteen years. Is't it interesting that though age brings us wisdom and experience, our faith always remains just a fragile as it was in our youth. We need God's word and comforts. And the angels of God provide that for Jacob.

   But here's the big question: **Why did God wrestle with Jacob?** You might have heard people say this story is all about *your* personal wrestling with God — like if you just pray hard enough and don't give up, God will eventually say "yes." But honestly, that kind of interpretation misses the bigger picture. It makes the story only about us and overlooks God's grace and what He's really doing in and through Jesus Christ. In fact this is a good litmus test for any devotion, sermon or blog that you might encounter. Is the preacher making you the doer of the verbs or is God in Christ the doer of the verbs?

   Why does God choose to wrestle with Jacob in such a raw and physical way? What lesson might be hidden in this strange, rough-and-tumble meeting? Well, remember this: God wrestled with Jacob all night, and then He simply touched Jacob's hip and put it out of joint — that could've ended everything right there. God could have stopped the fight instantly, but He didn't. Instead, He *let* Jacob win. Jacob even says, "I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is spared." Jacob isn't bragging about himself; he's acknowledging that it was God's mercy that let him come out on top. So, what lesson can we learn from this? Well, God might well put a cross upon us in life only for the purpose of giving us His grace and showing us His mercy and love.

   1 Peter 5:10 -- And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.

   What does this story suggest about the nature of God?
   This story somehow sums up the whole history of Israel. They keep struggling with God, they get "put out of joint" (the book of Judges), but God still lets them prevail, ultimately through Christ. And this isn't just about ancient Israel — it's true for Christians, too.

   Does it challenge any preconceived ideas you may have about divine encounters?
   As Lutherans we divide God's word by Law and Gospel. Through the Law, God often seems against us. The Law accuses us and shows us our sin and how much we deserve punishment and God's anger. Just ask a child about a spanking. Is a spanking a good thing or a bad thing? The child will most definitely say it's bad, but the parent says, "I do this because I love you." And the child says, "yeah, right!" You see, punishment always seems evil to the ones receiving it. Truth faith is what enables us to cling to God's mercy in Christ, the Gospel. Consider what Job said in Job 13:15 – "Even if God should slay me, yet will I trust in Him." In this way, suffering and hardship and even God's divine punishment makes us sharper and stronger in our faith. Through our Baptism, we have the guarantee that we are children of God, connected to Chirst. That cannot be severed. Faith is living in that identity even when our experience in life seems contrary to it.

   We don't win because we're strong or perfect. The Christian triumphs not because of inner power but because Christ has already won the biggest victory: over sin, death, and the devil. And that is why God wants us to wrestle sometimes because in the act of wrestling with all this, we realize where our faith is grounded.

2. Jacob had visions of angels and promises from God. We have Christ's incarnation, perfect life, death and resurrection and our baptism into all of this as tangible connection. We have all the more reason to trust God in the midst of suffering.

3. Yes.

4. Lots of beautiful elements: Forgiveness, echo of the story of the prodigal son, humility, story of Joseph and his brothers.

   Note that Jacob does not go and live with Esau, unlike Lot who chose to live near Sodom. Jacob goes toward the promised land as directed by God. I'm sure he and Esau visited. Later they both bury their father, Isaac.