



**A Sermon for The Ninth Sunday After Pentecost  
July 30, 2023**



*Reconciliation of Jacob & Esau, by James Tissot*

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[Ninth Sunday after Pentecost – The Episcopal Church](#)

9 Pentecost  
July 30, 2023  
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The Rev Barbara Bond  
Genesis 29:15-28; Genesis 32:22-31

## Reconciliation

In our four-part story of the saga of Jacob, we are hearing the last half this morning – the last two episodes together, because of a peculiarity of the calendar. What would normally be the last episode, you heard this morning, because next week's scripture texts are vacated by a special holy day, The Feast of the Transfiguration, August 6, a wonderful observance when your preacher will be Scott Bridges. But NO WAY am I going to let you miss out on the climax of Jacob's story!

Episode Three shows how Jacob got his comeuppance at the hand of his future father-in-law. Jacob fell in love with the beautiful Rachel and agreed to work for her father Laban for seven years, for her hand in marriage. Turns out Laban was as tricky as Jacob – at the last minute, he substituted his older daughter Leah for the bride, and the unknowing Jacob married Leah instead. Darn! But Jacob really really wanted Rachel, so he worked an additional seven years for her hand, too. Here he is, 14 years later, with two wives, both of whom have trouble conceiving. (This is a continuing theme in this narrative – all the women have trouble conceiving.) You will recall that Sarah and Abraham likewise had trouble conceiving and used Sarah's handmaid Hagar as a surrogate mother. This was common practice, and both Leah and Rachel use it also, so that eventually, Jacob sires 12 boys (and one girl), many of whom were born by surrogacy. Rachel's last two sons, her very own sons, were Joseph and Benjamin, and Jacob loved them especially because they came from Rachel, his favorite wife. That's the end of the third episode.

Now to the real turning point, the fourth episode. Jacob, quaking in his boots, decides to face the music with Esau. Remember Esau, his twin brother, whom Jacob had cheated out of his inheritance? Jacob certainly never forgot, and he has been nurturing his feelings of guilt for years. He

decides to return home and take whatever punishment Esau wants to inflict on him. So Jacob loads up the whole entourage – all the wives, all the children, all the servants – and he heads back to his original home. He sends everyone on ahead of him – he’s probably still a bit scared of what is coming and maybe he wants to soften up Esau with the family. Anyway, it is evening, everyone else has gone ahead, and Jacob is alone on the riverbank.

He wasn’t quite alone. According to the scripture, Jacob fought with a man, all night long. The man struck him on the hip socket and put Jacob’s hip out of joint. The man wanted to leave but Jacob said, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me. The man did so, changing Jacob’s name to Israel. The man says Israel is now his name because he had striven with God and humans, and had prevailed.

So who was Jacob fighting? Was he fighting God? Was he fighting a dark angel? Was he fighting with himself? I would say, yes, all the above. Jacob certainly thought he had been fighting with God – he said, “I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.” He retains a limp from the fight, a good reminder of the experience.

Fighting with God, fighting with himself, fighting the bad memories of his cheating Esau. Often our motives are complex when we face our past behavior, our present struggles, our hopes for the future. Jacob is a stand-in for all of us, and certainly for the Jewish people. He is, after all, now named Israel, so he stands for all of them and their complicated history. His 12 sons become the 12 tribes of Israel. The story is a good reminder of the difficult history of the Israelites.

But here’s the best part. We didn’t even hear it in the two readings this morning. So let me continue the story just a little longer.

Jacob made elaborate plans, sending many gifts and messages to Esau, perhaps trying to soften his brother up. Because Jacob was really terrified. He saw Esau coming, with 400 men. Oi-vey!

Jacob started bowing to the ground, seven times, to show his obsequiousness. Now listen to this: “But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.” (33:4) What a beautiful scene of reconciliation. It reminds me of the Return of the Prodigal Son, Jesus’s wonderful parable in the Gospel of Luke, when the Father saw his misbehaving son in the distance and ran to meet him, totally forgiving him even before being asked. Esau likewise has a generous spirit and rejoices to see his errant brother. All is forgiven.

The turning point in this story is when Jacob decided to go back to Esau and face the music. He worked it out in the fight on the riverbank, and he was ready for anything by the time Esau came to him. The reconciliation is beautiful.

We may need to do a little fighting with ourselves to work through some of the old stuff in our backgrounds. We can take it to God in prayer. We can take it to a professional counselor if we need help. But ultimately we have to accept God’s grace, and forgive ourselves.

Amen!