

New Life Episcopal Church
Uniontown, Ohio



Jacob wrestling with the angel, Gustave Dore 1855

A Sermon for the 10th Sunday after Pentecost
August 2, 2026

Rev Barbara Bond

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

Genesis 32:22-31

The Dark Angel

I just finished an excellent book about Berlin during World War II. By the author Ian Buruma, it is entitled Stay Alive: Berlin 1939-1945. As a student of history, I read it avidly, and since Berlin is my own Second City, even more avidly. The book is quite specific on the when and where, covering the city of Berlin in the six worst years of its history. But since I lived in Berlin ten years while the Berlin Wall was still up, I have experienced another traumatic era of that place. Berlin's history, and mine, coincided for a while. But the Nazi era was undoubtedly the worst time for Berliners. The level of hypocrisy, betrayal, mendacity and trauma was really unparalleled in Germany's difficult history.

I lived there for ten years, but I am now 81, and there have been a lot of other experiences in my life, all of them meaningful to me. I think of my life in decades – the Berlin experience was in the 1970s, Houston was in the 1980s, seminary and Idaho were in the 1990s. I just completed three decades of ordained ministry. I have packed a lot into my 81 years! And I suppose, like most people, I have things to celebrate and things to regret. I don't dwell on the bad times, but I certainly haven't forgotten them. Sometimes such events hover on the edge of my memory like a dark angel.

And so it is with Jacob, his story being the third generation in the Biblical narrative of Jewish history, personalized with names: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. All three characters experienced some harrowing events which affected their personalities. The events most likely parallel the historic events of the whole Jewish people.

Jacob's story has already shown us quite a bit of treachery. Jacob is not really a nice person. He is always out for his own gain, and he does occasionally experience some comeuppance as he learns about life. Last week we heard about his marriages to the sisters Leah and Rachel – that didn't turn out exactly as he had planned, but he weathered the deceit of his father-in-law Laban and went on to prosper as a herder of goats and sheep, with a family of eleven children by both wives and their handmaids. Jacob appeared to be quite successful.

But he had this one niggling memory, a dark angel that hovered on the edge of his consciousness. He couldn't quite forget what he did to his brother Esau.

Remember the story? We heard about it last month, about his rivalry with his twin brother Esau, a rivalry that began in the womb and played out with Jacob's deceit in acquiring Esau's birthright. Jacob probably regretted how that story had played out. Jacob ran away from home and landed in the next phase of his life, in the family of Laban. But years later, he really wanted to go home, and he was afraid of what Esau

would do to him. He thought maybe he could sweeten the pot by bribing Esau with gifts. As he started the trek back home, he sent before him all his wives and offspring and many gifts to give to Esau. But he worried that it was not enough to redeem himself. As the whole entourage went on before him, he paused in the night and remembered his life of cheating and treachery. The memories were not pleasant.

The dark angel on the edge of his memory became manifest, and Jacob fought this memory tooth and nail. His guilt, his regret, his denial – the game was up. He finally had to face it.

The fight was not without cost. The angel landed a punishing thump on Jacob's hip and left him with a limp, perhaps a reminder to carry with him the rest of his days. The fight was fierce, but there was also a win for Jacob: the angel gave him a new name, Israel.

Historically speaking, there were surely events in the story of the Israelites that left them limping. That's one way to look at the story. We could also interpret it as a psychological internal battle of facing one's own guilt.

But here's the thing: the story doesn't end here. Jacob goes forward to face his brother, dreading the encounter, limping all the way. And what happens? His brother Esau rushes forward to greet him, embraces him, doesn't even mention the former deceit, and welcomes him home. So was all Jacob's worry for nothing? Oh no. It was an essential phase in his redemption.

God offers us forgiveness, always. We have a ritual for it, the sacrament of reconciliation, which includes confession and absolution. We always feel better when we acknowledge our sins, and God always forgives us, no matter what. The ritual is one of the gifts of the church. Our corporate confession is likewise a gift to us, a time when we can confess together and ready ourselves for celebrating the Great Thanksgiving, the Eucharist.

The stories of our spiritual ancestors in the Old Testament are rich with meaning and can give us opportunities for contemplating and interpreting our own lives. Some philosopher once said that the *unconsidered* life is not worth living. I wouldn't go that far, but I think the *considered* life offers us much richness, depth and joy. Life is always a gift, a great gift from God.

