

In ten days, we'll all have little trick or treaters! Halloween isn't the warm and fuzziest of holidays, but I have to think that it's one that Jacob would have liked if only for the sheer possibility of a new identity. At Halloween, you can put on a costume and become someone different.

Jacob, the subject of our story today, is a man whose very name means 'circumventer, assailer, overreacher, supplanter, heel grabber'. Would you want to go around town introducing yourself as a heel or having people think of you as a schemer or deceiver?

Let me quickly reintroduce you to Jacob: He's the second born in a set of twins. By virtue of coming into the world just a few minutes after his brother, he lost the coveted 'birthright'. He cheated his brother out of that and then cheated his brother out of a blessing from their blind father. When his brother, Esau found out that Jacob got his special blessing, he wanted to kill him, so Jacob ran for his life.

He wound up working for his uncle. It wasn't easy. In an interesting twist of birth order and cheating, his uncle promised to give him Rachel in marriage after Jacob worked 7 years, but then the uncle cheated him by giving him Leah—the oldest daughter instead. (After all, it was her right to be married before her younger sister.) So Jacob works some more, takes another wife, has children, and accumulates livestock. And then God comes to him and says, "Go back to the land of your ancestors and relatives and I will be with you". And it's while he's on his way that we find Jacob.

He's learned that his brother is coming to meet him—with 400 men. This is his brother Esau—the one he cheated. Jacob is afraid and he fears for his family so, instead of trusting that God has got this, he sends some of his men ahead with lots of animals as gifts for Esau. Then he divides up all of the folks he's traveling with into two groups. He figures that if his brother attacks one group, the other will survive. And then Jacob himself stays back-by himself.

He couldn't have expected a peaceful night's sleep. He must have been anxious at what appeared to be disparity between God's promise and his current reality. God said he would be with Jacob, but Esau's got 400 men with him!

The scripture suggests that Jacob didn't sleep a wink, but instead struggled all night. Could it be that in that camp with no braying animals and no noisy children, there was nothing to distract him from his own thoughts?

Jacob believed that God had intended this reunion, but he was still anxious about meeting his brother. What was that wrestling all about? Could it be that even those with faith still struggle with following God's direction?

Who was Jacob wrestling with? We don't know. However, we do know the outcome. Jacob's hip has been wrenched and he has been physically slowed down. He ran away from his brother once, but now he can't run away anymore. He's got to face his past and his future all at once—in his twin brother. There's not a lot of dialogue considering that this struggle went on all night. Jacob's opponent says, "Let me go for it is daybreak." What's that about? It could be that no one can see God's face and live. Or it could mean, 'let go of the past. It's a new day'.

Was he feeling someone else pinning him down or was it the weight of his own regret for having cheated his brother? We know that darkness surrounded Jacob. Might it have been emotional? Any of us who have ever been kept up all night wrestling with a decision know that we might call this 'the dark night of the soul'.

The man he struggles with asks his name. Might it be that Jacob has to admit out loud who he is (or how he is)? Remember, his name means that he's an overreacher, circumventer, heel, etc....

Only after he says his name, does he receive the blessing—and it's a new name. The comparable term we'd use today is to say that someone 'reinvented himself'. The past doesn't define Jacob anymore. Now he is Israel which means 'prince that prevails with God', 'soldier of God' or 'one who struggles with God'. Now he's defined by his relationship with God.

In wrestling with an opponent, the object is to remain in physical contact with the opponent, but to have the upper hand. Could the lesson for us be to let God have the upper hand? Could it be to yield to God's will? In the context of the New Testament, (2 Cor 5:17), we know that with Christ, all things are made new—including us! We know that those who are defined by their relationship with God will have a new future! Blessed be and amen.

