

## “Sound Teaching”

Genesis 32:22-31; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

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We begin today with a story from the life of the biblical patriarch Jacob. For those of you who do not know, or do not remember, Jacob was the father of twelve men who became the ancestral heads of the twelve tribes of Israel. He was the third great patriarch of the Bible, after his father Isaac and his grandfather Abraham – although calling these three men “great patriarchs” does not mean they were perfect. Far from it, in fact; the Bible records, in painstaking detail, some of the major mistakes that each of them made over the course of their adult lives. In Jacob’s case, he was a trickster and a liar who cheated his twin brother out of his blessing and his birthright. Brother Esau was so incensed that Jacob had to run away from home, for Esau wanted to *kill* him. I mean, literally, *kill* him.

So Jacob fled, fled back to his ancestral homeland in what is now modern Iraq, fled to stay with his extended family, fled to work for his uncle Laban – who was as much of a liar and a cheat as Jacob himself was. The stories are somewhat amusing, like when Jacob wakes up the morning after his wedding to discover that the woman he had just slept with was the *sister* of the woman he *thought* he had married. This whole cycle of stories give ample testimony of how messed up things can get when people aren’t willing to be truthful and honest with one another, when lying and deceitfulness reign.

The particular story before us today takes place when Jacob is on his way home after being away many years. He is coming with two wives, two maidservants, twelve children, a bunch of male and female servants, and hundreds upon hundreds of sheep, goats, camels, cows, and donkeys. He is a wealthy man, richly blessed. Yet Jacob’s relationship with his brother was in dire need of healing.

Jacob and his company reach the river Jabbok, a tributary of the river Jordan. Jacob sends everyone across the river. “Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.” What man is it who is wrestling with Jacob? Jacob does not know – at least, not at first. The wrestling contest between these two men lasts through the entire night. At one point the stranger strikes Jacob on the hip socket, putting Jacob’s hip out of joint. As dawn begins to break, the stranger asks Jacob to let him go. Jacob says, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” The stranger asks Jacob, “What is your name?” Jacob replies honestly: “Jacob.” The stranger says to him: “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed.” The word “Israel” means “one who strives with God” – for, indeed, it is *God* who has been wrestling with Jacob all through the long night. Jacob asks the stranger to reveal his name. God declines to give Jacob his name. But God *does* bless Jacob. Jacob then gives a name to the place where this wrestling match with God took place; he calls it “Peniel,” which means, “the face of God,” for, Jacob realizes, “I have seen God face to face, yet my life is preserved.” Jacob walks away from that encounter with a limp. His life is not the same. You can’t have a real encounter with God without walking away *changed*.

Now there are many questions we could ask about this passage. Why did God feel a need to

wrestle with Jacob all the way until daybreak? Why did God not reveal himself to Jacob clearly from the start? What made Jacob think that this stranger's blessing was worth receiving? Why did God not reveal his name to Jacob when Jacob asked? These questions could lead to a lot of interesting speculation. But what I find most interesting is the *change* that this encounter wrought in Jacob.

We'll come back to that in a few minutes. For now, let's turn our attention to the New Testament reading, to Paul's words of wisdom to his young protégé Timothy. This might not seem like it relates, but trust me, there is a connection, and we'll get to it soon. Paul says to Timothy: "continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have known sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." Young Timothy has grown up with the sacred writings. At this point, the New Testament wasn't yet a part of the Bible; Paul is referring here to the Jewish sacred scriptures, the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings, what we call the Old Testament. These were Timothy's scriptures, as they were Paul's scriptures, as they were Jesus's scriptures, and early Christians like Paul found all sorts of references to Jesus in those sacred pages. Christianity did not reject the Old Testament; rather, Christianity embraced it, as it provided the essential foundation for understanding who Jesus was and what he accomplished. And somebody – Timothy's mother Eunice, perhaps, or perhaps his grandmother Lois – spent time teaching Timothy those sacred writings. The institution we call "Sunday School" did not exist yet; in fact, it wouldn't exist like we know it today until about midway through the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It's a modern invention. For most of Christian history, children learned the faith from their parents. "All scripture is inspired by God," Paul says, "and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that the person of God may be proficient, equipped for every good work." Notice what matters to Paul: "training in righteousness ... proficient ... equipped for every good work." Learning the scriptures is not an end in itself; it needs to result in a different kind of *life*. God calls us to be *different* as a result of our encounters with the scriptures.

Paul then urges Timothy: "proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage with the utmost patience in teaching." Paul knows full well, from hard personal experience, that not everyone is going to accept the Gospel message. Many people back then did not; many people do not today. And even among those who do, there are often misconceptions and misunderstandings; sometimes people are just *wrong* about some things. Hence the need for "reproof" and "correction" that he mentioned previously. There are also times when a teacher of the Bible just simply needs to be *patient*. You don't produce fully mature Christians overnight. People are going to slip up, make mistakes; and sometimes people have to hear the same message five or ten or even a *hundred* times before a light bulb goes off and it really starts to sink in.

"For the time is coming," says Paul, "when people will not put up with sound teaching, but, having their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths." Truer words could not be said. Let me repeat that. "The time is coming when people will not put up with sound teaching, but, having their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths." Think about what Paul is saying. I want these words to really sink in. Paul knows full well that there will come a time – or perhaps *more* than one time – when people "will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires." That is, people who will tell them what they *want* to hear, rather than what they *need* to hear. Rather than the *truth*. He's talking about people who *look* like they know what they are talking about, but who are fundamentally *wrong* about many things. Some of those people might simply be misguided. Others deliberately spout falsehoods. They create myths, fantasies; in our world today, they are the people

who create and promote conspiracy theories. People like Alex Jones, to name just one person who featured prominently in the news this week; he was just ordered to pay nearly a billion dollars in damages to families of some of the victims who were killed ten years ago at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newton, Connecticut, and to an FBI agent who responded to the scene. Why? Because Jones repeatedly said that the shooting hadn't really happened, that it was "staged," "manufactured," "a giant hoax." Over the years he has made similar claims about the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013, and so on. Jones has *millions* upon *millions* of followers, many of whom believe some or all of the outlandish, hurtful, and hateful lies that he tells and the conspiracy theories that he spreads. He is one of a small handful of people who are largely responsible for the vast quantity of conspiracy theories that are out there today and that have caused – and continue to cause – a tremendous amount of harm to our country. *The apostle Paul predicted all of this.* "The time is coming when people will not put up with sound teaching, but, having their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths." Right now there are millions of people in our country who believe a set of lies that have been debunked in court not just once, not just twice, but more than *five dozen times*. Do you know about those 61 court cases? Do you know what the judges said about the merits of those cases? You should! Right now there are dozens upon dozens of people running for public office who still endorse that pack of lies. I am immensely grateful for the courageous people who have boldly spoken the God-honest truth at great personal risk and sometimes at the cost of their political careers. Nobody who relentlessly spreads falsehoods deserves to be in a position of public trust. Paul's words were prescient, and *immensely* relevant for our times.

You see, God actually cares about *truth*. There are a *lot* of passages in the Bible that have to do with honesty and integrity and truth-telling. I haven't counted them all – that would be a fairly monumental undertaking! – but I'm sure there are *well over a hundred*. You can't read the Bible seriously and not walk away from it with a profound sense that *God cares a great deal about honesty*.

Paul wants to impress upon Timothy the immense responsibilities of his ministry. Not only does Timothy have to speak the Gospel truth – he has to do so in a context in which *some people will not believe it* because they would rather listen to teachers who will tell them what they *want* to hear. I resonate with Paul's words immensely. I try very hard to present the Gospel truth to you week after week – even when some of you don't like it. Every now and then, I do make a mistake. It is immensely painful to me when I realize I have done that. I absolutely do not want to mislead anyone. So I try very hard to ensure that what I am presenting is as accurate and faithful as I can possibly make it.

Let's circle back to Jacob one last time. You see now how these two passages connect. Jacob was a trickster, a liar, and a cheat. That was his way of being in the world. He took advantage of people whenever it suited his personal purposes. *But he wasn't always that way. He changed.* When did he change? It may well have been that night when he wrestled with God. I went back and read the rest of his story again to be sure. *There is no record of any deceitful activity on his part after his all-night wrestling match with God.* In fact, when his sons engage in lies and treachery a little while later, and he finds out, he chastises them! *Something happened to Jacob.* Something caused him to change his ways. Or – perhaps I should say – *some One*. He learned a *better way of being* in the world.

I can only hope and pray that all those people who are spreading lies and false information and conspiracy theories in our country today would have a wrestling match with God like what Jacob had. That they would stop leading people astray. That they would learn a *better way of being* in the world.

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