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I named my middle son Jacob because even in the womb he was a wrestler. The unborn child would twist and turn and summersault...it often felt like he was going to simply explode out of my belly, like that scene in the movie "Alien."

Jacob's name in the Bible has several different meanings, but the name basically means to wrestle, to struggle, to even trick, if necessary...and while my Jacob isn't a trickster, he is a spinner of tales, like his biblical namesake, and you often need to pay careful attention to his stories in order to determine if it is fiction or non-fiction...

In the Bible, in the book of Genesis, Jacob has a twin brother Esau, and they fight, even while still in their mother's womb. Rebekah is miserable because of this, and she asks God why this pregnancy is causing her to suffer so. God answers, "You have twins in your womb. They will be

the fathers of warring nations. They will fight each other for the rest of the lives.” Not exactly comforting words to a pregnant mother of twins. The time comes for her to deliver, and Esau is born first, but Jacob comes out immediately afterwards, grabbing Esau by the heel...Jacob wants that title of firstborn, and all the benefits that go with it, even from the beginning. And Jacob will do whatever he has to do to get what he wants.

And so over time, as the years went by, Jacob uses his charm and his silver tongue to trick his older brother out of his birthright. Finally, at their father Isaac’s deathbed, Jacob tricks their dying father into thinking he is Esau, thereby formally receiving the blessing that should have gone to his older brother Esau. This makes Esau so furious that he vows to kill his brother Jacob as soon as their father dies. So Jacob takes all of his possessions and flees to the distant land of Haran, where he finds safety with his uncle Laban.

Jacob stays with his uncle for about twenty years, and during that time, he accumulates two wives, twelve children, countless flocks and herds and great wealth. Finally, he decides to go home to see his mother Rebekah. So Jacob gathers his huge family, all their possessions and animals, and begins the long journey home. As they come near to the land of Canaan, Jacob sends word to his estranged brother Esau that he is coming home. Esau sends word back to Jacob that he will come out to meet him, along with 400 men.

This terrifies Jacob, since the parting words between the two brothers were ones of hate and murder, so many years ago. So Jacob, the smooth talker, tries to butter up his brother by sending ahead a gift to him, the best of his herds and flocks, along with the greeting, "To my loving brother Esau, from your servant Jacob."

As the two brothers then make their way to each other, one with an army of 400 men and the other with his entire family and flocks of sheep and herds of goats, night sets in. Jacob has already safely sent his whole clan across the river Jabbok, so he shouts to them to go ahead and set up camp for the night, and that he would join them first thing in the morning.

And so night falls and total darkness descends. Silence falls over the other side of the river, as Jacob's exhausted family finally falls asleep. The only sound is the rush of the river, as Jacob tosses and turns, alone on the bank of the river...but he is not able to fall asleep....Jacob finds no peace...why? Because he is terrified of what the morning will bring. Will his brother Esau finally have his revenge and kill him, along with his entire family? Jacob knows Esau would be justified in doing this. Does Jacob toss and turn because he is tormented by a guilty conscience, haunted by his terrible tricks he played on his brother so long ago? Does Jacob toss and turn

because he knows he's a sinner, and there's no way he can take back what he's done?

And Jacob tosses and turns all night long, fighting with himself, with his conscience, with his past, and with God. His guilt attacks him, taking the shape of a man, an angel of the LORD, who attacks Jacob in the dark as he lies alone on the riverbank. Jacob fights with all his strength, all night long, kicking and punching and clawing. *I won't let who I've been destroy me,* Jacob says to himself as he wrestles this mysterious angel...*I've been a weak and terrible person, but I'm stronger now, and I want to change my ways...*and Jacob fights for his life.

...and finally the sun comes up, and the angel and Jacob are still locked in their death-fight...and the angel asks, "What is your name?" And he replies, "Jacob." He says the single word, he only says his name, but his name is his confession, because it contains all the sins he has ever been

guilty of..."my name is Jacob, and since the day I was born, I have deceived people, even my twin brother, and I have tricked people to get what I want. My brother hates me and wants to kill me for all the bad things I've done to him, and he is coming to me today, and surely I will die, and I deserve it. My name is Jacob—this is who I am."

And the angel gives him a new name...in other words, forgiveness, a new beginning...and then, turning to go, he gives Jacob one more thing, a final kick to the hip, dislocating it, and disappears. Jacob limps for the rest of his life, but he never forgets that terrifying night on the banks of the river, when he wrestled with God...

And have we not all at some point found ourselves alone, in the dark, tossing and turning and crying and clawing, in guilt and in shame over what we've done, over who we are? When you speak your name, do you not also cringe, knowing that your name is brought up in gossip and rumors, for

things you've done and things you've not done? Do we not also fight with God, and kick and punch and claw and struggle and wrestle...times when faith seems meaningless, times when death—physical or spiritual—seems near, times when God seems distant.

But God is not distant.

God is on the ground with us, wrestling in the mud with us, locked in an embrace with us and will not let us go, as we kick and punch and fight with our worst fears, our crushing guilt, our tormenting shame. This is a God who sometimes reveals himself in our worst nightmares. But this is also a God who forgives us for whatever we've done and wants us to be stronger because of our struggle. God wants us to remember that night on the banks of the River, and to be transformed by it...

Struggle is a part of faith, as Jacob proves.

Wrestling with God is how you make your spiritual muscles strong;
but there will be pain and injuries along the way.

Do not be afraid in the dark, as you confront your deepest fears,
because God is with you in your struggles, and loves you all the more for
them...God wouldn't push back if he didn't care...Do not be afraid of being
alone on the bank of the river, God is with you, on the floor with you, on the
riverbank with you, in your midnight cry with you...you begin your struggle
scared and strong...and you end up scarred, but stronger.