The Blessing in Our Wrestling
UU Fellowship of Santa Cruz County
February 22, 2026

Selected worship texts

Chalice Lighting

Here, we gather.
Gathering here in this beloved community
united through all our diversity,
united in one strong body.

This is no fiction or illusion.
This is no cheap turn of phrase.
It is the truth.
Here, we are many, yet we are one.
We are rich in diversity of experience,
of age and culture, race and gender,
belief and call.
When we gather in a spirit of listening,
a spirit of readiness to be touched by one another's truth,
we are one.

We are no strangers to struggle.
We know at times the journey is hard,
the path rocky and not always of our choosing.

Yet we also know that in the struggle there is power.
In our faithful struggle
to love truth and love one another and love the world,
there is power.
The power to touch lives for good.
The power to open our hearts
and welcome the spirit
which is always ready to embrace us and fill us

and guide us.
Spirit, draw near.
Spirit, draw near.

Reading Jacob Wrestles (Genesis 32:23-33:4, Tanakh translation)

Laura: Today we'll hear a reading from the Hebrew scriptures, one of the stories from the Book of Genesis about Jacob, the grandson of Abraham and Sarah. In this story, Jacob has been away from home for many years. Now, he's happy to be returning home, but he is terrified of meeting his brother Esau again, because years ago, he stole his brother's inheritance. As this story begins, he knows he's going to meet Esau the very next day, and he expects his brother is going to be full of anger toward him.

We'll hear the story in the Tanakh Translation.

Laura: That same night he arose, and taking his two wives, his two maidservants, and his eleven children, he crossed the ford of the Jabbok. After taking them across the stream, he sent across all his possessions.

Carolyn: Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he wrenched Jacob's hip at its socket, so that the socket of his hip was strained as he wrestled with him.

Laura: Then he said, "Let me go, for dawn is breaking."

Carolyn: But he answered, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."

Laura: Said the other, "What is your name?"

Carolyn: He replied, "Jacob."

Laura: Said he, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and you have prevailed."

Carolyn: Jacob asked, "Pray tell me your name."

Laura: But he said, "You must not ask my name!" And he took leave of him there.

Carolyn: So Jacob named the place Peniel, meaning, "I have seen a divine being face to face, yet my life has been preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping on his hip....

Laura: Looking up, Jacob saw Esau coming, accompanied by four hundred men.... He himself went on ahead and bowed low to the ground seven times until he was near his brother. Esau ran to greet him. He embraced him and, falling on his neck, he kissed him; and they wept.

Sermon The Blessing in Our Wrestling

Let's return now to the story of Jacob wrestling.
Who is he wrestling with?
And what message might there be in this ancient story
for each of us today?

Jacob has had a complicated past, as we learn in the book of Genesis.
Jacob is the son of Rebecca and Isaac,
the grandson of Abraham and Sarah—
and he's one of two children. A twin.
The younger brother of Esau.
As a young man, Jacob did something terrible to his brother.
Isaac, the father of Jacob and Esau, was dying.
The story tells us, Isaac had always loved Esau better than Jacob.
Esau was his favorite,
and he wanted to bless Esau before he died.
This wasn't just a simple "bless you."
This blessing was like a will, effective immediately,
that would give Esau everything he had
and make everyone else obey him.
This is what Isaac wanted to do for his older son Esau.

So already we think maybe this isn't going to end well!

Isaac's wife Rebecca, Jacob and Esau's mother,
had always loved Jacob more than Esau.
So Rebecca coaches Jacob on how to trick his father
into giving *him* the blessing-slash-will instead of Esau.
And Jacob goes along with it.

The trick works.
Jacob gets the blessing, under false pretenses.
By the time Isaac figures it out, it's too late.
He's already spoken the words and they can't be taken back.
In their culture, that was the rule.
Isaac is furious and so is Esau.
Esau is so angry, he threatens to kill his brother.
So Jacob runs away.
And stays away for 20 years!
That's the backstory.

The story of those 20 years is a long story for another day.
The very short version is,
he meets and falls in love with his mom's cousin Rachel,
and *he* gets tricked into marrying Rachel's sister Leah
before he gets to marry the woman he really wanted to marry.
It's a long story.

(By the way, if you'd like to hear the story of this very complicated family
from the point of view of the women characters,
there's a wonderful novel called *The Red Tent* by Anita Diamant.
Some of you know it, I'm sure. I recommend it.)

But, today, what I invite you to imagine with me
is how it would feel to be Jacob, 20 years after stealing the blessing,
knowing you have betrayed your brother,
knowing your brother was so angry at you that he was ready to kill you,
knowing he had every right to be that angry.

and it's been years and years
and you haven't seen him in all that time
because you've stayed away,
you've been traveling on a long, long journey,
but now you are getting older and you miss home.
You miss your home and your family.

Only how can you go back?
That angry, wounded brother is still there, waiting.
You've avoided him for twenty years.
But he's still there.
And when you finally turn your face toward home,
you're afraid of what you have to face.

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I wonder if we can identify with Jacob's emotions in that moment.
Maybe there's something we've been running away from,
something we've been avoiding, trying to summon the courage to face?

For me, I hear echoes of our national history in Jacob's story.
Imagine the story as an allegory,
imagine it as bigger than the story of just this one family.
I sit with this image of one sibling stealing another's blessing,
and I begin to hear echoes of our long national story,
a story that is still beautiful in so many ways,
but also a story that tells of oppression going back generations,
dominant groups stealing from other groups over and over again,
stealing the blessing that belongs to everyone.
I hear echoes of that story.

And right now we're watching that old story
activate itself yet again in real time,
as billionaires with far more wealth than they could ever need
are stealing the blessing of economic security
from almost everyone else.

As brown and black and even Native American people
are being thrown into black-box detention centers
because supposedly only white people, white *men*,
are allowed to enjoy the blessings of liberty and equality promised to us all.

And yet, even now, so many of us are hearing a different call:
a call to turn our collective face
toward our hard and painful history as a nation.
To tell the truth about what's happened,
to make right the many wrongs that have been done,
so that the larger family of our nation can be reunited
in a way that has never yet been
but still may be.
And I know right now so many people are suffering.
And we may feel like we have so little power to stop it.
But that call to justice and equity and compassion
is growing and growing—
you know it is!
And I do believe it will prevail.

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Jacob and his family decide to move forward,
to leave where they have been and travel toward Jacob's original home.
But Jacob is afraid of what his brother Esau will do to him
when they finally meet.

Jacob sends messengers on ahead to let his brother know he's on his way.
He tells them to say basically,
please, please, please be nice to Jacob when you see him.
The messengers go on ahead and come back,
and tell Jacob that not only is his brother Esau coming to meet him,
he's bringing 400 men with him!
Now Jacob is *really* scared, for himself and his family.
He's afraid Esau is going to kill them all in revenge.

So Jacob sends the messengers back out ahead
with a big flock of farm animals,
and he says, tell my brother that I'm a rich man now,
and I'm sending him all these goats and sheep
and camels and cows and donkeys
as a present, so that maybe, hopefully he'll forgive me!
Basically, having cheated his brother twenty years ago,
Jacob's plan now is to *bribe* him.
It's so human, right?
And so ignorant of what real repentence looks like.

The night before they meet Esau,
Jacob sends his whole family across the river
that marks the border of his homeland,
along with all their things and all the animals and all the guards.
Jacob stays on the far side of the river, completely alone.

Now listen to this:
The story says, "a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn."
This is really odd!
We're supposed to be startled.
Who is this man?
Where did he come from?
What is going *on?*

The story says, they wrestled all night long.
Clearly we are entering a different kind of story-reality—
we've been in a sort of realistic mode,
where we can imagine real people being in this situation,
but now all of a sudden we've crossed over into the land of myth.
Or maybe dream.
Jacob wrestles with this mysterious man all night long.
Dawn comes—and again we know we are in a space of myth or dream,
because with the coming of the dawn the mysterious man has to go,
just like the supernatural figures of ancient legends.

This is some kind of messenger from God.

And Jacob knows it.
But he still holds on. He hangs in there.
Now the man "wrenches his hip"—and it hurts!
But still Jacob won't let him go. He says:
"I will not let you go, unless you bless me."
I will not let you go, unless you bless me.
And after all this wrestling, not without pain, not without struggle,
Jacob gets the blessing.
Only this blessing isn't about money or property or controlling anyone else.
It's a new identity.
The mysterious man gives Jacob a new name
that means "one who has wrestled and prevailed."

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We are all wrestling, in one way or another.
I invite you to take just a moment to sit with Jacob's story in silence
and ask yourself, Where am *I* wrestling?

(Breath)

And what if we too could ask for a blessing?
What if we too could say, *I will not let you go, unless you bless me.*
Could there be a blessing waiting for us, even now?

So many of us are wrestling, even now, with the hardest things in our lives.
Some of us are wrestling with our fears,
trying to find the courage to do what we need to do.
Some, wrestling with challenging relationships,
maybe with our kids, or parents, friends, or loved ones.
Some of us are wrestling with illness or the loss of abilities,
some of us trying to get well.

Some of us wrestling with addictions,

in our own life or in the life of someone we love.
Some of us wrestling with grief,
facing our losses and trying to live into what comes next.
Some, wrestling with financial challenges—
debt, or the loss of income, or a job that just doesn't pay the bills.

And all of us wrestling with the giants
of fascism, racism, economic inequality, gender discrimination, violence,
and so many other vast forces that hold sway over all our lives.
What if we could stay with it, keep wrestling,
and believe there is a blessing waiting for us on the other side?

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Jacob walks away from that wrestling, limping.
He has been wounded but also blessed.
And what happens next makes me think
that what Jacob was really wrestling with
was his own history, his fear, his shame and defensiveness
as he prepared to meet the brother he had wronged.

Jacob crosses that river,
and he sees his brother coming.
And then comes the second blessing,
or is it just the culmination of the first?
The brother whose anger he had feared so much
isn't angry at all.
Esau is overjoyed to see his long-lost brother.
He runs toward Jacob and embraces him.
The two brothers weep, tears streaming down their cheeks.
And Jacob tells him, seeing your face again like this,
it is like seeing the face of God.

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So when things get hard,

when it gets painful and messy and scary,
still, may we stay in it
long enough to find the blessing of transformation.
Hope.
New life.
A blessing in our wrestling.

May it be so.
Amen.

Extinguishing the Chalice/Closing Blessing

Folks in the sanctuary, please remain standing as you're able.
In just a moment, I'll offer a closing blessing,
then Carolyn will extinguish our chalice until we light our flame again,
and then our musicians will lead us in singing our Doxology.
After that, you're welcome to stay for hospitality!
Zoom congregation, we'll set up a laptop outside
so I can come say a quick hi to you.

And now, we extinguish the chalice.

May blessings find you every day, even now,
as you bless others with truth,
compassion,
and light.

So may it be.
Go in peace.
Amen and blessed be.