

Sermon – March 17, 2024  
“I will not let you go”  
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Genesis 32:22-32; 33:18-20

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, move among us, fill us anew, and anoint the sharing of these words. May they be a blessing for your people that leads us on to life eternal and fruitful labor as we follow you into your mission field right here, right now. Lord, come and astonish us with your word. Amen*

The Spirit of Jesus in me greets the Spirit of Jesus in you, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Good morning. We have made it to the start of another week of Lent. We have been through the season of Lent before, but we have never been through it this time. Let me encourage us as we journey through Lent this time to open our hearts to what Jesus is seeking to do in them. Take time to pray, fast, and praise Jesus for all that he has done for us. Read through the scripture passages in our Bibles from one of the Gospel writers' accounts of the Passion of Jesus. Prepare our hearts to arrive at Easter morning this time with our hearts open to new interaction from Holy Spirit. There are a few extra services planned for Holy Week, the week between Palm Sunday and Easter. We will gather Thursday evening at Afton Methodist Church for a Maundy Thursday service and will share Holy Communion as we remember the Last Supper Jesus had with his disciples in the upper room. On Friday of Holy Week, we will gather at Fairfields Methodist Church for a Tenebrae service, and through scripture and song, recall Jesus' crucifixion and death. On Saturday, or Silent Saturday, we will gather at Fairfields cemetery and read the names of those who have gone on to glory from our congregations in the

last year. Take time to come together in any or all of these moments when we worship our risen Lord and seek to open our hearts to what Holy Spirit is doing in us as we move this time through Holy Week and Easter.

The fourth altar we are stopping at was built by Jacob in the Promised Land close to the city of Shechem. Jacob, or Israel, names this altar El-Elohe-Israel, roughly translated as “God the God of Israel.” Israel is Jacob’s new name, so in naming the altar, Jacob is proclaiming God as his God, and, as a prophet, he is claiming God as the God of his descendants. We may not all know who Jacob is in the story of God’s people, so let me share a few reminders about Jacob. He is the second son of Isaac and Rebekah. His name means one who supplants or one who takes the place of another, and his life has reflected his name. He has tricked his brother Esau out of both his birthright and his blessing as the first-born son. He has fled with nothing to his father-in-law and has worked for years to acquire his wives and flocks. Jacob has the distinction of not recognizing his wife on their wedding night as his father-in-law tricked him and did not give him the love of his life, Rachel, but switched her for her sister, Leah. How Jacob could not notice this until the morning is a story for another time. Jacob worked for another seven years to acquire Rachel his second wife and almost another seven for his flock. Jacob and his family and flock have fled from his father-in-law and are now heading home to face his brother, Esau, a brother who has sworn to kill him. Jacob has sent messages to his brother telling him that he is coming and has been told that his brother is now riding towards him with 400 mounted men. In response to this news, Jacob has sent his wives, children, flocks, and servants across the river Jabbok and is alone on the other side struggling with his fear to cross the river to go and meet his brother. The time has come with the rising of the sun on this day for the arrival of his brother. Jacob will have to face the past, a past that is coming to him. He awaits his death and the death of all that he loves and possesses. Joseph has relied on his own strength and wisdom to guide him as he has struggled with events and people in the past. For now, he is alone, awaiting the consequence of his past actions to come to him in the form of his angry brother and 400 mounted men.

There, alone in the night, Jacob encounters a man and he wrestles with him all night until day begins to break. We are told in the text that Jacob’s opponent is not able to prevail over him, and as daybreak comes, the man strikes Jacob on the hip and it is put out of socket. Jacob’s wrestling opponent is no ordinary man. Jacob’s opponent has divine powers to strike and cause damage. Jacob realizes in that instant that he is in the presence of the divine and changes from a

wrestler trying to overpower his opponent to one who is clinging to his opponent, asking for a blessing, and will not let go. Jacob knows he is holding on to the divine and he needs help as the day breaks to meet his brother. Jacob clings to the divine, even with an out-of-socket hip. Most commentators recognize Jacob's opponent as divine, some as an angel and others as the pre-incarnate Jesus. The man Jacob now clings to asks Jacob a question. He asks him, "What is your name?" Now this might seem like a strange question coming from the divine opponent but for Jacob it is a question that will pierce his heart. It is a question his father Isaac asked him many years ago when he came in his self-reliance to deceive his father and steal his brother's blessing. Then he answered, "Esau." Here, as he clings to the divine, he answers with his name, "Jacob." In this instant when the divine asks for his name, Jacob owns his past. He owns what he has done, the lies he has told, and the deceit he has used to get what he wanted. Here, as he clings to God, he answers with his name, "Jacob." Jacob owns his past, admits who he is, and in doing so, he surrenders everything to the one he now clings to. Jacob for the first time in his life admits that he is the one who has tried to take the place of his brother. He admits his past failures and sin. He places who he is before the divine he clings to and waits for a response. The divine replies not with condemnation but with, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Don't take the divine's response that Jacob has prevailed against him to mean that Jacob has prevailed over God or that Jacob has even prevailed over other men. Hear in the divine's response that Jacob has recognized who he is and has surrendered who he is to the divine and been transformed by that surrender. Jacob places all that he is and has done before the divine and in response, the divine changes his name to Israel. The meaning of Israel is not clear but the context here is that it means, "God heals." Here, following Jacob's surrender, we see God bless Israel with a new name as a mark of the healing and change that has just occurred. The blessing has been given; healing and freedom from past transgressions has come. Jacob has wrestled with the divine and has surrendered to him and in exchange, has found healing and a blessing beyond his expectation. Jacob has also surrendered to God his fear of Esau and the death he might bring. We see this in Jacob's request for the divine's name and in his statement that he has seen God face to face and his life has been preserved. He has assurance that as he goes forward to meet his brother, God is with him and will keep his life. He will meet his brother without fear as he trusts in the God who has transformed him.

The altar Jacob, or Israel, builds at Shechem is an altar of surrender. God has blessed Israel's surrender of his past burdens and at Shechem, Jacob, now Israel, offers sacrifices to the God who has transformed him. Surrender is not a concept that we may fully understand, yet it is a theme that runs throughout the word of God. Let's look at a few examples.

Let's start with Hannah. Some will recall that Hannah was a barren woman. She has no children. There will be no one to care for her in her old age, and barrenness has brought her great shame before the other people of Israel. In her shame, she comes to an altar and promises God that if He blesses her with a child, she will surrender him to God as a priest, as one who serves in the temple. God blesses Hannah with a child, her first-born son, whom she names Samuel and whom, when the time comes, she brings to the temple and surrenders to God. She leaves Samuel as a young boy in the temple to serve the priest Eli before God. Samuel is a key figure in the history of God's people. Hannah keeps her vow made at the altar and surrenders her son to God. The idea of surrendering a child to God in this manner is difficult to grasp, but God blesses Hannah with other children and greatly uses Samuel in the story of God's people.

Let's look at an example of surrender that Jesus uses to teach his disciples about surrender. Remember Mary and Martha? Mary sits at Jesus' feet and listens to his every word while Martha is worried and distracted by many things. Martha finally gets so distracted and worried that she comes to Jesus and tells him to tell Mary to get up and get in the kitchen to help her. Jesus' response to Martha is to tell her to surrender her worries and her distraction and to come and choose the better part, to be with Jesus and to focus on him and him alone. Martha is told by Jesus to surrender her worries and distractions and to focus on him first. Those temporal things we worry about will be taken care of if we will surrender them to Jesus and focus on him.

Let's look at one last example of surrender this morning: Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. There, Jesus kneels down and prays, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done." Jesus asks his Father to remove the cup of suffering from him and then surrenders to the will of the Father, saying, "Not my will but yours be done." Jesus shows us what surrender is to look like as he surrenders fully to the will of the Father. He surrenders to take upon himself the sin burden of all humanity so that we might be reconciled to God. Jesus' surrender has great consequences for him. He will suffer and die on the cross and his lifeless body will be placed in a tomb. As a result of his surrender, we, like Jacob, are given the opportunity to surrender ourselves to God and be reconciled to God through Jesus.

Our fourth altar is the altar of surrender. Our fourth altar points us to another aspect of reclaiming our altar for its purpose, a place to meet with God and to be transformed. Our fourth altar calls us to the place of surrender in our lives. We will find that as with Jacob, the altar of surrender is a place where we may struggle, a place we also may wrestle with the divine. Each of us has a call from God to come and surrender our lives, and we may struggle with that surrender. We may, like many others, fear that God may ask us to go to some far-off place and die as we share the Good News with those who have not heard it. And that may be the case, but most likely God is calling us to follow Jesus into the mission field here where we are, to be those sharing the Good News with friends, family, and people in our community right here where we live.

Like Jacob, we might find that God is calling us to surrender sin in our past that we have been trying to carry for many years, a sin that we have tried to forget but a sin that we have never been able to put away. We are seeking to carry a burden that Jesus did not intend for us to carry. We are seeking to carry a sin burden that weighs us down and keeps us from living in the fullness of the joy of our risen Lord, yet, like Jacob, we hold on to the past. We carry the shame that others might discover who we truly are, sinners, and will no longer love us. We carry the shame of our past as a prison cell we have decorated so that we can look at the prison walls and find comfort with what we need to surrender. We cannot forget our past sins. They must be dealt with now in this life or they will be dealt with when we stand in judgment in the presence of God. We were not made to carry a burden of sin. We were not made to hold on to what Jesus died for to give us freedom. We were not meant to be broken people seeking to hold together our lives. Surrender is the first step into a release from our burdens. We, like Jacob, have to come before Jesus and decide that we will cling to him instead of trying to overpower our own sin nature.

So how do we surrender the sin that we carry to Jesus? We allow Holy Spirit to bring to our minds that which we still carry in our lives, then bring it to the altar and surrender it to Jesus. We give Jesus permission to lift off of us the terrible burden we seek to carry and allow him to heal us so that we might go forth in the power of Holy Spirit and live in the freedom of mercy and grace. We allow Jesus to touch the shame we carry and transform us into new people, formed and being reformed into his image. The fourth altar is an altar of surrender. It is a starting point for us to be remade, healed, transformed, and renewed in the love of Christ. Jesus calls us all to a complete and total surrender of our lives, but the first step is to let Jesus place his touch

on that sin in our lives which we are still carrying, still holding onto, still seeking to hide so that we may not be made to feel the shame of who we truly are. As Jacob answered when the divine asked him his name with his name, so we, when Jesus brings to our minds the past sin we are trying to carry, need to get up and bring that sin to this altar, lay it down, and let Jesus heal us. Our altar is a place where we can surrender the sin burden that we have dressed up or seek to let stay in the past. Our altar is a place where we can find freedom as we surrender our sin to Jesus. Jesus already knows the sin we carry. Jesus knows our pain, fear, shame, and hurt. Jesus already suffered and died so that we might be forgiven and our sin thrown into the sea of forgetfulness. I once heard the process of surrender described as Jesus coming to our house, knocking on the door of our heart and telling us when we answered, "Today, you and I are going to clean out that closet in that little bedroom in the back of the house where you have hidden away that dark burden you keep there." And while our response might be, "No, Jesus, not that one, maybe another day, not today," if we will open our hearts, surrender to Jesus, and let him go with us to that room, open the door, and take away what we have hidden there in the back of the closet, we, like Jacob, will be transformed. Jesus takes away the sin that we have hidden and hope we never have to deal with in our lives, sin we hope will just be forgotten, yet the weight of it drags us down and is unbearable. Jesus comes to take away that sin, heal our brokenness, and restore us to our Father. Our altar is a place where we can bring our hidden sin and let the consuming fire of Holy Spirit turn it into a pleasing odor for God, consuming it completely as a sin offering. If Jesus is calling us today, if we are still trying to carry around some great sin burden, let me encourage us to surrender it to Jesus, come to the altar, and leave our sin there as a sin sacrifice. Come and find healing. Come and find rest. Come and find peace. Come and let Jesus take away our sin burden. Come and enter into the joy of our risen Lord. The altar of surrender is always ready to receive our burdens. Come as you are led during the hymn, after the service, or anytime. Come and surrender all to Jesus.

*Pray with me: Jesus, I want to be free of the sin I have hidden away and hope no one ever sees. Jesus, you know the impossible sin burden I carry. Jesus, call my name to come and surrender and give me the courage to release my sin to you. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.*