



Materials you will need

- Postcards (or blank 3x4 or 4x6 index cards)
- Optional: paper and colored pencils/pens/markers for faith/life map activity
- Bible
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW)*

Theme Verse

“Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” – Genesis 28:15

Road Map

In this session, we will accompany Jacob as he leaves home to escape his brother Esau’s wrath. He spends several years living in Haran and working for his uncle Laban, until he finally returns home and faces his brother. Along the way, Jacob experiences the presence of God. In our study, we will ponder the intersections between Jacob’s journey and our own paths. What has been your experience of

leaving home? When have you wrestled with fears and doubts? How has a time of returning home brought an opportunity for change?

Preparing the Way

Sing “Lord Jesus, You Shall Be My Song As I Journey” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 808)

Reflect on a time when you have begun a journey. Where did you go? What was the occasion for your trip? What emotions and thoughts did you experience at the outset? What surprised you along the way? What did you discover about yourself and others as you traveled?

Leaving Home

READ GENESIS 27:41–45.

The study texts for this session are part of the larger story of the conflicted relationship between Jacob and Esau. Although Jacob and Esau were twins, Esau had been born first, which entitled him to the inheritance rights of the first-born son. While it might strike modern readers as unfair, it was customary for the first-born son to receive a significantly larger portion of the inheritance than his siblings.

Jacob and Esau's sibling rivalry began in their mother's womb, as she felt them kicking and wrestling one another (Genesis 25:22–23). Jacob had been born with his hand grasping his brother's heel, as if to pull Esau back into the womb so that Jacob could be born first. Jacob's name, literally "heel grabber," means "the one who supplants" (Genesis 25:26). Jacob's name and reputation are interwoven.

Jacob parlayed Esau's hunger into a deal in which Esau yields his birthright in exchange for a bowl of lentil stew (Genesis 25:29–34). Later, in collaboration with his mother Rebekah, Jacob dressed up in Esau's clothing. He presented himself to his blind, dying father to receive the irrevocable blessing meant for Esau (Genesis 27:1–40).

Esau is furious that Jacob's trickery has essentially supplanted his status as first-born, and threatens to kill him. Rebekah protects Jacob by having him flee to their ancestral homeland of Haran to take refuge with her brother Laban. This is where Abraham and Sarah had heard God's call to go to Canaan, the land of promise (Genesis 12:1). While Jacob runs away from his problems by leaving home, his departure also marks a new beginning and a new opportunity.

REST STOP

1. What do you think Jacob might be feeling or thinking as he prepares to leave home?

2. Remember a time when you left (or considered leaving) a place in order to get away from a difficult situation or to begin a new venture. What were your hopes? What were your fears? What were your dreams?

A Dream and a Promise

READ GENESIS 28:10–22.

Jacob's route reverses the path of his grandfather Abraham, who had come from Haran to Canaan, in response to God's promise of land, descendants, and blessing (Genesis 12:1–3). As Jacob leaves Beersheba on his way to Haran, he stops for the night in Bethel. He has a dream of a ladder connecting earth and heaven, with angels ascending and descending on it. Through this dream, he experiences God's presence. God re-affirms the covenant God had made with Abraham.

Jacob, who had once taken advantage of Esau's hunger to barter for his birthright and later deceived his father to claim the blessing meant for Esau, now receives God's covenant blessing. Through this act, Jacob becomes an heir to the promise, confirming the blessing that he had received from his father. But in contrast to God's unconditional promise, Jacob's response is conditional. Jacob vows that if God will provide for his sustenance and safety, then he will respond with loyalty and by offering a tithe upon his return.

Jacob, who has already demonstrated his capacity for shrewd deals, continues that pattern by bargaining with God. Jacob names this place of sacred encounter "Bethel," formed from the Hebrew words *beth* (house), and *el* (God). Later, as Jacob returns to the promised land, he himself will be renamed Israel, meaning "the one who strives with God" (Genesis 32:28), at a place that Jacob names "Peniel," which means "the face of God" (Genesis 32:30). These two naming events, each set within a nighttime encounter between Jacob and God, serve as spiritual landmarks in his journey of leaving and returning to the Promised Land.

REST STOP

3. Jacob's dream comes as he leaves the familiarity of home to face the unknown challenges and opportunities awaiting him in Haran. In what ways might his encounter with God encourage him? Challenge him?
4. In what ways have you experienced signs of God's presence and/or blessing in your own journey of life and faith?

Write a postcard from Bethel. This may be a note to yourself that contains a question, thought, insight, or reflection that has arisen for you out of this study (for example a postcard addressed from you to God, from God to you, or from Jacob to those whom he has left behind in Canaan).

Visiting Haran: Jacob Meets his Match

READ GENESIS 31:17–55.

(Optional: **READ GENESIS 29:1—31:16.**)

When Jacob arrives in Haran, he meets Rachel, his uncle Laban's younger daughter, and falls in love with her. He agrees to spend seven years working for Laban in order to marry Rachel, but when the time arrives for the marriage, Laban tricks Jacob into marrying her older sister Leah instead. Laban then offers Jacob the opportunity also to marry Rachel in exchange for another seven years of labor. Cunning and deceit runs in the family. All of Jacob's relationships are contentious and complicated. Jacob's time in Haran is marked by his and Laban's repeated efforts to out-deceive each other, by jealousy between his two wives, and by Laban's other servants accusing him of stealing.

Despite all of the challenges he has faced, Jacob has been blessed, and is wealthy, measured in terms of his herds and his sizeable family. Jacob decides that it is time to leave and return to Canaan. He sneaks away with his wives, children, and herds of livestock. Laban, suspecting Jacob of treachery, follows in hot pursuit.

The pattern of deception and trickery continues, with Rachel stealing statues representing her father's household gods or ancestors and sitting on them when Laban enters her tent to search for them. Laban and Jacob create a covenant that protects them from each other by establishing clearly marked boundaries to keep them separated, invoking God as their solemn witness, saying "The Lord watch between you and me, when we are absent one from another" (Genesis 31:49).

REST STOP

5. How has Jacob grown and changed during his time in Haran? How has he stayed the same? What challenges does he face?
6. What intersections do you see between Jacob's story and the story of your own life and faith?

Wrestling with God

READ GENESIS 32:22–32.

As Jacob prepares to return home and meet his brother Esau, he is concerned for the safety of his family and flocks. Having been out of contact with his brother for years, Jacob does not know how he will be received—as a friend or as an enemy. He does not know whether his brother's anger against him has grown or dissipated. Jacob sends his family ahead of him, employing a strategy of spreading out to minimize loss in case they are attacked. Jacob also sends waves upon waves of flocks to Esau, an impressive gift and demonstration of Jacob's wealth. Jacob seeks to protect himself by making Esau more receptive to his return.

As Jacob camps alone by the ford of the Jabbok river, he finds himself in a nighttime wrestling match with a mysterious figure. Unlike his previous battles of wits with his brother and his uncle, Jacob is not able to outmaneuver his opponent. In contrast to his dream at Bethel, here he is no casual bystander. Here, Jacob is an active participant. As Jacob wrestles the angel, he is also

wrestling with himself, his past, his future, and with God. By refusing to tell Jacob his name, the mysterious opponent demonstrates that he is not in Jacob's power.

The whole of the story has been leading toward this moment. Jacob had contended against Esau, outwitting him. Jacob had contended against Laban, in a contest of wits that ends in a draw with a mutual truce. Now Jacob contends with a mysterious figure who refuses to tell Jacob his name, but blesses and renames him. Now Jacob is Israel, a name that means to strive or contend with God. Jacob is left humbled and limping. He neither fully wins, nor completely loses. He has seen the face of God and lived.

Jacob greets the dawn as one who has been blessed and transformed. He names the place Peniel, which means "the face of God." Having contended with God face-to-face, now he is ready to meet his brother face to face.

REST STOP

7. Who, or what, do you think Jacob is wrestling with?
8. What have you wrestled with over the course of your life and faith?

Write a postcard from Peniel, noting your reflections, insights or questions. (For example you might write from Jacob to his family, talking about his name change.)

Home Again: Reconciliation with Esau

READ GENESIS 33:1–17.

The climax of the story is Jacob's meeting with Esau. In a scene fraught with danger and potential for violence, Esau approaches the returning Jacob with an army of 400 men. But the result is reconciliation, not revenge. Jacob presents Esau with gifts (literally, "blessings," the same term used in 27:35–36), that are not travel souvenirs, but restitution of what Jacob had stolen when he

had received Esau's blessing. Jacob recognizes that, in being graciously received by and reconciled with Esau, he has seen "the face of God."

REST STOP

9. In what ways are Jacob and Esau reconciled?
10. Where have you seen the "face of God" in the actions and presence of another?

Optional: Further Exploration

Draw a map of your faith/life journey in whatever way you choose. You may wish to note the major milestones of your life, and sketch the spiritual landscape you have traveled through, and give names to the places of significance.

Closing

Review the postcards you have written during this session. If you wish, share them with others in your group.

After a time for silence, pray together:

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (*ELW*, p. 304).

The Road Ahead

In session 2, we will walk first with the Israelites and then with the prophet Elijah, after each has made their great escape from danger and learn to trust in the divine promise to provide them with daily bread. 🌿

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LEADER GUIDE ALONG THE WAY SESSION 1

TRAVELS WITH JACOB

by Julie A. Kanarr



Road Map

During this three-session Bible study, we will meet a variety of biblical travelers. As we enter into conversation with them, we will explore our own journeys of faith. This study is designed so that those who have little prior biblical knowledge and those who have been studying Scripture for years can all participate fully.

Each session includes periodic “Rest Stops.” These are opportunities to pause and ponder, to listen and share with others in your group. Each resting place includes two questions. The first is intended to guide participants in reflecting on the meaning of the text, and the second invites participants to reflect on their own life and faith journey in light of the text. While the leader guides provide some suggested responses to the questions, there are no incorrect answers.

Each session also includes opportunities to write “post cards.” You may use blank index cards, create your own postcards, or use postcards from your city. The postcards serve as a short journaling exercise. They offer participants an opportunity to write down their thoughts, insights, feelings, and questions that emerge during this study. There is time at the close of each session for par-

ticipants to share from their postcards if they so desire.

Each session has an optional activity of drawing a faith/life map to help participants further reflect on their own life and faith journeys. If time does not allow for this activity within the study itself, you may encourage participants to use it as a take-home activity. If you are using this study as part of a retreat, you may wish to allow time between sessions for participants to work on their maps.

This study may be adapted to fit the needs of your group. Let the journey be your own, with openness to where it leads. You may find room for side trips, lingering, and further exploration.

Preparing the Way

Whether you are using this session as part of a group, or on your own, surround your study with prayer. If you are part of a group, spend a few moments at the beginning of each session to welcome all participants, and provide an opportunity for them to introduce themselves to one another by name. In addition to the suggested hymn and reflection questions, you may wish to read the key verse aloud together.

Leaving Home

1. Jacob may be feeling a wide range of emotions, such as fear, guilt, apprehension, relief, and/or sadness.
2. Some participants may connect with Jacob's experience of running away from a conflicted, uncomfortable, even dangerous situation. Some may reflect on the experience of moving to a new community because of a job or a new relationship. Others may find a point of intersection with their own lives in terms of Jacob's experience of leaving home as a young adult.

A Dream and a Promise

3. Participants may note the differences between how God acts and how Jacob responds. Jacob had obtained the blessing from his father, Isaac, under dubious circumstances. Here, God freely bestows the covenant upon Jacob. What Jacob had tried to gain by deceit, God freely offers as a gift, even as Jacob responds with a conditional promise. Jacob's challenge is to embrace and live into the covenant promise.
4. Some participants might choose to describe specific instances of feeling blessed or experiencing God's presence in their lives through specific events or people. Others might talk in more general terms about experiencing God's presence through prayer, worship, the sacraments, and Scripture reading. Some may even have a surprising story to tell.

Visiting Haran: Jacob Meets his Match

The optional text (Genesis 29:1–31; 16) describes Jacob's time in Haran. Jacob and his uncle Laban each seek to gain the upper hand in their relationship. There is also friction between Jacob's wives Leah and Rachel. The jealousy spreads into the next generation, as Leah has many children and Rachel does not. Jacob's conflict with Laban reaches its climax in Jacob's departure.

5. While in Haran, Jacob has had the experience of being outwitted. He has also had opportunity to hone his skills of both deceit and negotiation. He is accused of stealing and struggles with the

decision about when to leave, balancing the desire to increase his wealth with the desire to protect his family.

6. Some participants may identify with Jacob's experience of being part of a complicated and conflicted family. Some may share his experience of being treated unfairly. Others may reflect on their experience of having to deal with a character like Jacob in their lives.

Wrestling with God

7. This question invites participants to consider the spiritual aspects of Jacob's wrestling match. Jacob wrestles with his past, his fears and doubts, the choices he has made in his life, his family relationships, and his reputation.
8. Participants may choose to reflect on their own spiritual and emotional wrestling with times of doubt, fear, anxiety, life choices, work issues, upcoming decisions, personal values, and relationships.

Home Again: Reconciliation with Esau

9. Jacob and Esau are reconciled as Esau is no longer angry. There has been forgiveness and restitution. And, they live at some distance from one another to help keep the peace.
10. Participants may choose to share their own stories of reconciliation and forgiveness. Some may share how they have experienced God's love by being welcomed and accepted by others.

Optional: Further Exploration

Provide paper and writing/drawing materials for participants to draw a map of their own journey of life and faith. Some may choose to make a simple time-line drawing, noting important milestones (birth, baptism, confirmation, graduations, marriages, and other life transitions). Others may choose to make a more elaborate drawing, like a real map. Encourage participants to make note of places where they experienced intersections, detours, and curves.