

August 2, 2026

Paul Purdue preaching

In Matthew 22, Jesus quotes from Exodus, “*God said ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’*” Today, as we celebrate our Encore ministries, I have been thinking theologically about this human-centric naming of God. What are the lessons from “*the God of our ancestors*”? (Exodus 3) Who are your spiritual ancestors? How would you fill out your spiritual family tree: who are your spiritual companions, mentors, writers, poets, pastors, teachers, and friends who are guiding your journey?

Hebrews reminds us that “*we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses*” rooting us on. (Hebrews 11-12) Perhaps we might be more fully present, whole, and grounded if we paused, explored and acknowledged our spiritual roots?

The Fifth Commandment calls us to “*Honor, (heap praise on) your father and your mother*” (Exodus 20 & Deuteronomy 5) This can be complicated if our parents failed to honor us, but scholars assure us that the words “*father and mother*” are bigger than biology. Elisha called “*Father, Father*” as Elijah left this world (2 Kings 12) Jesus called his followers “*my mother, brothers and sisters*” defining family by a found connection in doing God's will. (Matthew 12) Who do you give thanks for? Who do you honor as part of your spiritual family tree?

1 Timothy counsels, “*Do not speak harshly to an elder, but speak to them as a father, speak to younger men as brothers, speak to older women as mothers and to younger women as sisters—with absolute purity.*” (1 Tim 5) I do not agree with everything in Timothy, but in a season of toxic masculinity, Timothy makes no distinction between the honor due women and men and calls men to a purity of speech that never objectifies or degrades women, but names them as part of God's beloved family. Timothy puts in a word for found family, adding, “*whoever does not provide for relatives, and especially for family members, has denied the faith and is worse than someone who believes nothing*”. There is a lot of talk about “traditional families” but the Bible rejects family models focused on position, power and authority. God roots family systems in mutual love, honor, respect, and service, because “*God is Love and whoever does not love has not yet met God*”. (1 John 4)

Today, our flowers memorialize Encore partners who blessed our congregation. You may not know them, but they have blessed us. Anne helped with our bulk mailings. Betty led our youth group. Carolyn led an RV park worship service in Texas for decades. Dawn fed 1000's of unhoused people at Church Street UMC in Knoxville.

Jean inspired us to master English. Jim offered free medical care to thousands of people in St. Vincent. Joe taught us how to usher. Lynda chaired our Staff Parish committee. Richard helped build MTSU Wesley. Ruth led us to Malawi. Sue helped charter the Abigail UMW Circle. We are surrounded by a great cloud of spiritual ancestors, helping us love one another..

In a culture obsessed with youth, God whispers: remember where you came from. Honor those who cared for you. Rejoice in people! Fill out your spiritual family tree. Grow deeper and more grateful roots.

"I am the God of Abraham, the God of Issac and the God of Jacob." I grew up thinking I should act like these Bible "heros", but I have come to realize these stories are really about God's grace that never gives up on any of us.

Jacob was a mess, lying to his dying father, stealing his brother's identity, and attempting to steal Esau's birthright. Fearing Esau's retribution, Jacob runs away from home. The name Jacob means, *"the one who grasps the heel"*. Imagine God says, I am the God of that guy who grabs the heel, the God of tricksters, trippers, and thieves. That sounds like a God of radical grace.

Decades pass. Jacob has his AARP card, two wives Rahcel and Leah, his two maids Bil-hah and Zil-(p)hah, eleven children, cooks, shepherds, wranglers, and superintendents. Genesis 30 tells us Jacob was *"exceedingly rich and had large flocks and male and female servants, and camels and donkeys."* Jacob has made it as a farmer, but things fall apart with his father-in-law and he runs away again, where can he go but back home. Esau has become a chieftain overseeing a regional confederacy able to marshall 400 armed troops. Esau and his deputies ride out to meet Jacob's little band. When the two estranged brothers are a day apart, Jacob spends the night wrestling with God. Maybe this is why Jacob is in our family tree: Jacob will not let go, grabbing hold of God's heel and hanging on. The commentators mostly have questions about this passage, but they note the mystery of God taking on a human form. As morning comes, God blesses Jacob and gives him a new name, *"Israel"* or *"one who strives with God and people"*. The encounter leaves Jacob with a life long limp and a deep transformation. Jacob names the place of this encounter "Peniel", saying, *"For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."*

The encounter with Esau awaits. Jacob does wrestle with Esau but bows down seven times to the ground. Esau dismounts, running to Jacob, lifting him up and falling into his arms with decades of tears enfolding a lost brother with wordless forgiveness. Enfolded in grace Jacob declares *"to see your face is like seeing the face of God"* (Gen.

33) Jesus tells us that forgiving allows us to experience forgiveness, loving allows us to

know love. (Matthew 6 & Luke 6) The commentators wonder: did Jacob have to wrestle with God all night before Jacob could see the face of God in Esau's tears?

Jesus tells us this spiritual grasping and wrestling is a foundational value. (Matthew 7:7) In a world that tempts us to live for tents, flocks, camels, donkeys, or possessions, positions and power God calls us to live differently- to adhere to a moral philosophy that challenges the marketplace mentality. *“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. You are more valuable than all the songbirds. Why worry over clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, not even King Solomon dressed as nobly as the wildflowers! God will clothe you. Therefore do not worry about ‘What will we eat, drink or wear like so many folks do. God knows that you need all these things (before you ask*). But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*

So what are you seeking this morning?

Who are your spiritual ancestors influencing your life?

As you remember your spiritual ancestors,

who have enfolded you in love, mercy and grace,

remember that you too are leaving a legacy to those around you?

Let us remember, we belong to a great cloud of witnesses to God's grace.

Let us honor our spiritual ancestors,

By seeking to sew love, mercy and grace to everyone around us! Amen