

Wrestling for a Blessing

Last week we celebrated the birth of Isaac, the boy named laughter after God transformed Sarah's empty chuckles into belly laughs, showing her that even the most shriveled, the most worn out and unworthy among us can be a part of God's saving ways. Now we find ourselves a generation removed with Jacob. Jacob, as you may remember is one of Isaac's sons. The sacred story tells us that he was born grabbing his brother, Esau's heel at birth. The grabbing does not end there. Jacob goes on to grab Esau's birthright along with their father's blessing. Learning that Esau wants to kill Jacob, their mother Rebekah tells Jacob to run away to her brother Laban's house to find a wife and stay out of harm's way until Esau calms down. On his way there, he has his famous dream where he meets God at Bethel and sees angels descending from and ascending to the heavens on something resembling a ladder. Here the blessing he received from Isaac is confirmed by God:

Suddenly the Lord was standing on it and saying, 'I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will become like the dust of the earth; you will spread out to the west, east, north, and south. Every family of earth will be blessed because of you and your descendants. I am with you now, I will protect you everywhere you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done everything that I have promised you.'¹

Jacob meets Rachel by a well and winds up on the other end of Laban's trickery. After living in Laban's house for 20 years and marrying two of Laban's daughters, God tells Jacob to return home. Jacob packs up his family and leaves while Laban is away. When Laban discovers that Jacob has left, he tracks him down, and they make a truce, deciding that it is better for them to go their separate ways. So now, Jacob is hemmed in. Behind him lies a hostile father-in-law. His wronged brother lies ahead, with 400 men in tow. As my friend Michael reminds us:

¹ Genesis 28:13-15, Common English Bible

In the passage right before our text, Jacob does damage control, splitting the herd in two so that not all would be lost if it goes badly, and then he starts sending herds of gift goats and sheep to his brother. The night before Esau is due to reach them, Jacob sends his wives and children across the river Jabbok, so that they might not be harmed if Esau is still in a killing mood.²

And Jacob prays, reminding God of God's promise and asking for God's protection from the hand of his brother Esau. [Read Genesis 32:22-31]

Jacob has been a wrestler since before day one. He and his brother wrestled in the womb. He cajoled and finagled his way into a blessing that by right should not have been his. He has had his share of divine encounters, too. God stood beside him and included him in the same blessing God shared with his father and grandfather. And at the beginning of this chapter, we are told that Jacob sees God's angels encamped nearby. Both the text and Jacob treat this as an oh-by-the-way kind of detail, as if everyone has grown accustomed to holy company on Jacob's winding way.

But this time it is different. Maybe it's because he is hemmed in, maybe it's because he has something to lose now, maybe it's because he has run out of luck and out of time, but this moment in the dark with the divine wrestler at the Jabbok is different. Scholars debate who exactly the wrestler is. They point out that our ancient ancestors would not be surprised by a mysterious challenger's confronting Jacob by the river.³ It was widely believed that spirits and demons were found in the dark and by rivers. I don't know that we need to pin down who the wrestler is to recognize that something holy is going on. And I don't know about you, but I find it hard to cheer for Jacob. Yes, God has seconded Isaac's blessing of him, but honestly, I'm tempted to cheer for the mystery man. I am bone weary with cheats getting away with their shenanigans. I am worn out with scoundrels who wriggle free. And yet, it does not matter whose team I cheer for, Jacob prevails. When dawn comes, the stranger insists that he must leave and demands that Jacob let him go. But before he will let go of his opponent, Jacob demands a blessing.

² Michael Kirby in his paper from the Well, 2015.

³ Vanesa Lovelace, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2555

What is it about Jacob and blessings? He seems almost greedy for them, like he can never get enough. But this moment of blessing is not like the others. He and the divine one have wrestled and wrangled all night. He is weary, dusty, and out of breath and his hip is out of joint. And as is said after many an athletic contest, he has left it all on the field, and that includes this moment of blessing. Because he is asked his name. He has been asked his name at an earlier moment when he demanded a blessing.⁴ A few chapters back he sat opposite his ailing father with goat skins on his arms and when his father asked him his name, he said his name was Esau. This time is different. Now, beside a little trickle of a stream whose name means “poured out,” Jacob claims his name and who he has been. No dodging, no backpedaling, no trickery this time. Instead he answers, “Jacob, my name is Jacob. I am the crooked trickster, the heel grabber, the clever charlatan who has wormed my way into the story and into God’s business of blessing the nations. I am Jacob.” And then he is given a new name. I can’t say for sure that it is because Jacob finally comes clean, but I find it striking that God gives him a new beginning when he is able to name the truth of who he is and who he has been. Maybe God was always ready to name Jacob Israel; maybe God was waiting for Jacob to be ready, too.

Each week, we gather at this font as we confess our sins, and we are reminded that God’s grace is poured out for us in Jesus Christ. We will spend much of October reflecting on this great good news, but this morning I find myself wondering about what *we* pour out, about those moments when we are able to name the truth of who we are, scoundrels and saints one and all. That coming clean thing is a plot device in the movies, and the big reveal is a show-stopper: (spoiler alert!) Melanie Carmichael is actually Melanie Smooter in *Sweet Home Alabama*; Dustin Hoffman’s character Dorothy Michaels is really Michael Dorsey in *Tootsie*; Darth Vader is Luke’s father and Princess Leia is his sister. But Jacob is not on stage. He is alone on the bank of a little known river in the thick of an all-night wrestling match that leaves him with a limp. His revelation is less a big plot twist than it is a confession, a coming clean from this one who has been anything but a holy hero.

But I’m not sure it’s a holy hero I need or we need. I don’t usually see myself in heroes, after all, I have no superpowers or feats of extraordinary bravery in my past, but if I am honest, I do see something of me, of us

⁴ This insight was pointed out in this podcast: <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/jacob-wrestling-his-angel-is-our-own-struggle-1.5285823>

in Jacob and his less than admirable ways. And so in those moments when my faith feels more like a wrestling match than a gentle nap in a hammock, when I am stuck between a past that no longer welcomes me and a future that scares me to death, when I am all too aware of all that I have to lose, and frightened by the water that lies ahead, when I am poured out and spent beside a river whose depth is too dark to fathom, maybe then it is time to find my breath and ask for—demand even—a blessing, too. Maybe those are the times to boldly push for a reminder of the God who claimed me long ago and promised never to leave my side, even if it means wrestling with me in the dark of night. And when that One asks my name, I will tell him:

My name is Ellen, the sacred one, the brash one, the one who has dodged and doubted, the one who has tried to hide from you and from who I have been, the one who thought she had to finagle and finesse a blessing that is not hers.

And I am convinced that when I find a way to pour myself out before the God who knows me better than I know myself, I will hear God respond with a blessing that has always been mine and mine alone, a blessing that sweeps me up into the love and the work of the God who wrestles with us and blesses us and calls us and claims us, always.

Thanks be to God. Amen.