

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, September 24, 2023

So over the last few weeks the Narrative Lectionary has had us in the Book of Genesis. We've been studying scripture together. Last week we had the birth announcement for Isaac, and his mother giggled when God said that they would have a child in their old age. This week we fast forward a little bit to Isaac, the father of Jacob, and Jacob, the focus of our text this morning. We're going to read together from Genesis, chapter 32. I'm going to add one verse to the end of the pericope. We're going to include not just verse 30 but verse 31 as well. We'll read from 22 to 31 in just a moment, but before we do, let us go to God In prayer.

Gracious and loving Spirit, we pray that you would move amongst us and within us in these moments, that you would fall fresh upon us to quiet us, that we might hear your word for us this day, and that in hearing we might be called to the lives of response. So may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God our Rock and Our Redeemer. Amen.

Genesis 32:22-31

The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. And Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.

When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, 'Let me go, for the day is breaking.' But Jacob said, 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me.' So he said to Jacob, 'What is your name?' And he said, 'Jacob.' Then the man said, 'You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.' Then Jacob asked him, 'Please tell me your name.' But he said, 'Why is it that you ask my name?' And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, 'For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.' The sun rose upon Jacob as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord endures forever. Amen.

It's a beautiful scene of blessing, one we'll dive into, but it's not Jacob's first blessing. The first blessing comes a little time before this in the text. The first blessing—perhaps you remember from your childhood, maybe even a vacation bible school or Sunday school experience—the first blessing happens at Bethel. It is a mountaintop experience for Jacob. Perhaps you remember the vision, the dream of climbing a ladder and going higher and higher and higher. That is the... the first blessing that Jacob receives. It is an exciting, awe-inspiring moment in Jacob's life; and when we reflect on it, and we're in those high points of our lives, we can really resonate with that. Our youth went to Montreat this past summer; and I remember when I was in high school, we would go there, and we would have what we understood or named as mountaintop experiences there in that thin place where the Divine and the ordinary seem to mix. And...and it was beautiful and good. The problem was that that week always ended, and we had to come back home, come back down the mountain. And so when we're on a mountaintop, Jacob's blessing at Bethel is beautiful and good, but when we come down from the mountain, we need the story of

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Jacob at Peniel. Jacob is blessed once again, but in this story it is not the climax of a dream. In this story it is the final outcome of a long struggle.

And what he gets from God is not simply a blessing, it is also a wound.

And we need to read this second story along with the first story, because not any of us can stay on the mountaintop forever. When we come down from that mountain, when...when life or the church or our family disappoints us, leaves us wanting, and it doesn't quite live up to our expectations, that's when we need this story of Jacob at Peniel. So here's that story. Here's the story of having to wrestle a blessing from God.

One key to this passage is for us to recognize that Jacob is alone when he has this experience with the Divine. He's not alone in his travels. The scripture opens by telling us that he went with his two wives and his two servants, along with everything that they have, and they go across the ford of the Jabbok. They cross this river, but Jacob doesn't stay there. "That same night he got up and he took his two wives, his two maids and his 11 children and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream and likewise everything he had, and Jacob was left alone."

All alone.

Sometimes people choose solitude. Saints like Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, they commit themselves to lives of solitude, and that is well and good; but more often than not when we are alone, it is an aloneness that has been placed upon us.

"What I miss most," a woman said once, "what I miss most is having someone to talk to. I turn to look for my partner, and he's not there." Alone.

See sometimes God finds us in our fellowship, but sometimes God finds us in our solitude. We get so consumed with the idea that the way to meet God is quiet piety that sometimes we forget that the way to meet God can also be honest struggle, and that is what Jacob does in this text. Not even of his own choosing. He is asleep at night when a stranger begins to wrestle with him. He's alone in that place, that darkness. I think that's important for us to pay attention to, because if you're anything like me, it's something about the sun going down or something about waking up in the middle of the night that makes it the easiest time for me to really truly enter into my struggles. Maybe that's the same for you.

Day is beginning to break, though, when the man saw that he would not prevail against Jacob, so he struck him on the hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. And then he said to Jacob, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

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I was kind of proud of myself with the sermon title this morning, Wrestling is Real, if I'm being honest.

A little double entendre going on there, but what's beautiful and powerful about this is, um, Jacob is in a struggle, perhaps not even of his own choosing, but once he's in it with God, he's not letting go. This sort of wrestling is entirely real. It is entirely true. If we live long enough in this life of faith, if we step away from it, maybe stick our toes back in a little bit later, we know that this type of wrestling is real and authentic; and that is what Jacob is engaged in here. Jacob says, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." So the stranger said to him, "What is your name?" And he said "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed." This is actually the first hint that we get, in verse 28, that God is involved in this struggle. We know that there is wrestling, that starts from the beginning, but it is only here that we find out that there is a divine presence in this place.

Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." And skipping the question almost entirely, the stranger blesses Jacob. That's interesting too. See, in the Jewish tradition to name something is to comprehend something, it's to understand it, it's to know it fully. So...so Isaac gets the name which means laughter.

So that his parents might tell everyone who meets him about the time that they laughed at what God promised God was going to do. To this day devout Jews across the world do not speak the name of God, because to speak aloud the name that was given to Moses is to somehow pretend that you can comprehend the God of all the universe. And so in the tradition that we are reading from this morning, when the stranger is asked his name, he says, "Why is it you ask my name?" And then he blesses him. Jacob has wrestled all night, and he doesn't even get to know who it is he has been wrestling with.

So as the famous theologian and one of my former professors once said, he said, *"Here's the tricky thing about this passage. If you feel sadly alone and you blame God for that, and you're not even sure who the God is that you blame, **you are just where Jacob is when he receives the blessing**, and the blessing finally comes, but the blessing does not come by itself. The blessing comes always in this story with the wounding. The man who had no name and was beyond naming struck Jacob on the hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint, and the sun rose upon Jacob as he left Peniel limping because of his wound. Along with the gratitude, the permanent limitation. Dancing the dance of blessing, but always with a limp."*

If you have ever wrestled with God, you know that you do not leave that wrestling match the same as you went in. If it is authentic and true wrestling that is faithful and good, you come out scathed. You come out walking in a different way, a different gait. It will be noticeable to those who love you most, who see you almost every day. And so if your wrestling is about grief, you come out with a heaviness. If your wrestling is about a broken relationship or...or a marriage, you come out knowing what that feels like and walking in a different way. I'm not sure what

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your wrestling is this morning, but I do know that when you faithfully engage in that wrestling in the dark night of your soul, it's going to leave you different than it found you.

And that's Grace too, it turns out, that we're not left where we're found. It's Grace too that even in his aloneness Jacob is found by the divine, engaged the whole night long, and when the sun is breaking he's going to walk away differently than he walked in.

On Wednesday nights we are studying Catherine Meek's work, *The Night is Long but Light Comes in the Morning*. It is part of our learning to be a truly beloved community...specifically, it is enabling us each week to live more and more into our identity as a community of faith committed to anti-racism.

Remembering the work that we are doing on Wednesdays reminded me this week of a story that my favorite professor told once when he was preaching. There's a story about his father's church in California, a story about blessing and about wounding and perhaps even about this sort of work. It was a story about coming in one way and leaving another, because the blessing always comes with a wounding.

David Bartlett's story—

What got injured when Milton McCage wrestled with the mysterious God was his pride. Milton was the most pillarly of the pillars of the First Baptist Church of Los Angeles, and he LOVED that church just the way it was. Just the way it was was composed entirely of white people; and when a black mother and daughter sought to join the church, Milton led the group who voted no. Milton led the group that won the vote. The man who had been minister of that church for 22 years quit. "If I preached all these years and that's what you got out of it, I failed," he said, though of course he'd faithfully tilled the ground that would soon bear fruit.

A new minister came, and he preached and preached and taught and taught and argued and argued; and when another black man named Neil Rose asked to join the church, Milton McCage, after a painful separation from his former supporters, after suffering a tremendous wounding to his pride, stood up at that meeting and voted yes.

Neil Rose not only joined the church, he joined the choir. When he was robing for service one day not long after, someone came into the men's robing room and beat him up. Badly.

The next week, when the Sunday service began, the congregation looked back as the choir processed. And there, marching down the aisle, the first pair of baritones were Neil Rose with his beautiful voice and next to him, joining the choir for the very first time ever, perfectly robed, painfully flat...Milton McCage. Right there for God and all the people to see. Pride injured, Soul healed.

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Of course, he was marching. Of course, he was limping. He had wrestled with God. He had lost. He had prevailed. He had lost. He had prevailed. Just like Jacob. Just like us.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.