

Wrestling with God

For several weeks now, we have been flipping through the family album which appears in the Book of Genesis. Or if you prefer a contemporary metaphor, we have been scrolling through the family Facebook page. Some of what we have re-visited has been touching and rather sweet. Remember that story about Rebekah spotting Isaac striding across the fields before they had been officially introduced?

“Who is that man over there . . . walking to meet us?” she asks.

“Oh, that’s your future husband.”

Immediately, Rebekah jumps off her camel, dons her jewelry, and puts on her veil. The narrator implies that, veil or not, arranged marriage or not, for those two, it was love at first sight. **“He took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her.”**

Rather sweet, don’t you think?

And then there are those other family stories – the ones that are so unflattering, you wonder how they have survived. Most of them concern Jacob, half of the pair of twins that Rebekah bore to Isaac.

We read about how Jacob cheated his twin brother Esau out of his inheritance by taking advantage of Esau’s momentary hunger and his proclivity for snap decisions. Granted, Esau was no intellectual giant, but he didn’t deserve that.

Then, as you might recall, Jacob gets his aging father Isaac to give him the paternal blessing that was supposed to go to Esau. This is accomplished by taking advantage of the old man’s failing eyesight and his love of wild-game stew.

Esau manages to get a sort of blessing from Isaac before he died, but it was a strange kind of blessing that sounds more like a curse. For this Esau blames Jacob, and vows to kill him as soon as the period of mourning for his father has ended.

Jacob gets word of his brother’s intention, and decides to take an extended vacation for the sake of his health. He goes out east to work for his Uncle Laban, Rebekah’s brother.

It turns out that Laban is a bit of a con man himself. He tricks Jacob into working for him for a full fourteen years instead of seven, and in the process, marries off both his daughters – both Rachel and Leah -- which wasn't in the original deal.

Those events were related in last week's lesson, but don't worry: Jacob gets his own back and then some. By the time we get to chapter 31, Jacob has managed to swindle Laban out of almost all of his flocks and herds, and has become, says the narrator, "exceedingly rich."

As we approach today's reading, all those chickens are coming home to roost. Jacob makes a kind of peace with Laban. They build a pillar of stones, call it "Mizpah" and swear, "**The Lord watch between you and me while we are absent one from the other.**"¹

I had a Sunday School teacher who used to have us kids recite that text at the end of every Sunday School lesson. We'd hold hands in a circle and say, "**The Lord watch between you and me while we are absent one from the other.**"

My teacher thought of that as a benediction. What it means in context is, "*Neither one of us trusts the other, so we agree to ask the Lord keep an eye on both of us.*"

So, by the time we arrive at today's reading, Jacob is in a real bind. He's a rogue and a liar who has spent his life cutting corners, gaming the system and running away. Now there is nowhere to run. God calls him back from Haran, saying, "**Return to the land of your ancestors and to your kindred, and I will be with you.**"² But as night descends in the wilderness, and Jacob makes camp at the ford of the river Jabbok, he has only his fear for company, and there is a lot to fear.

Esau is waiting. For more than two decades, he has been nursing his resentment and plotting Jacob's demise. Come daybreak, Jacob could lose everything: his property, his family and his life. In hopes of softening his brother's murderous mood, Jacob sends generous gifts in advance. Yet how many head of livestock could compensate a man for a lost birthright and blessing?

Alone in the dark, Jacob fears what the coming day will bring. Then night falls and God shows up, just as promised.

"And a man wrestled with him until daybreak." Picture in your mind the raw physicality of the scene.

¹ Genesis 31:49

² Genesis 31:3

. . . Imagine the grappling, the struggling, the straining and the sweating as two powerful figures attempt to subdue one another through brute force. This is no ethereal angelic vision; this is flesh against flesh. There are no words until the sky begins to lighten. Seeing that he cannot defeat Jacob if he continues to play by the rules, the holy stranger deals Jacob a crippling blow to the hip socket. Yet even this painful cheap shot cannot shake Jacob's resolve: he just hangs on.

Exhausted and spent, the stranger speaks, "**Let me go, for the day is breaking.**" But Jacob, who suspects that he has his hands on the Lord, demands a blessing. God gives him a new name: Israel, the one who has "**striven with God and with humans and has prevailed.**" Now Jacob is sure that this is the Lord, and in fear and trembling he asks to know his name. God replies, "**Why is it that you ask my name?**" Then, as suddenly as it began, the encounter is over. "**And there he blessed him.**"³

So, what do you suppose was the blessing? Was it the new name that Jacob receives? Pastor Shawnthea Monroe thinks it wasn't the *new name* so much as it was the *new self-understanding* that the name represents. She writes:

I don't think it was the name. Jacob became Israel not in the moment God declared it so, but over the course of a night spent struggling with the Lord. Up to that point, he'd always had some trick up his sleeve, some angle he was working. Jacob had made fools of Isaac, Esau and Laban, which is how he'd gotten into this mess.

But Jacob couldn't fool God. By human standards, Jacob was charming, clever and cunning, but his true power was revealed when fear stripped him of all pretense, and all he had to hold on to was God. *The experience was the blessing*, the experience of persevering despite the cost.⁴

Maybe you know someone like Jacob. I don't mean someone who tells lies and thinks he can get away with it. I mean someone who has persevered through exceptionally hard times and came out limping, but blessed.

Maybe that someone is you.

Pastor Monroe remembers a woman whose marriage had survived her husband's series of affairs, the woman

. . . told of discovering the betrayals and of all the rage and fear and sorrow and guilt that followed. Instead of giving up, she and her husband held on through painful

³Shawnthea Monroe, "Living by the Word," *Christian Century*, July 25, 2011

⁴ *Ibid.* (Italics added.)

marriage counseling and a slow rebuilding of trust. Years later, they seemed like the perfect couple, two people in a loving relationship that was a model of mutual care and understanding.

"I was in awe as I listened to her," writes Pastor Monroe.

"How did you get ever past the pain?" I asked.

"I didn't," she said. "The scars are still there, but that's OK. They remind me of how strong this relationship really is and what we've been through."⁵

Jacob never got past the pain, either. For the rest of his life, he limped as proof of the high cost of holding on to God.

I am the first to admit that I don't understand this story. I'm not sure anybody does. I do know that a kind of blessing comes from holding on to God through the long night of struggle – whatever that struggle might be.

Jacob wrestled with a stranger whose name was never revealed. Maybe the stranger you are wrestling with is named "grief," or "cancer," or "depression." Maybe you don't know your opponent's name. You just know that life is a struggle right now, and it's hard to see how God could be any part it.

Perhaps a least one message we can draw from this text is, Don't give up. Don't let go. The struggle might feel like a curse, but in the midst of it, we learn who we really are. Amidst the sweat, the pain and the uncertainty, we grab hold of God and God grabs hold of us, and God's blessing comes along with the limp.

Whatever the case, I'm glad our ancestors decided to include in the family album this unflattering picture of Jacob and his struggle. Every time I read it, I come away limping, but blessed.

⁵Ibid.