

Wrestling Match
Genesis 32:22-31
October 16, 2022
First Presbyterian, Luling

We come to this passage which is almost at the end of the story, and there's no way to understand what's happening without catching ourselves up.

Jacob and his brother Esau were twins. Esau was older and thus was set to inherit both a birthright and his father's blessing. Jacob and his mother Rebecca schemed to trick Esau into trading his birthright to Jacob instead. And then schemed to trick their father into giving Jacob the blessing instead of Esau. This first blessing was received because of a trick, not honestly. Jacob seems to be quite comfortable using dishonest means to get what he wants.

Having tricked both his brother and his dying father, Jacob needs to get out of town quickly. His mother, his partner in crime, sends him to her brother, his uncle Laban. As he's leaving his ancestral home, Jacob spends a night alone in the wilderness. And he dreams of an encounter with God, sees angels going up and down a ladder between earth and heaven. Here, in the wilderness, he receives a blessing from God, this one a gift of grace rather than a sneaky cheat. God blesses Jacob with these words: *'I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. 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.'* (Gen 28). This is a renewal of the covenant God had made with Abraham, and Jacob receives this same covenant as a gift from God. Jacob has done nothing to deserve this blessing, but he receives it anyway. He names that place Bethel, which means the house of God.

Jacob spends many years with his uncle Laban. There are more tricks and schemes involving marriage and Laban's daughters Rachel and Leah. And then yet more tricks and schemes with cattle and goats, which lead eventually to him being quite wealthy indeed, all at Laban's expense.

Laban is now, ah, not well pleased with Jacob. So Jacob decides it's a good time to gather up his wives and children and livestock and strike out for the land of his father Isaac. But Esau is still there, and so this means a confrontation with

Esau.

To recap: behind Jacob is Laban, not well pleased with Jacob and for good reason. In front of Jacob is Esau, who has every reason to still be not well pleased with Jacob. Jacob is potentially in a bit of a pickle.

So he decides to send a few messengers ahead with some gifts. The messengers return with this news: Esau is coming to meet you with 400 men. Now, exactly what was Jacob to make of this. Was it “Hooray! Your brother is so excited to see you that he’s coming right now!” or a “Yikes! Your brother isn’t waiting for you to arrive—he’s coming with 400 men to drive you back!” Could be either. Jacob isn’t sure.

Jacob, remember, is a trickster, a schemer. He’s good at thinking his way out of a mess. He splits up his family and livestock into two groups, so if Esau is coming to attack him, it will only be half of his stuff that he loses. And then to try to ensure that Esau is approaching in a friendly way, he continues to send out messengers with gifts of livestock, to butter Esau up.

And now we are finally caught up to where we read today. It’s a long saga of a tale. Jacob is the hero, but not an entirely likable one. His tricks and schemes have paid off. He’s got a stolen blessing and a grace-filled blessing. He’s alone on one side of the Jabbok river, and everything and everyone he is responsible for is on the other side. It’s a set up ripe for another visit from God.

This time, Jacob isn’t asleep. And this time, it’s not so clear that this is God. The text says it’s a man, several times. The man and Jacob wrestle, all night long. Neither gives up. As sunrise approaches, the man sees that he is not going to win and puts Jacob’s hip out of joint. Something about that injury, and something about the place, and something about his previous encounters with God must make Jacob realize that this is not just a man. Or at least, he’s not entirely sure. This man could be God. And so Jacob goes back to his past bag of tricks, and demands a blessing from the man. To be clear, Jacob demands a blessing from the man he’s been wrestling all night, a man who has just injured him. Jacob is just that audacious.

The man blesses Jacob with a name change, a change to Israel, to one who strives with God. And Jacob names that place “the face of God,” because he has seen the face of God and lived to tell the tale.

I’ve spent a long time telling this story, because I think it’s our story. We’ve been awake all night, fretting about what the sunrise will bring. There’s no fretting like middle of the night fretting. We need answers from God. We need a response from God. We need direction and guidance and just a glimpse of what

the future holds. We have things that we need God to get busy doing, or at least tell us how to get busy fixing things. What are we supposed to do? Which way are we supposed to go? How in the world are we supposed to do that? Those late night wrestling matches with God leave us weary and wounded. We're not the same when the sun rises.

I'm not often as canny as Jacob. Nor have I ever been so bold as to demand that God give me a blessing. Maybe I've not just been as desperate as Jacob. Maybe you have been that desperate.

Whether we think we can trick our way into receiving a blessing, or we just straight up ask for it, the blessing is there. Entering into a wrestling match with God doesn't mean we don't have a blessing, it just means that faith is hard. God's grace keeps the covenant and gives us blessings.

This part of the story ends with a meeting between Jacob and Esau his brother. Here's how that goes: "Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept." A blessing. A hard-won blessing, wrestled away from resentment and righteous anger and guilt and shame.

The book of Lamentations, which reads like an extended wrestling match with God, has this, and I'll close with it: "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. God's mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." (Lam 3:22-23)