

“Embrace Your Flawsome-ness!”

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Genesis 32:22-31

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Scripture Focus: Genesis 32:22-31 (NRSV)

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. 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 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.” 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 him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.

Message

This is a wonderful sacred story that spans over a couple of chapters of Genesis – we are only reading a portion of it, and it is well-known to us, perhaps too well known so that we hardly hear it.

When I read sacred stories from the Hebrew Scriptures, which we Christians commonly call the “Old Testament,” I always wonder what the story meant to Jesus and the first Christians. The Hebrew Scriptures were the Bible for Jesus, for his parents, for the disciples, and for the first Christians for the first 100 years or so after the Ascension of Jesus, even though the writings of the Apostles were being circulated within 50 years or so. And when the Gospels report that Jesus “opened the Scriptures to the disciples,” it is the Hebrew Scriptures that are being referred to. For this reason, I typically look in the Gospels and Epistles for direct references to any sacred story from the Hebrew Scriptures.

Curiously, while I was unable to undertake an exhaustive research, I did not find a direct reference to this story in the New Testament, curious to

me because of its familiarity to Jewish people then as now. Early Christian writers, whose works did not become included in the New Testament, quote this sacred story, explaining that the stranger with whom Jacob wrestled was the Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity. Charles Wesley would much later write a hymn suggesting the stranger was the Holy Spirit. And these interpretations are fine as long as we remember that this is interpreting a sacred story from Hebrew Scriptures through Christian lenses, but would not have been the ways the story was interpreted by Jewish people, for whom this story was first theirs.

Looking again at the New Testament, I did find an indirect reference, a passage in 2 Corinthians that seems to be built in a similar manner to this sacred story, and I will read it to you – from 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 (NRSV).

“To keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

And this, I think, is a good place to start for understanding this story of Jacob. What particularly connects the two is that the writer of 2 Corinthians had talked first about having a vision of God, as does this sacred story of Jacob, and that both passages refer to a physical weakness.

We all have something that the world sees as broken. I emphasize that this does not mean that we are not enough. We are enough. Just the way we are. But the world breaks us. The world tells us to “lead with your strengths.” This story seems to say, “Lead with your weakness.” From the world’s perspective, your weakness may be financial restraints, poor health, the infirmities of aging. It may be emotional, intellectual, or physical challenge. It may be skin pigmentation, ethnicity, language, gender identity, sexual orientation.

No! We are not broken because of any of these things. The world breaks us because of them, because this world is afraid of difference, of weakness, of being less, of being shamed, not realizing that only their own choices may lessen them. Marketing and advertising point out seeming

flaws that their product or service will overcome. It leads me to wonder what kind of economic system we would have if everyone genuinely realized that they were complete, enough, loved by their Creator without conditions. It would be an economy built on meeting needs, not induced shame, not induced fear. ... But I digress!

As a result of this encounter, Jacob walked with a limp. Jewish believers who closely follow their religious dietary rules, to this day do not eat the hip meat of animals unless certain ligaments are first carefully removed. They keep this rule to remember this sacred story. It is a story worth our remembering as well.

I remember the last faith community I served before retirement – Knox-St. Paul’s United Faith Community, Cornwall. The faith community had a mantra, “*When we are weak, then God is strong.*” I’ll never forget saying, “When we are weak,…” and everyone responding, “Then God is strong.” It was fundamental to their desire to build empathy.

I think of Leonard Cohen’s song, entitled “Anthem.” It contains these words:

*Ring the bells that still can ring. Forget your perfect offering.
There is a crack, a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.*

It also contains the lines:

Every heart, every heart to love will come, but like a refugee.

And I think of Henri Nouwen’s words about Holy Communion – I so miss this sacrament during these Covid times. Henri described the four actions of Jesus. *He took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it.*

You are taken by God, loved beyond human comprehension, called to be who you are where you are. Even before this universe came to be, you were in the mind of God – you are taken by God. You are blessed by God, and developing an attitude of gratitude will reveal more and more of your blessings, but you are blessed with having a life, with friends and family, with talents, and so much more. The world breaks us. Living in this world, as beautiful a creation as it is, breaks us. But God gives us to the world in our weakness to be a blessing – to be for others like the bread of heaven. And so too the wine – we are poured out, and we all know the experience of feeling drained by the expectations, demands, and worries of life.

Our focus passage here about Jacob is part of a longer narrative when Jacob is coming to meet his brother Esau, from whom Jacob had cheated his inheritance. Jacob was worried and afraid. When Jacob wrestled with the stranger that night, the stranger said, “You shall no longer

be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have wrestled with God and with humans, and have prevailed.” Later, Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.”

But the identity of the stranger is left unstated. In fact, when Jacob asked the stranger for their name, the stranger replied, “Why is it that you ask my name?”

But if we were to read the rest of the narrative about Jacob meeting Esau, we would hear Jacob say to Esau, whom he feared would punish him for stealing his birthright, “If I find favor with you, then accept my present from my hand; for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God—since you have received me with such favor.” To see the face of God in a stranger, in a perceived enemy, there can be no doubt to me that Jesus knew this story, taught, and lived its meaning. Jacob said he saw the face of God in the face of Esau, because Esau received Jacob with such favour, just as God receives us with favour, unconditionally, with all our weaknesses and brokenness.

I recently ran across a new word, probably not an official one yet, “*Flawsome*,” which means something like, “This synergy of two words ‘Flaws’ and ‘Awesome’ describes a person who accepts themselves irrespective of their flaws and knows that they are awesome regardless.”

Jesus must have known his own ‘*flawsomeness*’ – birthed in simplicity to parents of an oppressed people, out of wedlock; Jesus who died a criminal’s death at the hand of the oppressors on the testimony of religious elites. As the Epistle to the Philippians says,

[Jesus] emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:7-8, NRSV)

Jesus was ‘*flawsome*’. Jacob was ‘*flawsome*’ – Jewish people want never to forget his example. I am, you are, we are all ‘*flawsome*’.

Well, I am probably not at a stage where, with the writer of 2nd Corinthians, I would “boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses.” But I am doing a little better, I hope, by being “Content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.” When I am weak, then God is strong.

Black liberation theologians say, “God finds a way, where there is no way.”

While people may well credit you for your accomplishments and possessions, what people really want to know is how you live out your weakness, the brokenness the world casts upon you. What is it about your faith in God that keeps you going even when you may otherwise feel weak, broken, drained, and “poured out?”

So, what is it for you? Blessed despite of being weak? Or blessed through your weakness? What a difference those two perspective make. Blessed despite of being weak? Or blessed through your weakness? Which one will lead you to greater empathy, the kind of empathy that is the Way of Jesus?

You bless my attempt to share ideas about this sacred story. Thank you for listening.

Benediction

Be self-confidence in your weaknesses, in your brokenness.

Embrace your “flawsomeness!”

You are greatly loved and accepted.

And filled to the brim and overflowing with that love,

Share it with everyone you meet.

For in the face of everyone you meet,

You may see the favour that God has for you. Amen.