

Blessing? What Blessing?

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Wall Street United Church

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Genesis 32:22-31 (NRSVUE)

That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak."

But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

The man asked him, "What is your name?"

"Jacob," he answered.

Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome."

Jacob said, "Please tell me your name."

But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there.

So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."

The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip.

Sermon

Jacob Wrestles with an Angel

Holy God be near to each one of us, and may the words from my lips and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing to you O God, our rock and our redeemer.

A couple of weeks ago those of you who were here may remember we heard Reverend Daniel Hayward preach on an earlier part of this story. He compared it to a soap opera! And now we are at a later episode. So just to recap:

Jacob is the younger son of Isaac, and grandson of Abraham and Sarah. So this story takes place a good 1700 or 1800 years before Jesus was born, almost 4000 years before our time.

Jacob is the younger son, but he is twin to Esau who was born a few minutes earlier than him, and therefore Esau should have received their father Isaac's death-bed blessing. However, in a dastardly move aided and abetted by his mother Rebekah, Jacob disguised himself as Esau and tricked Isaac into giving *him* the blessing.

You may remember that Esau doesn't take this well since that blessing is worth a lot, and he threatens to kill Jacob as soon as their father dies. But word gets to Jacob who then flees to a far country where his mother's brother Laban lives. Along the way he spends the night sleeping outside, and has a vision of angels going up and down a Stairway to Heaven. Remember that? That was the passage Reverend Dan preached about, and that's where we left the story three weeks ago.

Our reading for today takes place twenty years later. A lot has happened in that time. Jacob has been living with, and working for, his uncle Laban. He has married both of Laban's daughters, Leah and Rachel. He loves Rachel but was tricked into marrying Leah — much as he tricked his own father Isaac into giving him his blessing! Joseph has also had 11 children, not only with Leah and Rachel but also with their maids Zilpah and Bilhah — his concubines. (If anyone wants to talk about the sanctity of biblical marriage later, do come and see me!)

Jacob has also acquired quite a bit of wealth in terms of flocks and herds of healthy animals. So in one understanding of the time, he has been "blessed". He has acquired things.

But he is still estranged from his brother Esau, and so he is not really at peace. That relationship is broken and therefore he cannot be truly happy. Esau is his twin. He loves and misses him, and he has betrayed him. So as a lead-up to today's story, Jacob has decided it's time to return to the land and try to reconcile.

Of course, he is afraid. What if Esau is still angry? What if Esau kills him or his family?

Nevertheless Jacob gathers his entire family, his servants and his flocks and herds, and begins the journey. And at the point where today's reading begins he is about halfway there, at the ford in the river Jabbok. He has sent scouts on ahead, and they have come back to say that Esau is heading towards them with a company of 400 men! Jacob is terrified.

So he does three other things.

First, he prays to God to protect him and his family.

Second, he sends droves and droves of animals ahead of him as a gift to his brother. We might think of that as reparations for stealing Esau's blessing and inheritance. It's more than a goodwill gesture, because scripture is clear about the abundance and generosity of Jacob's gift. Reparations are important as a testimony to a true desire for forgiveness. And we know this from our work on Truth and Reconciliation with Indigenous peoples.

And the last thing Jacob does is he escorts his family and his possessions across the river, then leaves himself alone to reckon with his fears and his God all by himself.

And this is the point at which today's reading begins.

The struggles in our lives

Perhaps you have had moments in your life when you are kept awake all night worrying and wondering about what tomorrow will bring? Perhaps you are in a moment like that right now.

Although the circumstances in our lives are tremendously different in our day, I do find that the anxiety Jacob must be feeling makes this actually one of the most relatable passages in Hebrew scripture.

Jacob wrestles

For Jacob the stakes could not be higher. Not only could he lose his own life, but his whole family could lose theirs as well. And even if that does not happen, his twin brother who he cheated may not forgive him. Jacob may not achieve the reconciliation he so desires with this brother who he loves and misses. That is a lot.

Because the easiest thing to do to save life and limb would be to turn back. But if Jacob turns back, all possibility of reconciliation is lost.

And so he wrestles through the night literally with God — or an angel of God. Sometimes in scripture both angels and God-in-God's-self are referred to interchangeably. This is one of those cases.

As morning comes, Jacob has been injured in the hip, but he clings to the angel until he receives a blessing. His name is changed to '*Israel*' which simply means "Strives with God". Name changes indicate a significant moment in someone's life in Hebrew scripture. And only then does Jacob let go.

What is Blessing?

But what is a blessing? As I said before, sometimes in scripture, and even in our day, it can seem to refer to *inheriting* the good things in life. When Jacob steals his father's blessing, he is essentially stealing an *inheritance* from Esau. With this blessing, Jacob inherits all the patriarchal power and wealth and is to be treated as the eldest son. Jacob becomes the heir, and Esau the spare.

There are Christian churches who use the word '*blessing*' so that it is more equivalent to *reward*. This is the basis of the so-called "Prosperity Gospel". These primarily southern evangelical churches teach that if you just have enough faith, God will reward you with an abundance of good things. Which means if you're suffering either economically or physically or emotionally, it's your own fault for not believing hard enough.

But that just does not make sense because Jesus, the Son of God, who could not have believed better or more, lived under oppression amongst the economically marginalized himself, and is put to death on a cross.

Teaching that blessing is a lifestyle reward is just an easy way for the wealthy and privileged to dispose of any niggling guilt they might have for injustice in the world. So we have to look deeper for a meaningful understanding of blessing.

For this, let's return to Jacob:

By the time the story we heard today happens, Jacob is no longer the boy who stole his twin brother's blessing from their father. That understanding of blessing as privileged inheritance has cost too much. He still wants a blessing, but not that kind.

And it isn't about his faith in God making his life easy either. His faith in God does not seem to have wavered. Yet still he has to face the challenges of life, as do we all, and still he must do the work of reconciliation with his brother himself. But what has happened is that he has gotten beyond a desire for things to a desire for meaningful relationship with others and with God. And that is a tremendous change.

What he lacks on this fateful night is not faith in God, but courage. Maybe even faith in himself and Esau. He is overwhelmed by his fears. Perhaps you have faced those moments.

And so he wrestles through the night with the angel, he wrestles and he does not walk away. He is wounded and afraid, but because he dares to wrestle, in the morning he receives a true blessing — the courage, conviction and hope he needs to continue on despite the fact that things could go wrong.

Somehow he gets up and limps toward his brother, through his fears, and into the howling wind of everything that could go wrong, guided only by the light of hope and courage of God that reminds him of the possibilities that blessing brings — that everything could go right.

Blessing for Us

So what then has Jacob really been given in this blessing?

He has not been given anything that he wasn't given since the moment he was born.

He has not been given anything that each of us aren't also given.

The difference is that at the end of that night of struggle — and maybe *because* he struggles — Jacob's eyes are opened, and his heart is too, and he *recognizes* the presence of God with him through all his fears and anxieties. A God who has always been with him. He finally *hears* and *feels* and *recognizes* the true blessing that has always been his. And *that* gives him the strength to act out of love. It gives him the strength to follow God's call.

And it works out. Esau does not want all the gifts Jacob brings — he too only wants his brother back. He too is blessed.

What this means for us

We are given the same blessing. All of us!

Jacob is not alone and neither are we, even in the reality of our problems. God is there in our fears. God is there in our moments of terror. God is there through the pain and the sorrow. When we wrestle with decisions, God wrestles with us. When we suffer through loneliness, God sits by our side. Even when we think God is gone and we are alone, we are wrapped in a love that does not end.

A blessing is an affirmation of the goodness of a person, and of God's love for them. It can be a gift to each other, and it is a perpetual gift from God. But a blessing only matters if we're willing to hear it.

So blessing, perhaps, is a word we might use to describe the fact of God's love on the one hand, but also sometimes to describe the moment when we really hear it,

either through the words of another, or because for a moment we are fully open to God's presence.

We are blessed. And sometimes out of the blue we get a realization just for a moment, of all of it.

Sometimes, like Jacob it's after a struggle. But sometimes, it's for no reason at all.

Speaking of glimpses of blessings, I want to show you one image just to end. As I was sitting in my backyard last Sunday afternoon working on this sermon and wondering if I should preach on this passage, my younger sister Laura who lives in Toronto showed up unexpectedly with her family. Now her youngest son is my Godson, and his name just happens to be Jacob! As I wrestled with this scripture passage, Jacob came around the corner of the house. Now I do not believe God micromanages my Godson's wardrobe, but for me his arrival gave me one of those "god" moments. Because this is what he was wearing.



Oh the love. Oh the blessing!

Amen.