

“A Dusty Blessing” Rev. Michele Ward
Psalm 121; Genesis 32:22-31 October 16, 2022

Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church Baltimore, MD

The second reading today comes from the book of Genesis,
listen now for a Word from God.

In the course of the night, Jacob arose, took the entire caravan, and crossed the ford of the Yabbok River. After Jacob had crossed with all his possessions, he returned to the camp, and he was completely alone.

And there, someone wrestled with Jacob until the first light of dawn. Seeing that Jacob could not be overpowered, the other struck Jacob at the socket of the hip, and the hip was dislocated as they wrestled.

Then Jacob’s contender said, “Let me go, for day is breaking.”
Jacob answered, “I will not let you go until you bless me.”

“What is your name?” the other asked. “Jacob,” he answered.

The other said, “Your name will no longer be called ‘Jacob,’ or ‘Heel-Grabber,’ but ‘Israel’ – ‘Overcomer of God’ – because you have wrestled with both God and mortals, and you have prevailed.”

Then Jacob asked “Now tell me your name, I beg you.”

The other said, “Why do you ask me my name?” – and blessed Jacob there.

Jacob named the place Peniel – “Face of God” –
“because I have seen God face to face, yet my life was spared.”

At sunrise, Jacob left Peniel, limping slightly for the injured hip.

One: Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

All: Thanks be to God.

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PRAYER - O God, you are closer than I am to myself. Draw me closer to you.

Jacob is finally alone on the side of the river. He has traveled with his two wives, Leah and Rachel, from their father Laban's territory. Laban tricked Jacob into marrying both of his daughters. Jacob wanted to marry the younger sister, Rachel. Laban required he work for Laban for seven years before he could marry Rachel. Laban gave Leah in marriage at that first ceremony, claiming the oldest must marry first. Another seven years later, Jacob and Rachel married. Their sisterhood-long competition led to dozens of children among them, including their slaves Jacob impregnated.

Jacob has sent symbols of his wealth and prosperity ahead of him to meet his brother Esau. Laban is responsible for the success of Jacob - the reason why his flocks are so plentiful and his children are double the amount. Jacob ran away from home after stealing his brother's birthright. But it was Esau who stayed and worked the land, caring for his aging parents, while his twin brother raised his own wives, children, and livestock in another territory.

He is afraid of Esau because the last he heard, Esau wanted to kill him - at least, that is what his mother Rebekah told him. Jacob decides to test the waters. He sends a message to his brother that he is finally coming after all of these years. He also informs his Esau that he has been quite successful and he wants his brother's blessing. What does Esau do? He responds by sending 400 of his men to meet Jacob. A show of strength. A show of intimidation. A show to threaten and remind Jacob of his rightful place - the second twin, the grasper, the always unsatisfied - and Esau will not stand for any attempts to

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charm or appease him. Jacob decides to send his symbols of wealth ahead of him rather than face Esau himself. Jacob has heard nothing since the messengers went out or the gifts were sent to Esau. He has no idea if Esau has killed his messengers or welcomed them with open arms. He does not know what will happen to his wives and children when he sends them out as their symbol of his wealth and success. He still sends them anyway.

He even puts a river in between his brother’s men and himself, sending everyone ahead of him across the Yabbok, and spending a restless night above the stars. Then, a faceless, nameless stranger wrestles him to the ground. Dr. Wil Gafney, Hebrew scholar, notes that “there is a pun in verse 24: the verb ‘wrestle’ has the same letters as a word for ‘dust’ (abaq).”¹ The one who ends up covered in dust is the one who loses the wrestling match. That same verb also means “to touch, strike, or plague.”² The touch of the wrestler could be ‘a violent blow’ or a ‘gentle touch.’”³

Jacob’s Blessing by Rev. Jan Richardson, Part One⁴

*If this blessing were easy,
anyone could claim it.
As it is,
I am here to tell you
that it will take some work.*

This is the blessing

¹ [A Bruising Blessing – The Rev. Wil Gafney, Ph.D. | Womanists Wading in the Word™](#)

² [A Bruising Blessing – The Rev. Wil Gafney, Ph.D. | Womanists Wading in the Word™](#)

³ [A Bruising Blessing – The Rev. Wil Gafney, Ph.D. | Womanists Wading in the Word™](#)

⁴ [The Wrestling Is Where the Blessing Begins](#)

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*that visits you
in the struggling,
in the wrestling,
in the striving.*

*This is the blessing
that comes
after you have left
everything behind,
after you have stepped out,
after you have crossed
into that realm
beyond every landmark
you have known.*

Jacob’s name means “heel grabber.” He was named after his birth - he grabbed his brother Esau’s heel. Ironically, now his own heels are at risk. He struggles to remain steady. Jacob somehow knows that the person he is wrestling with matters and can give him a blessing. And, he wants that blessing. The wrestler knows that Jacob does not give up easily. The wrestler says, “the sun is about to come up.” Why are they worried about that? What does it matter if Jacob sees the wrestler’s face. The wrestler commands that Jacob let him go before the dawn breaks and Jacob sees his face.

Jacob has worked for everything he has earned, and he will not let go that easily. He demands a blessing from the wrestler before they leave him alone in the dust. He somehow knows that the wrestler has more power than he does, and he knows if the wrestler could wound him, he could bless him. The wrestler has the power to curse or to bless, to reveal or conceal. The wrestler asks Jacob, “What is your name?” He does not name his ancestors, his parentage, his tribe. He says, “I am Jacob, the heel grabber.”

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The wrestler gives him a new name - “God-wrestler - Israel.” Jacob demands the wrestler’s name again, and the wrestler refuses to answer. Instead, the wrestler blesses Jacob. But, there is nothing in the scriptural text written down so we can hear the blessing, too, unlike the blessing of Abraham and Sarah, which is recorded in the same book, earlier on in Genesis. Usually, a blessing is spoken and then shared so all may remember it. Jacob’s blessing is just for him. For no one else, and no one will remember it after Jacob is gone.

Perhaps it was the wrestling match itself that was a blessing. Perhaps it was the rediscovery of his courage that was a blessing to Jacob. Or even the new name, the growth of Jacob from grabbing his brother’s heel to attempting to wrestle even God to the ground to ensure his success and domination.

Jacob’s Blessing by Rev. Jan Richardson, Part Two

*This is the blessing
that takes all night
to find.*

*It’s not that this blessing
is so difficult,
as if it were not filled
with grace
or with the love
that lives
in every line.*

*It’s simply that
it requires you
to want it,
to ask for it,
to place yourself
in its path.⁵*

⁵ <https://paintedprayerbook.com/2017/08/02/the-wrestling-is-where-the-blessing-begins/>

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What is the point of this strange encounter? We are left with more questions than answers with this wrestling match that ends in a new name and an anonymous blessing. We are left with more questions than answers at the end of this story. Like the shadows in the night that Jacob sees, we cannot know for certain who it is that we are looking to name as Jacob’s assailant. We cannot know the wrestler’s identity just as Jacob cannot see the wrestler’s face. And yet, the text does give us some hints. In verse 30, Jacob claims that he saw God “face to face.” During the transition between night and daybreak, as the shadows lessened and the light increased, the wrestler’s face became clearer to Jacob. It wasn’t that this was a stranger. It was God all along, appearing in the form of a stranger, revealing themselves to Jacob in between “the blessing and the parting,” as Dr. Wil Gafney eloquently says.⁶

Jacob’s Blessing by Rev. Jan Richardson, Part Three

*It demands that you
stand to meet it
when it arrives,
that you stretch yourself
in ways you didn’t know
you could move,
that you agree
to not give up.*

*So when this blessing comes,
borne in the hands
of the difficult angel
who has chosen you,
do not let go.
Give yourself
into its grip.*

⁶ <https://www.wilgafney.com/2011/08/08/a-bruising-blessing/>

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*It will wound you,
but I tell you
there will come a day
when what felt to you
like limping
was something more
like dancing
as you moved into
the cadence
of your new
and blessed name.⁷*

What are you struggling to endure in this moment in your life? What are you trying to hide behind like Jacob? Is it your family? Is it your professional success? Is it your social status? Your wealth? Your self-righteousness? Whatever it is, God sees you underneath it all. When you are alone and nothing is left but your fear, God meets you there. God meets you as you strive, as you insist that you must work for everything in your life, as you insist that nothing comes easily, as you live into your identity and tell everyone, even God, “This is how I’ve always been. This is who I am.”

But is that true? Do you really need to strive so much? Do you really need to work that hard? What are you trying to prove to everyone? What are you trying to prove to yourself?

God wants to bless you. Stop fighting it. Stop forcing the blessing to come early or control what the blessing looks like. Trust that God has a blessing for you, no matter how long you must wait for it. No matter how different it looks than what you expected. Embrace the blessing of the dust -

⁷ [The Wrestling Is Where the Blessing Begins](#)

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the blessing that comes when you finally lay down on the sweet earth,

accepting the name God gives to you, transforming you forever. Amen.