“Broken and Blessed”

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Genesis 32: 22-31

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I had a friend in seminary who loved professional wrestling. He particularly loved Ric Flair, the Nature Boy – platinum blonde and massive, winner of something like 20 championship titles. My friend would talk for hours about wrestling, who was feuding with whom, who had alliances with whom, and despite the fact that everyone now knows that WWE is, in fact, scripted and choreographed, he just loved the drama of it all: the theatricality, the lights and the special effects, the costumes, and the wrestling itself…he could name an incredible number of signature moves.

Professional wrestling is a far cry from what we read in the text this morning. What we have here is something else entirely. It’s unrehearsed, unrefined, no-holds-barred, and it’s life-changing. But before we get to the wrestling match, just like in WWE, we first need to introduce the characters.

In this corner, we have JACOB! Jacob is…complicated. He is the son of Isaac, who was himself the child of promise, born to Abraham and Sarah when they were well beyond child-bearing years, the first of the many descendants that God had promised them, so many that they would outnumber the stars. And Isaac and his wife Rebekah had twin boys: Jacob and Esau. From the start, Jacob proved to be a handful: Rebekah said that the boys were like two warring nations in her womb, and when the time for birth came, Esau was born first, but Jacob came shortly after, grasping onto Esau’s heel.

The name “Jacob” itself means “heel”, and “grasper”, and “trickster”, and “over-reacher.” And that is Jacob to a T. He wasn’t satisfied to be the second-born child in a culture where the first-born inherited everything. And so he connived and tricked his way into first place – he duped his brother (who was ripe for the duping, let’s be honest) by preparing a delicious and fragrant stew, and when Esau came inside, ravenous after working hard, Jacob said Esau could have a bowl of stew in exchange for his birthright.

Esau agreed, bless his heart. And Jacob duped his father, who by this time was old and practically blind. Jacob put on animal skins to simulate Esau’s hairy arms, and when Isaac called in his firstborn son to receive the family blessing, Jacob came instead of Esau, and was blessed.

Esau was furious at this, of course, and Jacob, fearing for his life (for not only was Esau filled with rage and telling everyone he was going to kill Jacob, he was actually much bigger and stronger than Jacob), Jacob ran away to stay with relatives in the hill country in the north, to let Esau calm down for a few years.

This is where our passage picks up the story. After many years, Jacob sent messengers with gifts to his brother Esau, asking for reconciliation, and he had received word that his brother was coming to meet him…with 400 men. Perhaps Esau hadn’t quite gotten over being swindled out of his inheritance.

So Jacob decided to send more gifts to Esau ahead of him, hoping to appease his brother’s anger with material possessions, and decided to spend the night on the banks of the river Jabbok. He sent his family and remaining flocks and possessions on ahead of him, and spent the night alone.

And then we are told that a man wrestled with him until daybreak. It’s so sudden, and so surprising… this isn’t something that you expect to happen.

People interpret this text in different ways: some say it’s Esau that Jacob wrestled with, some say it’s an angel. Jacob himself seemed to believe it was God, God in human form.

I’ll go with Jacob on this one, and agree that it is God whom Jacob wrestles. So why does God show up in human form to wrestle Jacob all night long the night before he faces his brother who may or may not want to kill him?

God’s ways are not our ways. We don’t get to know the whys and hows, but we do get to see what happened next. God, in the form of the human, initiated the wrestling, and God didn’t win. Maybe this is why God appeared as a human…for God to show up as God’s own self, well, obviously God could overpower anyone. But to show up as a human, to limit God’s power, emptying Godself, taking the form of a servant…now where have we heard that?

Oh yes, that’s Paul talking about the incarnation in Jesus Christ. We Christians know all about God in human form. So God didn’t win…the text tells us that twice, Jacob prevailed, but did God lose?

Interesting theological quandary.

When God saw that Jacob was prevailing, God struck Jacob on the hip, dislocating it, leaving Jacob with a limp.

The winner of this match isn’t walking away unscathed. God-in-human-form demands to be released, that Jacob relax his grasp, for it’s almost daybreak. This isn’t out of concern for Godself, but rather out of concern for Jacob – for to look at the face of God in the full light of day is certain death. And Jacob, being Jacob, demands something in return for releasing God: a blessing.

God ignores that request for the moment, and instead asks something peculiar: “What is your name?” Jacob has to tell God his name – Jacob: heel, trickster, manipulator, conniver, usurper. None of these things is positive or flattering.

And so God renames Jacob. Israel – which doesn’t just mean “struggles with God,” but actually means more like “God struggles” or “God rules.” And then God blessed Jacob, and Jacob released God, and limped on to meet his brother.

Spoiler alert: here’s what happened next… Esau wasn’t murderous and angry, but gracious and kind, delighted to meet Jacob’s wives and children, and refused to accept the many gifts he was offered.

And Jacob, who had for the first time in his life humbled himself, bowing to his brother seven times, Jacob, Israel, said this, “If I find favour 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 favour. Please accept my gift that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have everything I want.”

It’s as if he’s a different person. Jacob wrestled with God, he wrestled all night long and wouldn’t let go. But God also wrestled with Jacob, all night long, wounding him – leaving him with a limp, and renaming him – leaving him with a new identity. What a blessing.

No longer the trickster, the one who wanted more and could never have enough.

Jacob became Israel – the one who would not let God go, the one who would father a nation, whose descendants would outnumber the stars, the one for whom God’s grace became enough.

Broken and blessed, in order to be a blessing to generations. And the children of Israel, the people Israel, they lived into that name. Throughout scripture we see Israel, a community, striving with God, demanding that God fulfill God’s promises, pleading with God to remember God’s promises, angry with God, turning away from God, turning once again to God, and refusing to let go. And God loved them, as God loved Jacob.

God loved them, as God loves us. John Goldingay, an Old Testament scholar at Fuller Seminary, says this: “We are a people whose nature is to struggle with God to avoid becoming the people we could be, and a people with whom God continues to struggle to try to take us there” (Goldingay).

God will wrestle us again and again, all night long, to help us become the people we are created and called to be. God will bless us in our brokenness. Change is hard.

Change is hard, and we have faced a lot of change recently.

We went from blissful freedom in the beginning of this year to the frightening awakening to the realities of CoVID-19 to the “new normal” of quarantining, mask-wearing, and rigorous hand-washing (which we should have already been doing, to be honest).

We don’t like it – no one likes this – and it’s hard to recognize and acknowledge that this is something we will be facing for a long time, much longer than we initially imagined. Change is hard.

And in addition to pandemic life, many of us are waking up to a time of social change as we bear witness to the communal rage and grief of over 400 years of injustice against Black folks, our African American siblings. We cannot unsee and unknow what we are being shown and told, and while we may long for the days of ignorance, even as we white folks face our own racism, our own biases, and uncomfortable conversations we might prefer to avoid, God is calling us to justice here and now, to become the people of compassion and mercy and justice we were created to be.

It isn’t easy. Change is hard. We are wrestling, and the night is long, and dawn doesn’t seem to be breaking quite yet. Jacob didn’t want to change, he wasn’t repentant or remorseful. He never apologized for his behavior – to his family or to God. And maybe he didn’t actually change all that much.

But I do wonder if every time he introduced himself with his new name, and he didn’t have to identify with all the negative connotations of “Jacob the trickster” and maybe even after his hip healed, it still twinged from time to time, reminding him of who he was, and who he is now becoming.

Broken and blessed, blessed in the brokenness, and called to be a blessing to countless others.

From the scripture read earlier – Someone (or several someones) offered up their personal food, their dinner they brought from home, 5 loaves and 2 fish, and more than 5,000 people ate.

Because **when we trust God’s blessing**, even in the midst of our brokenness, we can go beyond what we think or know is right, and we can find ourselves reconnected with those around us, no longer individuals but a community, and this invites God to do what God loves doing: multiplying.

“Taking the five loaves and the two fish, [Jesus] looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full.” God multiplies.

We have multiple ways this morning to be blessed and to bless others, and to risk God multiplying our efforts. In a few moments in our prayers we will bless our children, our teachers, all students as they start this strange and sometimes scary pandemic school year – praying for peace, for safety, for learning.

It isn’t a hard thing to do, to bless someone with prayer, it doesn’t require much – you don’t even have to give up your dinner. And in another moment, you’ll have the opportunity to contribute to this congregation financially, to support what we are doing, and how we believe God is calling us to work in our neighborhood and in the world.

And following today’s worship, I hope that you will drive over to the church campus, to receive blessings in the form of simple gifts, compassionate faces, friendly waves, and prayers from your pastors. And if you have something to share, you can bring donations of non-perishable foods, paper products, or cleaning products to bless the folks at Duluth Co-op, Clifton Sanctuary Ministries, and our neighbors who utilize our Little Free Pantry on a daily basis.

I hope to see you there. May God bless us, every one. Amen.

# Works Cited

Goldingay, John. Genesis for Everyone, Volume 2. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.