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Wrestling for a Blessing

Kara Carter¹

Text: Genesis 32: 22-31

Jacob is no stranger to encountering God in the dark of night. It's been just four chapters since Jacob fled for his life. You may remember the circumstances. This morning we begin by looking back in order to set the context for today's story. Who remembers who Jacob's grandfather was? Yes, Abraham, the great patriarch. "Abraham," covenant-making God had said,

I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

And down the family line, Abraham's son was ... Isaac. And Isaac was the father of Esau the first born, and Jacob his twin. As the story is told sibling struggle began between the brothers in-utero, long before birth. Poor Rebekah, their mother! Struggle and wrestling that began in the womb is a theme that will follow Jacob throughout his life.

Jacob's story, to say the least, is a complicated one, it's messy – rife with deception, manipulation, trickery. And yet like his father and grandfather, Jacob is one of the great patriarchs, both broken and beautiful.

As we know from personal experience especially concerning family dynamics, relationships can be complex enough without tossing things like favouritism into the mix! Scripture tells us Jacob was his mother's favourite. Esau his father's. And neither parent thought to be too discreet about it. Not a good idea if a family value is harmony!

We pick up the story of Jacob this morning with a scene that unfolded between Jacob's father and his twin brother Esau. Isaac is in his golden years. He calls his the eldest son Esau and says to him:

My son see, I am old; I don't know the day of my death. Now then, take your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field, and hunt game for me. Then prepare for me savory food, such as I like, and bring it to me to eat, so that I may bless you before I die.

In ancient days the blessing of father to son was a high honour – losing a blessing was tantamount to a curse. Patriarchal blessings included words of encouragements, details regarding inheritance, but more than that. Blessing usually involved prophetic words concerning what was yet to be.

Now according to the story, Rebekah was listening in. And when Esau went to the field to hunt, Rebekah told Jacob all she had overheard. The family matriarch cooks up a savoury scheme. She tells her favourite son:

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Jacob, go out to the flock. Get me two choice goats, so that I may prepare from them savory food for your father, such as he likes ; and you shall take it to your father to eat, so that he may bless YOU before he dies.

Any “half-with-it” parent would realize this is a pretty lousy plan!

And yet this crazy scheme actually works. Elderly Isaac, his vision impaired is easily deceived. Animal skin is a sly stand-in for Esau’s hairy body. Jacob deceptively receives his father’s blessing – he will receive the earth’s bounty and be given authority over his brother.

When Esau returned to his father with meal in hand, ready for his blessing, he’s left holding the bowl. He learns of his brother’s trickery and he’s furious! So enraged. Murderous thoughts fill his mind ... which Jacob gets wind of ... he literally has to run for his life!

A fractious tear rips through this family’s fabric.

Jacob leaves with the blessing but he leaves with something more: fear. And how could have not left without the heavy ball and chain of shame? How would he live with himself for stealing from his brother? For deceiving his father? Aligning dishonestly with his mother?

Jacob’s story goes on. Years go by.

He meets his future wife at the well near Haran –and he meets her father, his uncle Laban. In Laban Jacob meets his match. Laban knows how to play the bait and switch game as well as anyone. And so the story goes: Jacob wants to marry Laban’s beautiful youngest daughter Rachel. He accepts Laban’s terms agreeing to work for him for seven years in exchange for Rachel’s hand in marriage.

The marriage finally happens...but as new day dawns on the first morning of the honeymoon, Jacob realizes he has married Leah, Rachel’s less attractive older sister. So another seven years of labour in order to marry his true love.

More years pass by, and Jacob prospers – flocks family, servants, land. But was that enough to soothe the deep ache in his heart for his actions so many years before?

Jacob sends messengers to his brother Esau, and he receives a message that his brother is coming to meet him, but not on his own. Esau is bringing 450 men with him: what are his intentions?

The anticipated reunion is enough to cause distress for anyone much less Jacob the deceiver. Is Esau coming to finally take revenge – to destroy him, to even the score? It is in the midst of this awaited encounter with his long-estranged brother, that Jacob lies down – and in the dark of night encounters his God.

There are a good many artists who have sought to capture this biblical wrestling match on canvas. A quick “google image” search uncovers a breadth of artistic interpretations. One particular artist’s interpretation is extremely intriguing. It is bold with colourful background, abstract with wild splashes of colours. Jan Richardson is not just a crafter of oils and water colours. She is also a gifted crafter of words. Richardson’s book *Painted Prayer Book* is one of my favourites. Jan Richardson describes her piece of art in this way. “In this latest night time meeting,” she writes,

Jacob learns that sometimes when the angel meets us in the wilderness, it makes us work for a blessing. This seems to be one of the ways the angels choose to minister to us, knowing there are times when a good struggle comes as one of those strange

comforts of the wilderness. Sometimes we need not to rest but to wrestle, to be stretched to our limits, to reach deep into the reserves we did not know we had.

We are not certain of course, just who it is that goes to-toe with Jacob in the night as he is on his way, with trepidation, to seek Esau years and lifetimes after fleeing in fear. The text is fuzzy – perhaps with intention – Is the visitor who approaches Jacob in the dark a man or is it God? The visual tradition settled somewhere in between, frequently depicting Jacob wrestling an angel.”²

Richardson acknowledges that as she worked on her painting and reflected upon this passage she found her imagination drawn not to the figures locked in their fierce struggle; what drew her attention instead was the ground. She imagined the tracks and traces left by their feet. The imprint of their bodies on the earth. The map made by their wrestling. She imagined those lines beginning to form the blessing that Jacob received, shaping the letters of the new name he would bear with him with a limp when morning came.

A focus on the ground is a unique perspective isn't it?

When my mind's eye paints a scene I tend to be curious about the human characters involved, not so much the earthy environment in which a drama unfolds. This artist draws our gaze downward toward the ground, to the struggle, to the wrestling, to the earthy birthing of blessing, a new name, a new identity, God-breathed, God-inspired. This is a unique artistic interpretation of wrestling with God isn't it? Richardson suggests our wrestling with God helps us know who we are; which way to go.

Does this statement hold true for you? As you bring to mind a personal wrestling it may be something current or something from the past. How has wrestling helped you to know who you are? Has wrestling revealed areas of deep emotional pain? What about areas in your life ripe for growth. How has wrestling challenged your faith, or deepened your faith? Wrestling helps us know who we are, helps us know which way to go.

This morning I want to draw your eyes to this Reformation door - it is going to remain here throughout the fall. This year we have been celebrating Canada's 150th. There is yet another monumental historic being commemorated. 500 years ago on October 31, Martin Luther, an Augustinian friar took an eight-minute walk from his monastery home on one end of the little town of Wittenberg to the Castle Church on the other end of town, and there he posted his protest against indulgences – which was basically currency paid to the church to ensure one's eternal salvation.

Luther nailed ninety five theses to the door in protest of institutional corruption, clergy abuses, and much more. His bold action came in response to his wrestling and study of Scripture. A key Scripture for Luther was Romans 3:2:

We hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

Luther became convinced indulgences did not ensure a place in God's eternal kingdom –Jesus' life and death and resurrection had already assured salvation for all, for all time, – through faith. To be sure Luther had no inkling of the firestorm his actions would start – the Protestant Christianity.

² <http://paintedprayerbook.com/2017/08/02/the-wrestling-is-where-the-blessing-begins/>

As a side line, there were a number of other events that were also stirring sixteenth century and before which helped prime reforming winds. There was the invention of the Printing Press which enabled lay persons to have access to Scripture. Remember, at this time in history clergy were the only ones who read and interpreted the Bible. Communication was shifting, culture was reshaping – the industrial revolution was gaining steam, and the church was swept up in reformation. Our own Anabaptist roots emerged just a few short years following Luther’s actions, and plans are underway for a 2025 grand celebration.

Jacob was both broken and beautiful.

God’s people throughout history have been both faithful and fallen, both beautiful and broken...strugglers and wrestlers like Jacob yearning for the blessing of God – grace, peace, joy, love. I believe today we the people of God are wrestling for a blessing from God. We are wrestling to understand ourselves and which way to go. The Christian church is no longer at the center of communities and center of our culture. Although a retired Mennonite pastor recently said he’s not sure the church was ever meant to be at the center. The church is effective as a voice at the margins.

Parents today are yearning for deepened faith and are wrestling with how to do it all including managing children’s sports activities – practices often scheduled for Sunday mornings. Two income households are wrestling with exhaustion and yearning to carve out sacred family time. A new group to emerge amongst Christians are known as the “dones.” These are folks suspicious of institutional religion. In their wrestling, they have walked away from the church and are not coming back.

The “Spiritual but not Religious Folks” are practicing their spirituality in the forest and nature, believing they don’t need a faith community. More and more we are hearing that the Christian Church is in the midst of new Reformation. We are journeying into an unknown future that will change the face of Christianity.

And we are deeply yearning for a blessing from God.

We are wrestling to know ourselves deeply.

Which way to go? What new name will be called?

It seems to me times of renewal come from grass roots – from the ground up, not from top down. Renewal is birthed through courage, vulnerability, prophetic voices, bold action, inspired by the Spirit of God. While national denominational restructuring can serve as means to further vision and mission, and while area church leadership can support us in our calling to form disciples I believe in this time we are called to wrestle and dream new dreams, new hopes, to share our vision. Attentive to God and looking at the ground, watching for earthy shoots of new life.

We are being called to share God’s presence activity in the world when we witness it: to share stories of hope, reconciliation, restoration, new life.

Where did you encounter God in the world this week?

Were you watching? Are you wrestling for a sighting?

Renewal and transformation emerges from grass roots but for true renewal – this comes from our personal encounter with our God: transformation, renewal always begins from within. As our committees and programs get off the ground in the next weeks, we will be praying with Jacob’s story of wrestling. We will be listening for God and to one another.

We are each invited to pray with this text over the coming weeks and to turn toward God who is always drawing near to us. Knowing who we are and where we are going will emerge I believe as we listen deeply to the very voice of God. The church in transition is

yearning for a blessing. And over the next few weeks we also have opportunity to add our yearnings for the church on this Reformation Door.

Take the opportunity ... it's an invitation that is open to all!

Take the time. Take time to pray. Take time to wrestle. And take time at the Reformation door to read what is posted. The blessing doesn't come easily – we will have to wrestle for it. It will leave us with a new name, wounded and limping. Good people of God, if God could use a trickster like Jacob and bless him and generations to come ... surely God will bless us and continue to use us to further God's mission of restoration and renewal in the world.

God's reforming presence bless us in our wrestling.

Amen