

WHAT IS A BLESSING?
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church
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Good morning! It's great to be here with y'all this morning. I had not heard of Shepherdstown PC or indeed Shepherdstown, WV before Jeananne invited me to come preach several months ago. But, it turns out that a lot of people I know and love, know and love y'all. Because every time I mentioned to someone that I was coming here, they said, "Oh Shepherdstown! I love that church!" So just know that you come highly recommended.

In fact, one of my colleagues' father is a Scottish Presbyterian pastor, and way back in the early 90s he did a pulpit exchange and came here for a summer. So you were the first American Presbyterian community my friend was a part of.

It's also been great to be in Shepherdstown, which is clearly a very unique place. After I was sent off to dinner by the owner of my B&B and his pet parrot, I wander through downtown and passed a drum circle, and artists, and later I commented to some friends that it's nice to be reminded that there are little pockets of resistance everywhere, standing against brokenness.

Especially in times like these. Because what a year it's been. Sometimes, the divisiveness and conflict in our country overwhelms me. I still remember – in the months after the election – my staff team of journalists and I all realizing we were in for a marathon and not a sprint. Sometimes it feels like we're jumping from one crisis to another, and it is exhausting.

And I know it isn't just me. Because in the months after the election, Sojourners saw recording breaking engagement and readership and donations. And then, around March, we hit a wall. Our engagement dropped – and this isn't just true for us. It's true for publications and media across the board. People are tired. They don't know what else to do.

Maybe you're feeling similarly. And in the midst of that, we take some time away, and we come to this place to worship and be with God and wrestle with our thoughts, and our fears, and our faith.

And today, that brings us into contact with a story about Jacob. It's a fairly famous story — the story of Jacob wrestling God (or an angel — depending on your interpretation) by the shores of the Jabbok. It's also a weird story. Because really, how often in scripture does somebody wrestle on the ground with God? And perhaps because it's so well known and because it's so weird — this passage — as I was studying it this week — filled me with questions.

Questions like — how does Jacob always end up in messes like this? And where does this random guy he wrestles come from? And how does he know it's God? Why doesn't the stranger just tell Jacob his name? What is the deal with the hip thing? And above all, this scripture left me with this question: What even is a blessing? What does it mean here? What is this thing Jacob is so desperate to get from God that he wrestles God for it? What does a blessing even mean or look like in such a messed up world?

Because the world Jacob lives in — it's pretty messed up. And I think to fully understand the message that today's scripture holds for us, we first have to understand the world that it happens in. Jacob's world.

Jacob is one of the great ancestors of Judaism — son of Isaac, grandson of Abraham. He is the literal national of Israel (or at least he will be, by the end of our story for today). His 12 sons

will become the 12 tribes from which the Israelites — and eventually — Jesus will descend. He is — by all accounts — a biblical hero. But he's also... a trickster. It's his wiliness that first defines him in the bible - even from birth. He is described as fighting his brother in the womb, and then grabbing hold of his brother's heel as he was born. He tricks his twin brother Esau into selling him his birthright in exchange for a bowl of stew, then he tricks his father into giving him the blessing intended for Esau by disguising himself.

But there's a reason why Jacob is the way he is. From the jump, the world he enters is stacked against him. He is the second born son — even if only by mere minutes — and that costs him inheritance and security. On top of the arbitrary rules of birth order, his brother is favored by his father because he better fits the role ascribed to boys of their time — he loves to be out in the fields while Jacob spends his time in tents. Essentially, Isaac prefers Esau because he is a “man's man” and Jacob... is not. Jacob in his turn is favored by his mother Rebecca, but because she is a woman — her favor doesn't hold much power. Later, Jacob will be deceived and swindled by his uncle Laban, forced to trade years of labor for marriage to the woman he loves.

And all around these twisted family dynamics is a world of nomadic, hard living, and pharaohs and famines and war and slavery and brokenness. We know a bit of this world too, in our own time.

So Jacob, with his mother's encouragement and seemingly God's approval, comes into this world bound and determined to circumvent and thwart and overthrow its broken systems, its flawed values by any means necessary.

He struggles, at times. His deceitfulness has a cost. He gets a taste of his own medicine from the trickery of his uncle Laban, and he ends up separated from his beloved mother, and at violent odds with his brother. He is at odds with everyone really, even his own family. And despite being surrounded by wives and children and servants, he is mostly alone. Isolated.

Having left Laban, and after years of one crisis after another, avoiding Esau and the conflict between them, he faces yet another crisis: their inevitable reunion. He cannot run away anymore. And for this brief in-between time, he finds himself here — on the shores of the Jabbok — wrestling a strange man, who is also an angel and also somehow God. Let us listen to the story:

“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[a] said, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel,[b] for you have striven with God and with humans,[c] 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,[d] saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.” “The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

I was struck, when I first revisited this text in preparation for this sermon, by two different things. The first – which isn't really relevant – is that it got Bohemian Rhapsody stuck in my head all week. You know – the part that goes, “Let me go! Bismillah no! I will not let you go!” “Bismillah,” by the way, means “in the name of God” in Arabic. So maybe that verse is more relevant than we might think.

But the more significant thing that struck me was the word “daybreak.” For whatever reason, it just gave me a really visceral image for me of how this scene plays out. Jacob has been avoiding Esau but his reckoning is coming, and soon. And so he has done everything he can to prepare for this conflict. He sends droves and droves of livestock ahead of his party as gifts for his estranged brother. And then, he sends his whole family and all his servants ahead of himself over the river for the night. And then, he stays behind. Once again, alone. Isolated. Or so he feels. And all he is left with is his own fear, his own helplessness, his thoughts, and — it turns out — God.

Immediately, this image made me think of my childhood. At a very young age, I developed a strange and disruptive problem. As I was laying in bed at night, my mind would begin to race. And I would think about the people I loved who were far away from me and worry about them. I would think about all the people in the world and how some of them were hurting and I couldn’t do anything about it. I thought about the inevitability of my own pain. I thought about all the hard things we cannot control and cannot avoid - like pain, and conflict, and death, and time. And as a kid, these thoughts would overwhelm me. I’d go through periods of weeks at a time where I couldn’t stop thinking about these things and feeling fearful and helpless.

During the day, I developed a coping strategy. I kept myself busy. I filled my time with distractions and put as much distance between myself and that overwhelmed feeling as I could. But at night, when I had done all I could and I was all alone, the thoughts and fears would come back. And I would have to face them.

Sometimes, my mother would come up to bed and hear me sobbing in my room and she would come in and ask what was wrong. I would tell her and she would get quiet. And then say that there were some things we just weren’t meant to understand. Because what else could she say really? These things I was afraid of — pain and conflict and time and death — they were real and inevitable. She would leave, and eventually I would just lie there and cry out to God. And ask God why? Beg for some kind of mercy. Beg God to just let me fall asleep so I could escape a little bit longer. The truth is, this still happens to me sometimes, all these years later.

As I grew up, I developed better coping mechanisms. I also came to understand in a deeper way that hard things — the hardest things — are a part of life. Eventually, we all have to face them. Still, every once in awhile, on a dark night, I will find that I have done everything I can do, and I am left alone with those old fearful thoughts.

In my own way, I empathize with Jacob in this moment. With this feeling of not knowing what else he can do. Of not being able to run away or fight anymore. That feeling when everything just becomes too much. And then, really having it out with God and at the same time begging God for a blessing. And again I wonder, what is a blessing in this situation? What is the blessing that Jacob needs?

I said earlier that two of my questions about this story were, “Where does this random wrestler guy come from? And how does Jacob know that it’s God?”

I think maybe these two questions, at least, answer one another. Because this person does not arrive on scene. He’s just there, like he’s been there all along — and perhaps Jacob had just forgotten to notice. And so maybe Jacob does know that it’s God, because who else but God is always, already there?

And if that wasn’t enough, there’s the fact that this stranger takes hold of Jacob, and isn’t afraid of Jacob pushing back. This scene is intimate. Incarnational. Relational. Vulnerable. And mutual.

Did you know that the verb translated in this text as “wrestle” actually, literally, means “get dusty?”

God and Jacob are rolling around in the dirt. They are getting dusty together. This phrasing, I think, means even more when you remember Eden. And the dust from which we are formed and are destined to return. God is in it with that Jacob, fully immersed in the earthy humanness of Jacob’s struggle as they hold tight to each other all night long.

I wonder if this is why the stranger/God refuses to tell Jacob his name. Scholars often talk about how in the ancient worlds, knowing someone’s name meant you had power over them and that that may be why God is reluctant. But I also can imagine that after this close, intimate encounter, it’s as if God’s saying, “Come on, Jacob. You don’t need me to answer that. You *know* who I am.”

All through this long night of fear and helpless waiting, God is with Jacob. Not just distantly, not just metaphorically. But *really with him*. God let’s Jacob take hold of him and neither of them let go. After a life time of being distrusted, and isolated - God reminds Jacob of the power of relationship. Real, tangible, messy, dusty relationship. Jacob has spent his whole life putting tricks, and distance, and whatever else he can think of between himself and others — between himself and the hard things, himself and conflict and pain. But God seems to be reminding Jacob that his power and his calling lie in drawing close.

You shall be called Israel, God tells him. Because you have striven with man and with God. Striven. Wrestled. Gotten dusty with. Touched and held on and refused to let go. God reminds Jacob that he is made for relationship.

And relationship too has cost. Even though Jacob prevails, he does not come away unscathed. God strikes his hip, and puts it out of joint. The significance of this event is a matter of debate. Some point out that Jacob’s lasting hip injury would have kept him from ever being a soldier - ensuring that the leader of the national of Israel would not be a violent conqueror (a theme that would, of course, later be echoed by Jesus). Regardless, what’s clear is that after this night with God on the shores of the Jabbok, Jacob literally walks away differently.

And what happens next? Daybreak does indeed come. And the time to face Esau and all that Jacob has been avoiding arrives. He is still terrified of Esau and his men and the violence he is sure will ensue. But this time, he goes on ahead. Drawing close to Esau. And what does Esau do? He runs up to Jacob and embraces him. They take hold of each other and they do not let go. At least not for awhile.

Maybe, this is the blessing that Jacob needed, in this messed up world of his. A reminder to keep going. To keep facing the hard things ahead and striving for better. But also a reminder of the power of relationship and engagement, and being willing to come away differently, vulnerably affected. Perhaps the blessing is knowing deeply his calling to hold onto God and to others. Even when those others seem to have become enemies.

Maybe that’s the blessing this story holds for us too. We live in troubled times. Conflict abounds. Derisive rhetoric dominates. And those who have been most at risk in our society, those who are oppressed and marginalized, are more at risk than ever. There are times when I don’t know what else I can do. When I don’t even know what to pray for - what a blessing might be - so just say to God, “please, please” and hope that she knows the rest.

Maybe you can relate. Maybe on a big, whole world scale, maybe in your own life. Maybe you know, like I know, about those long nights when there is nothing left to do but wait and wrestle with your own fearful thoughts.

Let's this story, then, be a blessing for us. A call to gather our energy about us and continue to strive. A call to draw close to one another and continue in vulnerable relationship, instead of keeping one another at a distance. To take such firm hold of God and one another that we forget how to let go. And may this blessing be a promise too: that God is always, already there. In the dust with us. Holding on, and just as stubbornly refusing to let go.

I said at the beginning that this story filled me with questions. Now I leave with us with one. How can we bear this blessing to the world? Daybreak is here. The world beyond waits. There are Esaus approaching. Conflicts, and struggles, and fears, but also people, and possibilities, and opportunities. What does this blessing look like for us and for this world?

I'm not sure, but I do know that we figure it out – together.