

Rev. Lisa Schrott
August 13, 2023
Genesis 32:22-31
Wrestling

We are continuing our journey with the Old Testament patriarch, Jacob. Our friend Jacob has done a few things he is not too proud of. He has some regrets, particularly with respect to his brother Esau after tricking his father Isaac into giving him, Jacob, the birthright and blessing of being the firstborn that was due Esau. This prompted Jacob to seek refuge with his uncle Laban. Uncle Laban turned out to be a somewhat deceptive guy as well, and he tricked Jacob into marrying his older daughter Leah, rather than younger daughter Rachel, whom Jacob loved. When we last left Jacob, he decided that it was time for him and his large family to travel back to his home country and reunite with his family. He has made amends with father-in-law Laban, and he is motivated to reconcile with his brother Esau.

Just before our passage this morning, Jacob sent messengers to his brother bearing gifts and requesting they meet. He is feeling a bit insecure – well maybe even afraid – about what lies ahead. We pick up Jacob’s story the night before he is to meet his estranged brother Esau. Hear now these words from Genesis chapter 32 beginning with verse 22.

The same night Jacob 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 (or some translations say an angel) wrestled with Jacob 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 the man 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 said, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans 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, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, yet my life is preserved.” The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. **This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

Jacob’s narrative takes up a lot of the real estate in the book of Genesis. The stories of our ancestors - the matriarchs and patriarchs of our faith - begins in Genesis chapter 12. Jacob’s story begins in chapter 25, stretching for ten chapters to chapter 35. Pieces of his story are intertwined with that of his beloved son Joseph in chapters 37 – 45, and the conclusion of Jacob’s story occurs in chapters 46-49 (chapter 49 being the penultimate chapter of Genesis). We hear more about Jacob than we do his father Isaac and his grandfather Abraham. We hear more about Jacob than we do about his son Joseph, whose journey leads the people to Egypt where they will become enslaved and eventually freed by God through Moses. Why did the writers of Genesis include so much of Jacob’s life - literally the good, the bad, and the ugly?

I think it is because there is so much in Jacob's life that we can relate to. He is so human - in all of the ways we are so human. His life is punctuated by many moments of joy, deep love, and contentment, if not true happiness. And yet Jacob spends much of his life feeling insecure about his place and standing; feeling fearful about what lies around the bend, never quite certain - never quite inhabiting- the promise and blessing that were given to him.

This blessing was first given to by his father Isaac when he said, "May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and numerous, that you may become a company of peoples. May God give to you the blessing of Abraham, to you and to your offspring with you, so that you may take possession of the land where you now live as an alien, land that God gave to Abraham."

This blessing was given to Jacob again at Bethel directly from the Lord God. "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring, and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land, for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

The Lord directly told Jacob, "I will be with you. I will not abandon you. You may wander far from home, and I promise I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you." How much more reassurance could Jacob possibly need to feel secure in his journey back to his homeland? And yet... and yet, here on the journey home about to meet his brother Esau after so many years estranged, Jacob is afraid. To say that he and Esau did not part on good terms is an incredible understatement. He knows that while many years have passed, Esau may still be angry with him. After all Esau unfriended him on FB, stopped following him on Intsa, and never retweets any of his funny memes about the antics of his 11 kids. Jacob wants to be liked by his brother Esau, wants to reconcile with his brother, much like he reconciled with his uncle Laban, and yet he is fearful. Jacob has a choice he can trust that God will follow through with God's promises or he can fall back on the ways of the past, bribing Esau and bargaining with God.

I mentioned at the beginning of the sermon that Jacob offered gifts to Esau as they were approaching their meeting. When I say gifts you may be imagining he sent some flowers or a nice loaf of marble rye. Well, Jacob in all of his doubt and insecurity, doesn't just send a gift, he sends two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, thirty female camels with their young, forty cows and ten bulls, and twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys. And to make this even more of a spectacle, Jacob instructs his servants who are delivering the gift to make a grand production, spacing out the gifts. He tells the lead servant to approach Esau, and when Esau asks who he is and who all of these animals are, the servant should say, "They belong to your servant Jacob. They are a gift sent to my lord Esau, and he is coming behind us." Jacob likewise instructed the second, the third and all the others who followed the herds: "You are to say the same thing to Esau when you meet him. And be sure to say, 'Your servant Jacob is coming behind us.'"

We don't often get to hear the thought processes of those in our biblical narratives, but we do here: in chapter 32 verse 20 the author of Genesis tells us that Jacob thought to himself, "I will pacify Esau with these gifts I am sending on ahead; later, when I see him, perhaps he will receive me." So Jacob's gifts went on ahead of him, but Jacob himself spent the night in the camp. And this is where we find Jacob in our passage this morning. He is spending the night alone, after having sent his family across the Jabbok River and after sending gifts – a lot of gifts – ahead in the hopes of appeasing his brother.

Jacob is a man with a lot to wrestle with – his past dealings with his brother and father; his present complicated family situation with four women who are mothers to his 11 children; and an unknown future as he returns home after 20 years away. The Hebrew Midrash commentary on this passage reminds us again of why Jacob's story is so prominent in the book of Genesis: "When God's people encounter situations in which they are afraid, they need not be ashamed of that. After all, Jacob was afraid as he went to meet his brother, Esau."¹

Jacob is standing on a precipice – a lot of weight on his shoulders. Jacob is alone, as is often the case of those who are wrestling with the vagaries of life. Should he continue the path he has been taking throughout his life, relying on deception and bribery to help him get ahead? Or is there a new path forward for Jacob? One where he trusts that God will lead him faithfully and will fulfill the promises God has made. Which path, which road, will Jacob take?

After a night of wrestling – with a man – an angel – with God – Jacob comes out the other side changed. He is physically changed – his hip socket is knocked out of joint and he must limp toward his meeting with Esau. And Jacob is emotionally and spiritually changed – receiving a new name: "Then the man with whom Jacob was wrestling said, 'You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed.' " This name change is not superficial. Rather this name change embodies Jacob's calling as the Father of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. When we refer to the twelve tribes which populate the land conquered after the Hebrew people are freed by God from slavery, when we refer to them as the twelve tribes of Israel, it is more than a geographic designation. It is an identity statement – they are the descendants of the man God name Israel. The man who was given a new name and a new identity and new possibilities of living as the child of God he was called to be after spending a night wrestling with God. After he saw God face to face.

As I have been sitting with Jacob's story over the last few weeks, I couldn't help but think about the parallels between Jacob's wrestling and that of a protagonist in a recent blockbuster movie – yes – I am talking about Barbie. Now I promise not reveal spoilers... and for those of you who haven't seen it, I do highly recommend the movie. Really. It has a lot to offer. In deep and very meaningful ways Barbie is a movie where the protagonists (both Barbie and Ken) are wrestling with their identity, and how one uses the gifts one has been blessed with.

¹ Genesis Rabbah 76:1 as quoted in Michael E. Williams and John C. Holbert (eds.) *The Storyteller's Companion to the Bible, Volume One. Genesis*. Abingdon Press, 1991; p160

Now this thought is not original to me, I have to confess. I was inspired to look at Jacob through the lens of Barbie by this wonderful column in the NY Times in early August about two YouTube hosts who have built a following by dissecting the psychology of movie characters. The YouTube series known as *Cinema Therapy* was founded in 2020 by its hosts, Jonathan Decker, a marriage and family therapist, and Alan Seawright, a filmmaker. The YouTube channel has built a following in part by holding faux therapy sessions for heroes, villains and onscreen couples, treating movie plots and characters as case studies for mental health topics. Some typical titles: “Psychology of a Hero: ‘Hulk’ and Anger Management,” “Villain Therapy: Jobu Tupaki From ‘Everything Everywhere All at Once’” and “Movie Couple Therapy: ‘Shrek.’”²

Therapist Decker shares with us that:

“Barbie is having an existential crisis. We see this in real life — the whole, “things start to go wrong in my life and I’m not sure why, because I’m just chugging along like I always have been.” And the assumption is, what I’ve always been doing is fine. ...

Barbie *wants* everything to just keep going the way it’s going. What she *needs* is self-reflection, introspection and perspective-taking. Perspective-taking allows her to make a shift, to let go of the thing that worked for her in the past and to walk into a future that’s going to work for her.” The therapist ends by saying, “What I would prescribe is exactly what the movie does.”

In our scripture this morning Jacob is having a Barbie moment. As family therapist Decker relates, what Jacob needed is self-reflection, introspection and perspective-taking. Perspective-taking allows him to make a shift, to let go of the thing that worked for him in the past (namely bribing and deceiving his brother) and to walk into a future that’s going to work for him now. A night of wrestling with God gives him that perspective and allows him embrace his future as the father of the nation Israel.

We have spent this summer wrestling with scriptures that call us to commit to being in community, be it by seeking to restore people to community through healing or by feeding each other as we have heard Rebekah share, or by working to reconcile relationships that have been shattered like we saw with Jacob and Laban a few weeks ago, and see with Jacob and Esau this morning.

Being in community is not easy. It means we have to interact with people we may not always like. It means we may have to give up some things we find comfortable to make room for new people and new ideas. And it may mean we have to wrestle with things we thought were theological or scriptural certainties that turn out to have a bit more nuance or multiple interpretations. And what I love about Jacob’s story is that God met Jacob in the messiness of his life. Jacob experienced the presence of the Lord while alone, on the road, fleeing a home life

² Gabe Cohn. These Characters Need Therapists. ‘Cinema Therapy’ Is Here for Them. *New York Times*. August 1, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/01/movies/cinema-therapy-barbie-oppenheimer.html>

that had deep fractures; on the road to new possibilities. In a time of major transition in his life. And here is Jacob again in a time of transition, unsure of what lies around the bend in the road. And the Lord returns, this time not in dream leaving Jacob to interpret the outcome. This time the Lord meets Jacob and asks him to get personal – to get down and dirty – much like the creation story in Genesis 2 when God breathes life into dust forming the human Adam.

God meets us in the messiness of our lives. God asks us to be willing to wrestle with the realities and the vagaries of life. In her book *Holy Disunity: How What Separates Us Can Save Us*, Presbyterian pastor and author the Rev. Layton Williams posits that “It is part of faith to strive, to struggle, to wrestle, to get dusty. ... It is both our gift and our responsibility as complex creatures to stay awhile in unresolved places and question whether there is a deeper and more complicated truth - or multiple truths - to be discovered and held and honored.”³

And friends that is what Jacob is doing on that long night in a place he named Peniel. Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, yet my life is preserved.” For in wrestling with God, Jacob was also wrestling with his past dealings with his brother and father; wrestling with his present complicated family situation with four women who are mothers to his 11 children; and wrestling an unknown future as he returns home after 20 years away. Our scripture this morning ends with these words: “The sun rose upon Jacob as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.” Jacob was a changed man after his wrestling match. Jacob was a changed man after God met him in the messiness, truly accepting his blessing that he and his offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, spreading abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in him and in his offspring.

Like Jacob, each of us will face times in our life when we wrestle with God and the hand we have been dwelt. Like Jacob, we will come out the other side changed and knowing in our hearts the truth of the blessing given to Jacob from the Lord God: “Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” May it be so. Amen. Join me in prayer...

³ Layton E. Williams. *Holy Disunity: How What Separates Us Can Save Us*. Westminster John Knox Press., 2019. p73.