

Readers theater from Peace Table bible - p 34, "Jacob and Esau"

Genesis 32: 22-31

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 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, and yet my life is preserved.' The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.

Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle.

SERMON:

Name that much of this is taken from Debie Thomas' chapter on wrestling in her book *A Faith of Many Rooms*.<sup>1</sup>

When I was little, I remember standing in the doorway between the kitchen and living room, watching my three older sisters get ready to Queenie Wrestle - a take down, all out match to determine who was the strongest - the leader. Imagine a 9 a 10 and an 11 year old taking turns holding on until there was no more fight in them. It was more of an endurance match - who really wanted to be crowned the winner. There were no timed rounds, with breaks to rest and strategize. These were matches until one cried out in exhausted defeat.

I was too little to be a Queenie wrestler - but as I got older, I wanted to win the arm wrestling contests. They involved holding steady, applying just enough energy to keep from the arm bending back and waiting for my sister to expend her strength. Then, when the time was right, I'd go for the pin.

Wrestling is a contact sport - intimate, and can leave you exhausted, winner or loser.

Many devout Christians don't have a need to wrestle with their faith. EXAMPLE - Mary Overholt, the wife of my first Mennonite pastor in GA - she had a deep faith that didn't get easily ruffled.

She didn't get stuck on questions about human suffering; didn't get rattled when she couldn't understand the hows and whys of certain biblical stories.

Somehow Mary - and others like her - took the ups and downs of faith in stride.

I can't relate. I'm a wrestler. And thank God I'm not alone.

Throughout Hebrew scripture we have the faithful ones contending with God - Abraham verbally wrestles God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. David pours out his disappointment and fury into psalm after psalm. Job dares God to show up and answer his bitter questions.

Wrestling can be an act of engaged faithfulness.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas, Debie. 2024. *A Faith of Many Rooms: Inhabiting a more spacious Christianity*. Broadleaf Books, Minneapolis, MN.

Today's story...

Jacob is returning to the place of his birth after 20 years away. He's steeling himself to reunite with Esau, the brother whom he deceived, tricked and manipulated. Jacob has no idea how Esau will receive him, and he's afraid.

After sending his wives, his concubines, his children and all his possessions ahead across the river, Jacob decides to spend the night alone. Scripture doesn't tell us why - maybe he wants to pray and beg God for help. Maybe he wants to scheme and strategize before facing his brother. Maybe he's overwhelmed by anxiety and wants to hide, allowing his family to run into Esau first and smooth things over for him.

All we know is that Jacob is isolated and vulnerable, unable to hide behind his wealth or servants or large, complicated family.

He's alone, in the dark...until he's not. Out of nowhere a man shows up and throws him to the ground. They wrestle all night long, legs tangled, elbows flying, until Jacob is almost sure he will prevail.

This God (so named later by Jacob) is not a God whose first priority is our ease and comfort. Jacob's God is not a God who maintains a polite distance. No, Jacob's God is wild and mysterious, not hesitating to roll around in the muck, bringing Jacob to his knees. The Hebrew word for wrestle means 'to get dusty - to get dirty'. This is a God of dust and sweat and tears - a God who is willing to become dirty with us, and, then, to lift us out of the dirt.

***This is a God who wants to engage.*** A God we can throw ourselves against with the full weight of our thoughts, questions and feelings. A God who invites our persistence and intensity and strength. This is a God who doesn't let go.

As the night wears on and the stranger sees that Jacob has no intention of giving up, he strikes Jacob on the hip, dislocating it and causing him to limp. In "The Magnificent Defeat"<sup>2</sup>, a sermon on this story by Frederick Buechner, the pivotal moment is described like this:

All the night through they struggle in silence until just before morning, when it looks as though a miracle might happen. Jacob is winning. The stranger cries out to be set free before the sun rises. Then, suddenly, all is reversed.

He merely touches the hollow of Jacob's thigh, and in a moment Jacob is lying there crippled and helpless. The sense we have, which Jacob must have had,

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<sup>2</sup> [https://day1.org/articles/5d9b820ef71918cdf2003adf/the\\_magnificent\\_defeat](https://day1.org/articles/5d9b820ef71918cdf2003adf/the_magnificent_defeat)

that the whole battle was from the beginning fated to end this way, that the stranger had simply held back until now, letting Jacob exert all his strength and almost win so that when he was defeated, he would know that he was truly defeated; so that he would know that not all the shrewdness, will, brute force that he could muster were enough to get this. Jacob will not release his grip, only now it is a grip not of violence but of need, like the grip of a drowning man.

We live in a culture that celebrates success and scorns defeat. But sometimes defeat is what saves us.

Sometimes blessings and bruising are not mutually exclusive in the realm of God.

We can experience healing in brokenness.

If we want to engage with God, then we must expect that we will be changed in the process - and not always in ways that are painless or easy.

We can't dictate the terms of blessing. We can't say we want the blessing but not the limp. Sometimes the blessing *is* the limp.

As dawn breaks, the stranger asks Jacob to disengage, and tenacious as ever, he says no: "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."

Jacob hangs on, waiting for something good to happen, and the stranger consents to his request, but first, he asks Jacob "*What is your name?*"

What is your name?

The first time Jacob heard that question was when he was 20 years younger, standing in his aging father Isaac's tent, wearing his brother's clothes. Isaac had told his eldest son, Esau, to prepare a meal and receive his blessing. Young Jacob, trickster Jacob, whose very name means 'heel-grabber' or 'go getter' looks into his father's failing eyes and lies, saying "I am Esau, your firstborn."

Now, 20 years later, the heel-grabber gets a do-over. Still groaning in pain, he hears the exact same question: "What is your name?" *Who are you?*

Is this a question God asks us, too, every time we begin to wrestle? Asks not because God doesn't know who we are, but because so often we don't. Who are you, really, at your core?

What Jacob learned that night by the river is that the big questions we dodge and evade return to us again and again until we find the courage to look them in the eye and answer them honestly.

It's only when we name the worst that we can relinquish it. It's only when we confess the darkness within that God begins the work of transformation.

"You shall no longer be called Jacob," the stranger tells his weary opponent. "You shall be called Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed."

His blessing is a new name, meaning "one who wrestles with God".

Wrestling - it's the opposite of apathy, the opposite of resignation, the opposite of complacency. To fight is to stay close, to remain engaged. Wrestling means I haven't walked away, and neither has God.

The God of Jacob delights in those who get dusty and stay engaged. The opposite of loving God isn't fighting God. The opposite of loving God is not caring enough to fight. Wrestling is our best protection against spiritual apathy. Wrestling keeps God relevant in our lives. It makes sure that God remains a force to reckon with rather than a dusty relic we stick on a shelf.

In my human relationships, I don't bother getting worked up when I don't care (Penn State football - really doesn't matter to me). What really matters to you? What do you care enough about to get dusty? To wrestle with God is to insist that God matters.

Do you wrestle with God? Bring hard questions? Get into the dusty, dirty parts of life and say, God, where are you?

How do you wrestle with the Divine?

As the story ends, the sun coming up, it becomes Jacob's turn to rename the place of his wounding. He calls the muddy wrestling ring 'Peniel', saying 'I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.'

It's important to remember and to name the places where God shows up and contends with us. They are holy places - where we lose and find our true names.

Places that leave us blessed and limping all at once.

Wrestling as a holy act - bringing our hard questions to the one who invites us to hold on. "What is your name?" *Who are you?*