

Welcome

My mom loves the Bible. I mean really loves her Bible. Some of my earliest memories are her reading the bible to me and my brother. Now that she's a grandma, it's not surprising that she's given multiple versions of children's Bibles to my kids. Since I have 4 kids, we've built up quite a collection over the years, and now our youngest, Case who is nearly 2, has his own baby bible library. His current favorite is this one. It's a soft, fuzzy bear on the outside and has 11 stories on the inside.

As I held Case recently and read from this bible, I started thinking about the elite nature of the stories we include in children's bibles. God's activity in the world throughout history is billions of stories. It's really all the stories. We have a rather small collection of thousands of those stories included in our Bibles (hold up bible). And just 11 stories in this book I was reading Case. Which stories we select for our children reveals something about our priorities, and our hopes, our understanding of God.

Here's one that makes it into many children's bibles: Daniel in the Lion's Den. Daniel was in a difficult place. His faith was being challenged, and he was persecuted for his beliefs. His fate was certain to be that of a martyr. Yet God closed the lions' mouths, and Daniel survived. That's a beautiful, hopeful story. It's true about our God and certainly authoritative for our belief.

However, despite the other 10 stories in this elite selection looking very similar, God's miraculous intervention is not the only way God operates in our daily lives, or in our crises. More often, God's activity is difficult to decipher. That's the kind of story we're going to look at today. It's the story of Jacob wrestling in the middle of the night and getting his name changed.

In historical perspective, this is a huge event. His name, and his identity, is changed from Jacob, which means deceiver, to Israel, the name all his future descendants took as their identification. And yet the moment itself is not clear, divine rescue. It's a physical and psychological struggle in the darkness, where Jacob doesn't seem to understand what's going on.

I think all of us are somewhere on a spectrum of wrestling with God most all the time. We have struggles and we pray for God to intervene and just shut the lions' mouths so we don't have to worry about it. We like to tell each other stories of when God does intervene. But we're not as good at telling stories about entering into the struggle with God.

So today I'm going to read you a story. It's not a story about divine rescue or God fixing everything. Instead it's a story about how we are changed in our struggling with God.

Join us now as we worship a God who rescues us, but also a God how struggles with us and transforms who we are at our deepest levels of being.

SERMON:

Today we're picking up the story of Jacob where we left off last week. For a quick recap: here is Haran. Here is the promised land. Jacob's grandfather, Abraham, left Haran to follow God's call to a new land, a promised land. That's where Jacob was born and grew up with his twin brother Esau. He annoyed and cheated his very slightly older brother to the point of Esau wanting to literally kill him and Jacob fled back to his relatives. He's spent a couple decades away, but so tricked his relatives that they're tired of him as well. At this point in the story, God's called Jacob to return to the promised land and he's on his way. Our story occurs on the banks of the Jabbok River. It's a border between these two lands, these two worlds. Jacob can no longer stay in the lands of his uncle, Laban, but returning home is likely a suicide mission. Jacob has made a truce with Laban that he'll leave and never return. However, he's so scared of returning to his brother, that he's divided his camp into two thinking that if his brother attacks, while one group is getting slaughtered, perhaps the other can get away. He divided his camp right after learning that Esau is on his way along with 400 men, which happens to be the size of a standard army regiment at the time.

It is on the bank of this river that Jacob, and subsequently all his future generations, are given the name Israel. In the middle of this larger story, we have this small story, a story within a story, where Jacob gets all his family across the Jabbok River. And then he returns to the other side to be alone. It is alone that he wrestles all night and then receives the blessing of a new name.

As I studied this story, I was met with confusion at most every turn. Scholars and tradition are uncertain who the man is that Jacob wrestles, and uncertain of the precise nature of the blessing. The climax of the story is obviously the bestowing of a new name for Jacob. He is to now be called Israel. Yet scholars are not even sure what Israel means or where it comes from. It's clear he's no longer to be defined by his deception, but how is he to be defined?

It's a confusing story. Not one that fits in our children's Bibles. The victory is not clearly defined. The significance is not easily seen. And yet, I find the story very true to my experience of God. More often than not I wrestle with whether God has spoken to me or if it was just my own thoughts. And I wrestle with the meaning of what's been given.

I've found it's the wrestling itself that creates a deep faith. We need stories of divine intervention that give us hope. But we also need stories that invite us to wrestle with who God is and what God requires of us. That is, perhaps, where the greater faith is created.

I don't think there's a specific meaning we are supposed to extract from this story and apply to our lives. Rather, the story invites us to enter further into the wrestling. In order to help us do so, I have imagined two moments in the story from Jacob's perspective. I have weaved in both some of my own wrestling with God as well as questions scholars have about the story. The first scene is at dusk on the west side of the Jabbok River, the night before wrestling all night. The second is the next morning on the east side of the River.

Jacob stands on the bank of the Jabbok River,

returning to his father’s house after a long exile in Haran –

The water smoothing this bed of stones is finally peaceful again, as it was early this morning when we approached. Seemed it was a mere creek on our first crossing, but by my 10th crossing it seemed like a real river. Ha, as much as I was in this water today, perhaps this Jabbok River should be named the Jacob River. I must have crossed it 30 times, back and forth, giving instructions, carrying supplies, carrying the smaller lambs, and that last time, carrying my youngest: Joseph. Now that the tents are set in this, this, promised land, and most have eaten, I have less to do and find I’m thinking about tomorrow, again, as I’ve been doing for weeks.

I’ve likely not hid it as well as I’d hoped from Rachel and the kids or even the servants. When you’ve been afraid for a long time, even what you think you’re hiding is written all over your face. An old weariness has returned to me ever since we left Laban. Rachel has asked twice now what’s wrong. I’ve not been able to put it into words, but my fear too has grown into a river as I’ve crossed it over and over carrying my past and my future.

This Jabbok is a boundary line, one edge of the land God promised my Grandfather Abraham, and therefore the boundary between me and my brother for many years now. That old promise of land to my Grandfather ... well, it was suppose to go to me, I think, but honestly - I’m not sure of the old promises, anymore. And yet I cannot deny that God has been with me, blessed me even in my exile. This river is now also a boundary line between me and my uncle Laban, as we agreed to part ways just a few days ago. On one bank, I am unwanted by my brother. On the other, unwanted by my uncle.

Have you heard that song, “Grandfather Abraham had two grandsons. And two grandsons had Grandfather Abraham?” Well ... , I am one of them, and my brother Esau is the other. We’ve been separated for so long because, I, I tricked Esau. I waited for, well, a very opportune moment, and I offered him a bowl of stew for his birthright. Look, I was so tired of being the little brother who never got anything, and anyway it was my mom’s suggestion. I was kinda just going along. AND I didn’t believe he would actually make the trade. I guess I didn’t realize how desperate he was. The young are myopic that way, unable to see the world from another’s place of hurt or desire.

But my excuses, which, believe me, I’ve rehearsed a thousand times, have grown thin. They don’t even convince me anymore. Something’s been feeling different for about a year now. Feels like it’s time to own my mistakes, to face Esau. But I know from experience that mistakes are fearful things to own. They accumulate a lot of baggage over time, and it’s easier to not carry all that baggage across rivers. Just leave it and start anew.

The sun has dropped below the earth, but has left the sky ablaze in oranges inviting us toward our journey for tomorrow. All day, as my stress about crossing this Jabbok before dark dwindled, something else, something unexpected, has been growing inside. I began noticing at the time when I had no shadow. It seemed like fear at first, a growth of the fear of my brother that I’ve now harbored longer than I wasn’t afraid of him.

After the birthright/stew incident, I later dressed up like Esau and tricked our ailing father Jacob into thinking I was the eldest son. And I asked for the family blessing, and my father obliged. At the time, I didn't realize how furious Esau still was over the first trick. The two were just too much for him. Esau swore he'd kill me. I can see why now. My mom thought he was serious and hatched another plan, this time to get me sent away, far away. I wasn't sure at first. Esau and I always fought and sorta got over it. But the next day I saw him out practicing his hunting. He could handle a bow like no one else, a skilled hunter, a perfect mix of might and finesse, but that day his large shoulders seemed even broader as he pulled his bow taught and the arrows flew with a greater fury than I'd ever seen. They didn't all hit his old practice target, but the ones that did went clear through to the other side.

With my mom's blessing, I ran to a new land, well, really an old one, where my family was from before God spoke to our Grandfather Abraham. But it was new to me, and I was to find a wife among our people, AND it was very far from Esau. I had only my staff, and yet, I was full of hope. Another myopia of youth, I suppose. I didn't realize how hard the journey would be or what it would feel like to be the one getting deceived.

I stopped one night early on my journey. I laid my head on a stone and fell asleep and had a most amazing dream – a stairway with angels ascending and descending. And God spoke to me and promised me the land God had promised to my grandfather. And God promised to bless me AND to bless all the nations of the earth through my offspring. When I awoke, my fears were gone for the time. My hope was bolstered. I named the place Bethel – house of God, and I made a vow: "If God remains with me, if God protects me on this journey and gives me bread and clothing, and if I return safe one day to my father's house – The Lord shall be my God, and I shall set aside a tithe."

I've remained alive thus far, and prospered, too. But I've not yet returned safe. Esau may well arrive tomorrow with his 400 men. When he does, we will see if this God wants to be my God. If not, I've at least divided my camp, and perhaps some of us will get away.

Yes. I am afraid. Terrified. But something weightier than fear has brought me back to the bank of this river, alone. As my heaviness increased this evening, I snapped at Rachel and then at Joseph. I never snap at Joseph. So I left dinner, and returned to this border.

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Dread.

That's what it is. It's not just fear of Esau. It's dread before that promise-making God. I will surely have dealings with my brother shortly, but not until I have dealt with this God. It seems entering this land will require a reckoning.

Oh, Rachel. I shouldn't have snapped at her. I must return and kiss her and Joseph goodnight. Then I will cross this river again and be alone on the other side, unprotected by family and servants and wealth, and NOT in the land of this promising God. Perhaps God will again meet me in a dream, and tomorrow I can be what this land and this God demands of me and can return to my father's house with my life.

I have a little interlude in the story here so I can ask us some question..

We can only speculate why Jacob returned to the other side of the Jabbok to stay the night alone. Was he so selfish that he sent his family across the river and slept on the other side so if they were attacked he could get away? Might he have tried to justify such a decision by believing that the promises of God were with him, and he was, in a way, protecting God's promises by keeping himself safe?

Or perhaps he was putting himself as a rear guard so that he could warn the others in case of a surprise attack from behind?

Though his motivations are not given in the text, I don't see these options as very likely. As a literary theme, the Bible is full of stories of what's often called a wilderness experience. Moses in the wilderness for 40 years before hearing God speak to him out of a burning bush. Jesus, just before beginning his ministry, purposefully going into the wilderness and fasting for 40 days and nights and being tempted by the devil there.

Wilderness experiences, a sort of wrestling with God, are pretty common throughout the Bible. I suspect the original readers of this text would have recognized this immediately as a place for struggle and questioning. His need to be alone in the midst of a crisis may be a spiritual practice that we have lost. We have so many ways of satiating ourselves when things are difficult or confusing. I wonder if we've lost the ability to be alone with God in the midst of hurt and pain. I wonder if we need a better theology of wrestling with God and better practices for doing so.

Perhaps God's made promises to you, but they've proven to be painful, and they seem impossible. And maybe you've only been taught how to sit and wait on a God who sometimes shuts lions' mouths. What would it look like to have a practice of removing yourself from everything to be alone with God when things were difficult? What would it look like to walk into the wilderness and wrestle with God instead of sitting and waiting for a God who sometimes slays giants? What does it look like in your relationships when you stop just waiting for everything to magically get better and you instead take that scary step of talking to the other person about something that's been bothering you?

The following morning –

I don't know how to .. I don't. .. I'm not sure what happened last night, but ... I feel different. I'm in great pain, but I feel more certain, almost peaceful.

I wrestled with a man, or maybe it was a demon.

At first I thought it was my brother's guardian angel attempting to keep me from returning home. Maybe attempting to forego the bloodshed that is to come when we meet today.

But as the fight continued, it felt more like a demon. I know, I know – demon sounds crazy, but there's this story I heard years ago from a nomad. We were walking one day, and I suggested we lead the sheep across a creek before the sun fully set so that they could feed on new grass in the morning. He refused. Later that evening he told his story. He had been crossing a river in the late evening when a demon came out of the water and attempted to kill him. He fought for his life and eventually subdued the demon with his staff and injured it and demanded a reward. The demon promised safe travels and an increased herd. His herd doubled in the next two years. He said he had since heard similar stories from other shepherds, though some did not end well at all. Fearing for his life, he swore he would only cross waters in the morning.

I guess his story is why I demanded a blessing before releasing the man last night. It was my old self, being a trickster. Jacob – the deceiver. It's the only way I'm known in my father's land.

Oh, also - often in those stories, the demons insist on finishing the fight before dawn breaks, and this ... this ... wrestler, fought me until nearly day break and suddenly demanded to be able to leave. That's how I got the blessing out of him. I said I'd let him go only if he blessed me.

But would a demon give a blessing of a name?

Then again, what angel would do that? How is a new name even a blessing? I did not let him go at first, for it didn't seem to really be a blessing. But as the word sank in, my muscles relaxed, my anxiety, i guess my dread, softened. My grip loosened and the being slipped away. I'd wrestled all night, and what I got out of it was ... a name: ISRAEL.

I'm not even certain what it means. The ending is the word for God, so something to do with God. But the beginning, the root of the word... i don't know. It's similar to a word that means to stand straight .. like maybe "righteous before God." Perhaps this is it – the exact opposite of the meaning of Jacob – the deceiver. Perhaps I'm no longer to win by deceiving. Perhaps he was an angel, a messenger sent on my brother's behalf to warn me to not attempt to deceive Esau again.

But it's also close to the word for "to strain or struggle." Maybe it could mean "one who struggles with God." That's what the angel/man said, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed." But does that mean I got the blessing because I wrestled with divine beings or that the name means I wrestled with divine beings?

And another thing - Normally when El is at the end, it means El is the one doing the action. So... God struggles? God struggles with me, with us? I don't know. It seems my wrestling was not finished last night, for I have wrestled with this all morning.

Who will I be when I cross back over this Jabbok River? Maybe I'm crazy, and I should keep quiet about all this? How could Rachel not call me Jacob? What would she do if I asked her to call me this new name, this "Israel?" But how else will I know if I don't hear it from her lips? And what will my sons think of an old man who goes to be alone and comes back with a story of wrestling a stranger and then insists being called something different? What would I be teaching them with such actions?

Perhaps I cannot know what it means, but I am breathing deep breaths this morning. Last night I felt like a sheep in an already grazed pasture. I couldn't even seem to find enough air to breathe. This morning, I feel like I can smell the flowers on the hills of Gilead. Perhaps, perhaps, this is the blessing. This name, "Israel," feels like a new space, a new calling, something for me to become. A wholeness I can't deceive my way into. I feel I could give the whole of my wealth to Esau tomorrow and yet still be "Israel."

Yes. I am no longer a deceiver. I will struggle to be righteous.

I see Rachel coming down to the river. I will cross and ask her to whisper the name "Israel" in my ear, and then I will know for certain.

This place. I will name it Peniel, the face of God, for surely God has met me here, has turned his face graciously upon me. Who else can call into being that which was not?

Most of the stories we have in scripture were written down way after they occurred. They were first told and retold, sometimes for generations, before being written. The texts we have are stories with the benefit of hindsight. Each story's tone is shaped by God's faithfulness over the long haul. Since those writing the stories down knew the outcome, and since we know the outcome, the characters in the stories can often seem like they know the outcome, like they thought miracles were normal and expected or like they understood God was crafting this larger, generational outcome. And we then come to think that we are supposed to have a faith that sees this whole larger view at once.

We've seen in this series, though, that it wasn't that easy for the patriarchs and matriarchs of our faith. Their struggle was real, and they messed it up a lot. The difficulty of discerning God's voice and the meaning of God's instructions, especially in the midst of a crisis, is very uncertain and can be very painful. It's not just ok to struggle, it's actually the norm. In fact, where I see the most maturity in ancient saints is in their expectation of the struggle, when they voluntarily walk into the wilderness and fast or cross back over the Jabbok to be alone before God.

And so I wonder about our lives and what our defense mechanisms are during crises. Do we self-medicate with comforts? Do we escape or ignore in hopes it will go away? When is a faith claim that God will certainly rescue just a way for us to ignore the crisis? What would happen if we instead had the kind of faith that recognized crises and responded by going into the wilderness to be alone with God, to

be nourished by God alone and not by all the creature comforts we've surrounded ourselves with? What words of life and possibility would we hear there? What name might God speak into existence there?

Communion

[Communion Slide] We have come to my favorite part of every service here at Catalyst. We are going to take communion together. When we take communion together, we are not magically healed and all our problems disappear. Rather, we are instructed to do this in remembrance of Christ and his death.

On the night Christ was betrayed he had supper with his disciples and invited them into the brokenness that was to come. He took bread and broke it and gave it to them and said "This is my body, broken for you, do this in remembrance of me." Then he took the cup and drank and gave it to them and said, "This is my blood poured out for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

After dinner, he withdrew to the Garden of Gethsemane, in order to wrestle with the heavy weight he was feeling. He invited the disciples to join him, but they ... they were tired, and they did not yet know how to wrestle. He withdrew further into the garden and invited just a few, the most trusted disciples and pleaded with them to stay awake. But they could not. So Christ wrestled alone the night before his crucifixion. He asked if the cup set before him could pass, but ended his praying with, "Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done."

Let us pray:

God of miracles, and of wrestling. God who resurrects and who was also crucified. Forgive us for expecting only resurrection. Teach us what it means to participate in your death, that we may also participate in your resurrection. Teach us to be a people who wrestle. May we learn to cross back over the Jabbok to be alone with you. May we learn to stay awake in the Garden of Gethsemane. As we remember your body and your blood this day, may we grow in our willingness to be more like you, to follow in your steps, through the garden and even to the cross.