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Wrestling: Human and Divine
Gen 32:13-33:11

The scene before us is one fraught with emotion and tension. Estranged brothers are about to meet, face-to-face.

Jacob and Esau have been apart for a long time, for 4 involved chapters. Since their parting, Jacob has found a woman he loves; has fathered with her and 3 other women 11 sons and at least 1 daughter. He has worked long and hard for his father-in-law Laban and the two have wrangled over fair pay for fair work. Later, through a genealogy, we will learn that Esau apparently has had a life of his own: 3 wives and a long list of sons and daughters. A lot has happened since Jacob and Esau were last together.

Their parting had been one saturated with anger and fear. Jacob had exploited Esau's hunger to take the elder's birthright. And, following his mother's plan, Jacob had deceived their father into giving him what rightfully belonged to the elder son as well—his blessing for prosperity and power. Esau hated Jacob for his treachery, the text tells us, and plotted to kill his brother. That is why Jacob fled from home, to the land of Laban and work and wives and children. In preparing to meet Esau, Jacob is preparing to face a brother whom he had deceived, a brother who, at least when they last saw one another, wanted him dead.

But this meeting will be more than of a wronged rival; in facing Esau, Jacob will also face the conflict that has defined his life. The conflict between Jacob and Esau, the narrator of Genesis tells us, began long before Esau handed over his birthright for something to eat. It began already in their mother's womb, as the twins struggled about who would prevail. And the

flames of that conflict had been fanned by their parents' inability to love them both equally: Isaac loved Esau, we are told, while Rebekah loved Jacob. Jacob surely bore responsibility for the actions he had taken against his brother, but according to the narrator of Genesis those actions followed a path cleared for him by his parents and God.

In some ways, the conflict between brothers that defined Jacob's life had been on hold while he sojourned with Laban, but in other ways that sojourn was only a variation on a theme. Deception. Self-interest. The poignant, desperate pain of those who are not chosen, who feel less loved. These themes throb like a persistent bass beat through stories of Jacob and Laban, Rachel and Leah. **In facing Esau, Jacob is facing his life: how he has chosen to behave but also the choices that others have made for him, the life into which he was born, the life to which the narrator claims God destined him.**

Jacob prepares to face this encounter in the way he has faced every other encounter of his life: with calculating shrewdness. Learning the size of Esau's party, he has divided his own to make them appear small, unthreatening, humble. Separating into two groups would save lives but it would also allow Jacob approach his brother in strategic humility. He also has sent servants ahead of him with gifts for his brother, hoping to curry his favor: "For he thought, 'I may appease him with the present that goes ahead of me, and afterwards I shall see his face; perhaps he will accept me.'"

That is where Jacob stands as we enter the story. His plan in motion, waving farewell to his wives, maids, and children.

But before he can learn if the calculations will pay off, before he can see if his brother's face will offer favor or remain contorted with rage, something unplanned happens to Jacob. It is a short, cryptic account of what must have been a terrifying and tortuous night: a man wrestled with Jacob until daybreak. The man strikes Jacob's hip, but still Jacob will not let this man go until he has a blessing. The blessing is given: the man calls Jacob "Israel"—the Wrestler—and in his explanation gives a new interpretation to what has just happened: you have striven with God as well as with humans, says the man. Only then Jacob is able to see what he had not seen before: "I have seen God face to face." In Jacob's unwillingness to back down from a struggle with another human, he had come to recognize God's presence in this place.

The blurry lines between divine and human do not come into focus as the eerie encounter at night ends and the day breaks. When the brothers at last meet and Esau offers Jacob a weeping embrace rather than an angry blow, Jacob can exclaim, "truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God—since you have received me with such favor." Both in his wrestling with a man and in his brother's acceptance, Jacob has known God.

Steeped as we are in the stories that our own culture tells in movies and on TV, we might expect that this reconciliation between Jacob and Esau will change everything. That Jacob's encounter with God and brother will finally resolve the long-standing conflicts in his life, and he will from this day forward become a different and better person.

But readers of Genesis know that the patterns of Jacob's life continue to give shape to the rest of his story and that of his children. Despite Esau's request to live together, Jacob will propose that they part, just as he and Laban had parted. As the Jacob story unfolds, he too will love one son more than others, and his preferential love will poison the relationship between brothers and lead to yet further betrayals that call for yet other brotherly reunions.

Neither Jacob's wrestling with the man nor his reconciliation with his brother stopped the flow of his life. Neither wiped the slate of all that he had done or all that life had presented to him. And yet, and yet, our narrator insists, God was in those moments.

II

As heady—and as full—as these 3 days of Convocation have been, they have not wiped clean the slate of our lives or of our life together. In fact, all 3 speakers, each in our different ways, have actually invited a deeper look at that which is in and around us. Jeffrey pushed us to look harder at war and violence than we want to; Elyse pushed us to learn about a tradition that is in some ways very different from our own; and I have claimed that thinking about the Bible as the ultimate authority over our lives is not the most helpful way to approach it, that we need to critique it and ourselves.

We have invited not retreat into the beauty of wonderful Old Testament stories but the asking of hard but important questions.

And so we must ask questions of Jacob's story.

- How is Jacob's story your story?
- What are the themes of your own life, the bass line that persists, even as you change and grow?
- How have the contours of your life between shaped by the interplay of choices you have made, paths laid down for you by others, and forces that feel so compelling that you can only believe they are God's own?
- Whose favor have you experienced as divine favor?
- What struggles have been at once human and divine, both and neither?

- How can entering this story and making it your own help you to see yourself and your world more clearly and spur you to live more honestly, more faithfully, more abundantly?

Those are the kinds of questions that keep me reading the Old Testament, that keep me intrigued and challenged by it. Not its dictates for how to live but its power to engage us intellectually, imaginatively.

But this story, for all its beauty and poignancy and power, is not immune from critique for what it assumes about power and privilege. This story assumes that it is the lives and the status of men that matter; that children are the property of their fathers; that slavery is normal; that wealth is a mark of importance; that physical strength gains favor. It appears to care only about how Jacob encounters God, not about how—if at all—God enters into the lives of everyone else in the story.

If we are to engage this story fully—all of it—then surely we have other questions to ask of ourselves as well:

- Who are the silent wives and children and servants of the Jacobs of this world?
- Who rarely is allowed to act or speak, to shape their own destinies or those of others?
- Who remains invisible while we watch the jockeying of those with enough privilege to at least have a shot at power?
- Who is treated as mere chess pieces in the negotiations of others?
- What are the social and institutional structures that make success a zero-sum game, that join hands with choice and fate in shaping our conflicts, our relationships, our lives?

Surely, these questions are also worth asking, of our individual lives and of our life together as the church. Surely they are questions that we bring to our world.

III

The Jacob story doesn't answer these questions for us. It does not provide us the script of how to wrestle well with Scripture. It does not provide clear rules for living.

It does not provide a 3- or 12- or 52-step plan for how to live faithfully in a world with so many needs. It offers no roadmap for seminaries around the country who are struggling to stay afloat even as the needs of the church grow in number and intensity.

No, these are our encounters to wrestle with, problems created by a web of human choice and forces bigger than ourselves.

But this story, and the Bible as whole, does not leave us alone in our struggles. To the contrary, our deep engagement with these old, old stories can provoke us to ask the essential questions, questions that must be asked—and wrestled with-- if we are to live a faithful life together.

These are stories that Christians share with one another, and they are stories that we share in more complex ways with other modern communities of the faithful. They are stories that we share with a vast array of those who have come before us.

But as long as we treat them as fragile family heirlooms, to be encased behind glass away from the grime of daily life and the jostling of our relationships, we will spend all our time admiring them and finding new ways to protect them.

The Bible is not that fragile. It has survived because people in diverse times and places have turned its pages and found truths that connect with their lives and their understanding of the world.

Our own era, one that finds in the Bible not only good news but also the dynamics of power and privilege, is no different. We bring the problems of our world to our reading, in a way that fits with our own time and place.

And we find that even our critique of the Bible can enrich our lives. If we are honest not only with the texts we read but also with ourselves, we gain insight even in our resistance.

Will our wrestling with the Bible always bring us face-to-face with God? Neither the Jacob story nor our tradition promises that. But as Jacob learned in his encounters, sometimes we are only able to see God's presence with us after our efforts are complete, after we have been tenacious in struggles that catch us by surprise.

Don't back down from difficult encounters with God and humans. Don't back down from difficult encounters with the Bible, from naming its ethical problems and engaging them. There's no guarantee, but you might be left with a blessing.