
What Does It Mean to Wrestle with God?

A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
Proper 24 – Year C

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart find favor in Your sight, oh Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

What does it mean to wrestle with God? What does it mean to wrestle with God?

I think Genesis, the book that begins, "In the beginning," begins to answer this question. The first eleven chapters of Genesis seem to be a litany of all the ways that it is hard to live a righteous and holy life. And then beginning with chapter 12, we have the stories of the patriarchs and their families, stories that seem to offer up examples, paradigmatic examples, of how to engage this challenge, how to live a righteous and holy life here on earth with the concrete challenges we face.

Now one of those stories that I have always loved, and seems to address this question very directly, is the story of Jacob wrestling all night long. But as I read that story, or more specifically, listen to that story being read, I feel like I can hear the echo of somebody else. I feel like I can hear the echo of Rebecca.

You know Rebecca. She is Jacob's mother, and it was really Rebecca who got all this started sometime before. Jacob, sometimes called the heel because he was born holding on to Esau, his older brother's heel, as if he was trying to get ahead.

Jacob thought he'd figured out how to get the family inheritance. Esau came in from the field one day after a very unsuccessful hunt, hungry and thirsty and tired, and Jacob offered to feed him bread and lentil soup if Esau would give him his birthright, which Esau, always impetuous, promptly did. Genesis tells us that he despised, that is, turned his back, on his birthright. Jacob thought he had this all figured out. But Rebecca, his mother, persuaded him that there was one other thing he needed to do, maybe two other things.

First, he needed to get the blessing from his father, from Isaac, who had gotten the blessing from Abraham. And Rebecca thought she knew just how to do this. She dressed Jacob, who was smooth skinned, we are told, because he hung around the tents generally with his mother. She put animal skins on him so he would feel and smell like his older brother, Esau. And then she made a wonderful stew and had Jacob take it in to his father and ask for the blessing, the inheritance that was intended for the firstborn child.

Isaac, whose sight is beginning to fade but who's hunger is all too present, smells the stew, feels the arms and neck of Jacob, concludes that it's Esau, enjoys his dinner and grants Jacob the blessing. Grants Jacob the blessing. When Esau comes back and learns that the blessing has been stolen by his younger brother, he is none too happy about it. So Rebecca persuades Jacob that he must go to her brother, Laban, in search of a wife. He actually gets two, but that's another story altogether. He needs an appropriate wife, one who's part of the clan. Now you might think that Rebecca, through trickery and deceit, has stolen the birthright, tainting it forever, maybe for her own power and wellbeing.

But I think there's another way to understand what has just happened and it's important. Because I think what Rebecca has done is find a way to be righteous and holy. What Rebecca has done is find a way for Isaac to set his relationship with God straight, and for Jacob to go off on a journey where he will learn how to come back and set his relationship with his brother straight.

It's clear, to me at least, that Rebecca loves her husband, Isaac, and Rebecca loves her firstborn son, Esau,

and Rebecca loves her second son, Jacob. But it's a clear-eyed love. She realizes, I think, that Isaac is no Abraham. The story of their life together has been a long story of Isaac going places that Abraham went, meeting challenges that Abraham faced, and at each instance, not quite measuring up. He has done enough to become prosperous but not enough to be a successful patriarch. He has managed to expand his herds, but not grow in his relationship with God. And, I think, Rebecca realizes that Isaac can't pass on the blessing if he doesn't embody the wisdom of the blessing. And so she tricks him.

Now Esau, the impetuous hunter, has not exactly demonstrated his worthiness for the blessing either. There's very little evidence of God's presence in his life. He seems far more interested in hunting, and he has found wives, but from the Canaanite tribes. We are told by scripture that these women really don't like Isaac or Rebecca. Esau is not worthy to receive the blessing. And so Rebecca does what she does.

But in tricking Isaac, she allows Isaac an opportunity to see for himself his error, which he does, I think.

For you see, Abraham heard the word of God and followed its command. And Abraham recognized Isaac, in a famous passage, by the sound of his voice. And yet when Isaac asked Jacob who he was and Jacob said, "Esau," Isaac did not recognize his voice, did not know who he was, as if he didn't really know the character of his two sons. But upon realizing his mistake as he did when Esau actually appeared, he knows he can't change the blessing that he has given, and he offers Esau another blessing.

Now all of this, I think, sets the stage for the nocturnal wrestling match that we read about today. Because, I think, in Jacob's encounter, you can see the pattern of Rebecca's actions. In Jacob's encounter, you can see Rebecca entering into the situation, realizing what had to happen, and from a position not of power, capable of coercing a different course of behavior through persuasion and trickery, guile, if you will, creating a situation where relationships could be restored. It is, I think, in embodying this pattern of behavior learned from Rebecca that Jacob encounters the man, we are told. Not an angel, not a spirit, a man who he wrestles with all night, neither of whom are able to gain the upper hand, if you will, neither of whom are able to cause the other to submit.

And Jacob asked his opponent his name, which is not forthcoming. But when asked his name, Jacob says simply, "Jacob." You will remember when Isaac asked his name, Jacob said, "Esau," pretending to be somebody else. But here Jacob says, "Jacob," as if to acknowledge who he really is, all of the good and all of the bad, all of the worthiness and all of the unworthiness, in trust and confidence that this is what the blessing requires. The blessing requires that he create a situation that doesn't involve him killing his brother and hopefully doesn't involve his brother killing him because that's what it means to embody the wisdom of the blessing.

So Jacob emerges from that match, saying that he has seen the face of God and yet his soul survives. The Old Testament is full of warnings that you can't see the face of God and have your soul survive. This is why Moses is told that he can't see the face of God, or you will remember Elijah and the cleft of the rock waiting for the still small voice of God. And yet Jacob, having ended this wrestling match, says that he has seen the face of God. Now my theory is that Jacob was actually wrestling Esau, his brother. It wasn't just a spiritual encounter, it was real. And in that combat, in that encounter, in that experience, Jacob saw the face of God in his brother, and his brother saw the face of God in him, and it was in that way that they became brothers again.

So Jacob asked for the blessing and receives it. They are brothers again. But Jacob, remembering all the lessons that Rebecca has taught him, doesn't stop there. Jacob has sent many gifts to his brother. We are told there's a long caravan of gifts, each section greater than the last. Jacob has carefully instructed all of his messengers to respect, glorify, magnify Esau, submitting themselves to his authority. And Jacob then does the same. Not only does he stand alone that night having sent his wives in their separate ways so that he is left without the family, for their protection perhaps, but also so he is alone to face Esau. He then offers Esau the gifts of his prosperity. Esau, of course, refuses these gifts, I suspect, hoping that Jacob would then insist that he take them. That's what I do.

But somehow, through all of this, their relationship is restored. Jacob, the self-sufficient, I don't need God, heel, has through his journey, launched and commissioned by his mother, Rebecca, learned of his need for God. He travels with God by his side and in his heart, and he has offered himself to Esau for the benefit of the blessing because that's what the blessing requires.

What Jacob has done, as Rebecca had done before him, is answer the question, what does it mean to wrestle with God? It means, I think, to strive and struggle here in this world with all of the uncertainties and challenges of life, to be in right relationship with other people and to be in right relationship with God. It is, I think, to realize that to be in right relationship with other people, you must do so through your relationship with God. It is by

seeing the presence of God in another that we feel our own compassion and empathy and love.

This is the lesson, I think, that Jacob learned from his mama, as we would say in the South. He embodied her wisdom and in doing so, fulfilled the promise. And from this point forward, he has a new name, Israel, to govern by the will of God. And it's not just his name, it is also the name of the people who follow God, who were identified with the descendants of Jacob, because Jacob learned the lesson that Rebecca taught him. And out of that, we have the nation of Israel. It's good to pay attention to what your mama teaches you.

Amen.