

## The Spirit of Wrestling with Angels

Forge the Soap Operas of your younger days; Forget *General Hospital*. Skip *All My Children*. Don't bother with *Days of Our Lives*. Forget today's soaps in their many incarnations, from *Chicago Med* to *Bridgerton*. Read Genesis instead! Every salacious plot of every soap opera ever broadcast can be found in the stories in the book known as Genesis. We think of the Bible as a holy book, and, because we do, we tend to think of the characters as holy people. Abraham. Noah. Jacob. But a close reading of the stories reveals that they are human, human, human. And today's story is no exception.

Jacob's life story has it all. It is a pivotal story to the foundations of Israel and Judaism. Consider the book of Genesis. Jacob's story takes up ten chapters out of fifty. Walter Bruggemann writes: "The narrative...portrays Israel in its earthiest and most scandalous appearance...(It) is not edifying in any conventional religious or moral sense...But for that very reason, the Jacob narrative is most lifelike. It presents Jacob in his crude mixture of motives. This grandson of the promise is a rascal compared to his faithful grandfather Abraham or his successful father Isaac."<sup>1</sup> Do you see the plot lines unfolding? With Abe for a grandfather and Ike for a dad ole Jake sure has some big sandals to fill!

So. Let's imagine Jacob's story as a soap opera, or even a prime time or an HBO mini-series. I don't know why someone hasn't thought of this! Lying. Cheating. Trickery. Conniving to be the number one son. Striving for daddy's approval. Running away from home. Sleeping with your wife but loving another. Intense sibling rivalry. Estrangement. Remorse. Nightmares.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 204.

Terror. And so much more. Jacob's story is more *Godfather* than God the Father. And while we are on it why does God pick the women and men he does? If you were God and had a choice would you choose Jacob?

Back to the story. Let's pick it up on the banks of the river.

Jacob was alone on the shores of the Jabbok River. Alone, it seemed, for the first time in years. Alone, like the youth who had fled his home with barely a shirt on his back.

He wondered if he had really accomplished anything during all these years away. He had worked hard and prospered. But what of the covenant his grandfather and father had made with God? Was he ready to finally assume responsibility for leading his clan and following Abraham's vision? How could he cope with the world of (grown-ups)?

Jacob laid his tired body down by the riverbank, but the ground was a harder bed for him at forty than it had been at twenty. The campfires across the river smoldered dimly against the black sky. The silence of the night was broken only by a dog barking plaintively somewhere far off. The moonless dark reminded him of the shadowed places he had stumbled through in his life: his father's blind embrace, the amazing unhappy surprise in the wedding chamber. Jacob wondered, in the dark of this night, what mystery awaited him and whether to emerge from the darkness into light, to assume responsibility of leading his clan and fulfilling Abraham's covenant. Or was it death, the final veil of darkness, that awaited him on the far shore of the river?"<sup>2</sup>

What has Jacob in this state is where he is going—and who he will meet—in the morning. He is going to meet with his estranged twin brother, the one with whom he wrestled in the womb. And he fears for his life.

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<sup>2</sup> Natalie Rosenblatt and Joshua Horwitz, *Wrestling with Angels: What the First Family of Genesis Teaches Us About Our Spiritual Identity, Sexuality, and Personal Relationships* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1995), 297,

Because this story is so compelling it has been told and retold, painted, sculpted, danced, taught. The very real image of struggling with our angels our demons our God ourselves in the darkest night is so real, so personal, so universal, so powerful that it has never lost its grip on our imaginations. When we wake, wide-eyed at 3 AM or 4 AM, adrenaline flowing, heart on a marathon, tossing and turning and fretting and aching about God knows what, we are the most alone. Even if someone is snoozing next to us, even if someone has an arm draped around us, we are the most alone. Even if the cat purrs on our pillow, we are alone. We are alone because no one can actually be in our skins, no one can actually totally enter our reality. And no one can wrestle our angels for us. No one can confront our demons for us. This is a story about the very truth of us, the very heart of us, the thing that goes bump/crash/bang in our lonely, old night. It is not just about the obvious. It goes deeper to the things that we have not told even our husband or mom or closest friend because we cannot put it into words. We all have these moments. It is part of being human. This is how it is for Jacob:

Jacob has reached the end of his homeward journey. He won't uncover the intent of his brother's heart until the next morning. But this night, on the evening of that fateful reckoning, Jacob will take stock of where he has been and what he has become. He is finally ready to face the spirit that haunts his waking and sleeping soul—and he is determined to test the limits of his power to overcome them.<sup>3</sup>

We, like Jacob, put it off as long as we can, this angel wrestling. We do everything and anything to avoid it. Take sominex. Drink vodka. Watch reruns of reruns. We think a lot about what has brought us to this night, this reckoning. We think about where we have been and the mistakes that we

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 296-297

have made. But one night, like Jacob, we are finally “ready to face the spirit that haunts” our waking and sleeping soul. “When we are alone in the stillness of the night, we face our worst fears and our deepest wishes. It is often at these dark moments that we discover who we really are. When we reach within ourselves for guidance, or call out to a higher power for comfort, we find out if we are truly alone, or in the company of others—our ancestors, our personal angels, our God.”<sup>4</sup>

At these moments there is, for us, always a metaphorical river to cross. There is always our Esau to face. There is always the anguish of the night before. The night before your case is heard in divorce court. The night before the meeting at work where all the slander and sophisticated revenge seeking are sure to erupt. The night before the family dinner, family visit, family civil war. The night before you face those things that were not your fault—the messes you inherited, were born into or just stumbled into. The night before all of those things and a hundred things like them.. Only you know what it is for you. It is the night before any moment when you face the truth of what you have done with your life, of how you have treated someone, of how you have behaved or behaved badly, of who you have hurt, of how you have avoided God. There is always a night before, a night of tossing and turning and rearranging the sheets and pillows; there is always the imagining which is almost always even worse than what actually happens in the morning. Our lives are filled with those moments when we act out tomorrow in our heads, when we imagine tomorrow in our hearts, when we fear tomorrow in our spirits.

For Jacob, this is such a moment, the moment of face to face, the moment of truth, the time of reckoning. It is the culmination of all that has

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 296.

come before, of all that he has done. And he is afraid, really afraid. He is afraid that his twin brother, Esau, with whom he “wrestled” in the womb, is out for revenge. So he thinks about how he will behave the next day to avert the possible violence. And every sentence—actually every word—of this great story is chosen to heighten the drama of it. Take verse 21, for example.

Jacob thinks: “Let me placate him with the tribute that goes before me, and after I shall look on his face, perhaps he will show me a kindly face.” You see what he is doing here. He surely isn’t sleeping. Rather he is planning how to avert the punishment he expects. Jacob plans to offer “stuff” before he shows Esau his face. You know. Send gourmet food baskets crammed with Godiva chocolates and Starbucks coffee, tickets to the NBA playoffs, gift cards to Sunoco Camel Fuel. Placate here literally means cover his face. Jacob is saying that he hopes what he offers will cover the anger in his brother’s face.<sup>5</sup> “To ‘look on his face’ is...generally used for entering the presence of royalty; and ‘show me a kind face,’ an idiom that denotes forgiveness, is literally ‘lift up my face’ (presumably, my ‘fallen’ or dejected face).<sup>6</sup> If this one verse contains this much meaning you can just imagine the depth and breadth of meaning in the entire passage!

Interestingly the author moves directly from Jacob’s scheming to the symbolic crossing of the stream. This is something we see often in history, in books, in movies and in our own lives. Caesar comes to the Rubicon. Everything changes. Ulysses leaves on his *Odyssey*. Everything changes. The Allied Armies cross the English Channel. Everything changes. And you come to your river, your mountain, your bridge. Once you cross, everything changes. And how did Caesar or Ulysses or Eisenhower sleep the night

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 180.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

before? What about you? There are always real and symbolic rivers to cross, mountains to climb, bridges to travel. Once you cross or climb there is no going back; you know things will never be the same.

And so Jacob, who has been traveling south from the high country of Gilead, crosses the river on his way to meet Esau who is heading north from Edom to meet him. And once he got the wives, slaves and kids across, he was alone. Alone. Again, this is so real. So human. No matter how many wives and kids he has on this night he is alone. He is alone as we always are on nights like this, nights before the scary thing, nights before the confrontation, nights before the river crossing, nights before the mountain climbing, nights before the truth facing.

Immediately—immediately!—after he was left alone “...a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn.” From Jacob’s point of view it is a man, but who, who, who is it? “It is part of the power of the wrestling that we do not know the name or see the face of the antagonist. To be too certain would reduce the dread intended in the telling.”<sup>7</sup> Not knowing makes things much, much worse. If I do not know the name of the disease, I do not know what is wrong with me. If I cannot identify what is making me feel crazy, I live in a miserable state of free floating anxiety. Not being sure about who the adversary is makes it so much more real, human, universal, modern. Is that you God? Angel? Demon? Brother? Self?

Of the hundreds of thousands of words written to answer that let me share Robert Alter’s.

But the real point, as Jacob’s adversary himself suggests when he refuses to reveal his name, is that he resists identification. Appearing to Jacob in the dark of the night, before the morning when Esau will be reconciled with Jacob, he is the embodiment

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<sup>7</sup> Brueggemann, 267.

of portentous antagonism in Jacob's dark night of the soul. He is obviously in some sense a doubling of Esau as adversary, but he is also a doubling of all with whom Jacob has had to contend, and he may equally well be an externalization of all that Jacob has to wrestle with within himself. A powerful physical metaphor is intimated by the story of wrestling: Jacob, whose name can be construed as 'he who acts crookedly,' is bent, permanently lamed, by his nameless adversary in order to be made straight before his reunion with Esau."<sup>8</sup>

Ok. That was a mouthful by a brilliant scholar, but he nails it. And to understand it I want you to think of the things with which you truly struggle in your dark night of the soul. For the things with which we struggle—wrestle—in some way embody all that confronts us, troubles us, haunts us. The one with which Jacob wrestles is somehow Jacob; the one with which we wrestle is somehow us. For Jacob to truly meet his brother face to face in the morning, for Jacob to transcend his past, for Jacob to reconcile self to God, self to brother, self to self, he must go to the mat. And so it is with us. For us to meet, to transcend, to reconcile, to prevail over the demons within and without, we must go to the mat. Going around just doesn't do it. "In the night, the divine antagonist tends to take on the features of others with whom we struggle in the day."<sup>9</sup>

We are surrounded by those who try to go around, who let the darkness prevail. I heard stories of those who let the demons win. And behind each of them is the story of one or many who gave in to the dark side. There is trickery and greed and malice and indifference and shameful selfishness. There is a failure to follow the simple and clear

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 181.

<sup>9</sup> Brueggemann, 267

commandments—the ten from Moses and the one from Jesus. They need to face the one who waits for them on the river. And so we ask:

“Who is the man who wrestles with Jacob on the riverbank and finally blesses him with a new name? Is he his departed father, Isaac, from whom Jacob had tried to wrest a blessing? Is this ‘man’ his twin brother, Esau, with whom he wrestled in the womb and whom he must confront the next morning? Is he Jacob’s shadow self, the darker part of his psyche that doubts and fears—that he must integrate before he can become whole? Could he be an angel of his brother’s revenge? Or is this ‘man’ in fact an angel of God, Jacob’s spiritual destiny wrestling with his worldly ambitions for primacy in his soul.

It seems to me that the man is all of these. As Jacob wrestles through the night with his personal demons, he subdues each of these incarnations and transforms himself in the process. The withholding father gives way to the contentious brother, who finally yields to the angel of God, a messenger announcing Jacob’s new spiritual identity...the break of dawn sheds new light on the meaning of the night’s dream. Jacob realizes that he has finally scaled the ladder connecting heaven and earth, and indeed his soul has *seen God face to face*.

Finally, after decades of humiliation and flight, Jacob wins the blessing he once sought in his father’s tent. Self-affirmation was never something he was able to cajole from his father or usurp from his brother. Blessedness could only be claimed as his birthright when he had prevailed over his doubts and fears, when he had wrestled against his darkest demons. Only after enduring a long midnight of despair could Jacob earn the blessing of the dawn’s light.”<sup>10</sup>

And so it is with us. When you are strapped onto a table and someone is sticking a probe precariously close to your heart. When the college tuition bill says: surprise! You owe us \$5000 more than you expected. When you

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<sup>10</sup> Rosenblatt and Horwitz, 299.



squeeze your eyes shut so that you don't have a major panic attack during your MRI. When you are really afraid about what will happen to you when you are old and sick. When, when, when...what is yours? Those are all real moments when we wrestle. Those are the times when we must face up and fess up. Those are the times of truth and transformation, of new names and new identities, of battle scars and benedictions. Those are the times when we come face to face with all that we are and all that we can and should be. Those are the times when we come face to face with the God within. And although we may limp away, we are never, never the same.

Amen. Reverend Sharon Smith. The Gathering of Baltimore. August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021