

October 19, 2025

Rev. Mike Eller

"Jacob Jockeys at the Jabbock"

Genesis 32:22-31

9 times out of 10, if you sneeze in the presence of other Americans, you will get at least one "God bless you". There's something about a "ha choo" that turns ordinary people into on-the-spot priests. Here, "God bless you" is the culturally polite thing to say. Now, you may already know this but the origins of this casual benediction go way way way back. One origin story has it that it was originated by St. Gregory the Great in the year 594 AD as a formal prayer said in response to a sneeze. The belief at the time was that the air was filled with toxic impurities and sneezing risked expelling their soul out into the dangerous air. Saying "God bless you" countered this risk of soul-propulsion. This gives a whole new meaning to covering your mouth when you sneeze.

I'm very familiar with a second blessing of sorts, spoken mostly by folks who live in the south. During the years we lived in Texas and North Carolina, we too mastered the art of the southern, "bless your heart". While the origins of this blessing aren't exactly known, there is agreement that it has a wide range of meanings, from heartfelt sympathy to passive-aggressive condescension to an all-out veiled insult. The southern, "bless your heart".

Another blessing, not half-hearted as the other two, happens here at the close of every Sunday church service. It's when I offer the charge and benediction as a way of pronouncing God's blessing over you as you begin the new week. With this, each service ends, in a way, with a "God bless you".

So, if you're prone to sneezing a lot, come to church often, and are the object of southern sympathies, you could be on the receiving end of drive-by blessings all the time. Some blessings come free and uninvited. Some blessings you have to wrestle for and may leave you wounded.

That describes the story of Jacob in the book of Genesis. You might remember that Jacob was a twin. Jacob and his brother Esau came into the world already struggling with one another. (I know firsthand the tension that

is twin rivalry.) Esau was born first, red and strong, a hunter. Jacob came out gripping his brother's heel, which is foreshadowing in their unfolding drama. Their mother, Rebekah, named the younger child, Ya'akov, Jacob—meaning “supplanter,” or “heel-grabber”—after a vision that he would one day overtake, or supplant, the older. And that's how their story went. Jacob always grasping for what wasn't his—first Esau's birthright, then their father's blessing—and always through cunning and deceit.

When Esau found out that his birthright had been stolen, he was enraged, and Jacob ran for his life, fleeing east to his uncle Laban's house. There he built a family, gathered wealth, and learned firsthand what it feels like to be tricked after Laban deceived him into marrying both of his daughters. Decades later, God tells him that it was time to go home. But home meant facing Esau. And before he sets out, he learns that Esau and an entourage of men are in fact on their way to search for him.

So Jacob, full of fear, sends his family, his servants, and his possessions across the Jabbok River, which was a tributary to the Jordan River, and for the first time in this narrative, he is alone. Alone in the darkness, alone with his thoughts, away from his family, disconnected from his wealth and possessions. He's left alone to wrestle. And he wrestles all night long.

The text says he does so with a mysterious being. Part of the mystery is how this wrestling partner arrives. It says that Jacob is alone with no mention of being approached. Perhaps Jacob is wrestling with himself. He is there in the dark, but spiritually-speaking he is also struggling in the shadows internally.

Maybe that night, he wrestled with the version of himself his mother said he was destined to be, the supplanter, the one who always had to grab, to scheme, to get ahead. Perhaps he wrestled with that small, buried part of himself that had been silenced by all the expectations placed on him. After a lifetime of living out someone else's story, maybe Jacob finally came face-to-face with his own soul—and out of that struggle, a new man was born, carrying not someone else's calling, but God's blessing for him.

While some traditions say that it was a man he encountered, centuries later, Hosea called this mysterious being an angel. And by the end of the struggle, the text says that Jacob knows that it was God.

I have always loved this image of the God who wrestles with Jacob, and by extension, us. The God who wrestles with us, is a God who invites our vulnerability. Yet, we're taught to despise weakness, to push through pain, to

keep smiling when our hearts are breaking. We act as if struggle and doubt disqualify us from faith. But the truth is, every honest life carries a share of fear and failure. We must not be quick to call those things defeat, when they may be the very places where God is trying to meet us, to change us.

In her book, *Scarred By Struggle, Transformed By Hope*, the Benedictine nun and writer Joan Chittister, talks about eight elements she identifies in Jacob's story. These are: change, isolation, darkness, fear, powerlessness, vulnerability, exhaustion, and scarring. That's a pretty daunting list. Do you identify yourself in any of those? Feeling isolated, fearful, powerless, or exhausted lately? These are also elements of our own story, all of us.

Yet, Chittister says: "God does not leave us there, and in each human struggle there is a corresponding divine gift available to us — conversion, independence, faith, courage, surrender, limitations, endurance, and transformation."

In the struggle, there is an exchange. It is out of this vulnerability that a blessing can emerge if we are willing enough to enter the fight for it. Frederick Buechner characterizes this wrestling match between Jacob and God as the "magnificent defeat of the human soul at the hands of God." I hear in this the kind of defeat we would welcome, if we were wise enough. The kind where something must be overcome, subdued, before the life-giving fruit emerges to take its place.

I'm often reminded of that scene in C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, when Mr. Beaver is talking to young Susan about the great lion, Aslan. Susan is nervous about finally meeting Aslan, thinking before that he was just a man. She asks Mr. Beaver, "Is he quite safe?" "Safe?" responds the beaver, "Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. The God who wrestles with us invites us into a vulnerability that risks scars, that may leave us wounded, yet those wounds become wombs through which a new blessing can emerge. Safe? Not by human standards. But good? Always.

In Jacob's struggle with the mysterious being—the man, the angel, God—seeing that it will not overcome Jacob, wounds him by putting his hip out of alignment. This gives Jacob a permanent limp as he exits the struggle. In this, our wounds are not vanished but become part of our story, sites by which we remember all that was overcome.

Think about your own journey for a moment. When have you faced a struggle that left its mark — a wound, yes, but also a blessing? When have you wrestled with God, or with life itself, and come out of it seeing yourself — and your path — more clearly?

I found it inspiring to hear how Australian priest Jo Inkpin preached this passage in light of the wounds of her own transgender transformation. She said: “Each wound...can be a space where God can work. Our wounds, like the wounds of Jesus, however horrendous, can become places of transformative love and life for others. In my case, I was literally wounded by surgery in very intimate places, profoundly interconnected to my deepest self and sense of identity. Like Jacob in our story, I have consequently limped from my wound.”

Wounds become wombs. Our wounds can be holy sites where we encounter the living God. When Jacob limped from the banks of the Jabbok, he named it Peniel, which means “face-to-face with God”. That place represented his coming clean with who he really was, his true identity, scars and all. There he came face-to-face with Esau, God, and his past. Jacob’s arrogant stride becomes a humble limp, being struck in a very vulnerable spot. And out of the struggle, he receives a new name, Israel, which means “one who wrestles with God.”

Helen Keller, who knew more than her share of life’s difficulties, said: “The struggle of life is one of our greatest blessings. It makes us patient, sensitive, and Godlike. It teaches us that although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it.”

After leaving Peniel, Jacob finally meets Esau, the brother he feared, and something miraculous happens: Esau runs to him, embraces him, and weeps. The deceiver is met not with vengeance, but with grace. The God who wrestles with us, always meets us with grace. It’s a beautiful story that challenges the ways we think about God’s blessing and how it might be received. So that, “God bless you” might not be the safe, casual benediction we sometimes think.

I want to close with a poem by the reverend artist, Jan Richardson, called *Jacob’s Blessing*:

If this blessing were easy,
anyone could claim it.
As it is,
I am here to tell you
that it will take some work.

This is the blessing
that visits you
in the struggling,
in the wrestling,
in the striving.

This is the blessing
that comes
after you have left
everything behind,
after you have stepped out,
after you have crossed
into that realm
beyond every landmark
you have known.

This is the blessing
that takes all night
to find.

It's not that this blessing
is so difficult,
as if it were not filled
with grace
or with the love
that lives
in every line.

It's simply that
it requires you
to want it,
to ask for it,
to place yourself
in its path.
It demands that you

stand to meet it
when it arrives,
that you stretch yourself
in ways you didn't know
you could move,
that you agree
to not give up.

So when this blessing comes,
borne in the hands
of the difficult angel
who has chosen you,
do not let go.
Give yourself
into its grip.

It will wound you,
but I tell you
there will come a day
when what felt to you
like limping

was something more
like dancing
as you moved into
the cadence
of your new
and blessed name.

Amen.