

THE NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | OCTOBER 16, 2022

GENESIS 32:22-31 | PSALM 121 | 2 TIMOTHY 3:14-4:5 | LUKE 18:1-8

I was at a wedding last month, and during the speeches, someone mentioned what a strange feeling it was that all these different people from all over the world from all these different times in their life were in one room together on one single night. They said they when they looked around the room, it was like their whole life had culminated in this one moment of joy.

Jacob has a similar experience in today's Hebrew Bible reading. Except instead of being a cause for joy, seeing the totality of his life is a cause for anxiety. And not without reason. By the time we get to this part of Genesis, Jacob has fleeced his brother Esau out of his blessing. He's tricked his blind father. He's run away from home to avoid any consequences. And there's a whole issue with Laban which we don't need to get into, but suffice it to say that it's not good.

Point is Jacob's whole life has been based on quick deceptions, sort-of half-truths, and expedient bargains. Whenever he's been faced with the cost of these decisions, Jacob has thought, "That sounds like a problem for Future Jacob." But now he has become "Future Jacob."

Today's Hebrew Bible reading finds Jacob preparing to go back to his home and meet his brother Esau again. And he is, to put it mildly, a wreck. He gets word that Esau is coming to meet him with four hundred men. Which doesn't sound great. So Jacob starts coming up with plans again. He sends over five hundred animals to Esau to try to soften him up a bit. And Jacob starts getting worried about what's going to happen to his family, so he splits them up and sends them out in different directions to save at least one branch. And at this moment, he is completely and totally alone, out under the stars.

The action starts at night. And it's important that this story happens at night. Because it's easy to cover all that anxiety up in the middle of the day. To crowd it out with noise and calls and emails and errands and all the rest. It's at night when "the shadows lengthen, and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed" that the struggle starts. That's when we're left alone with our histories and our actions and all that we're called to account for and make sense of. At 3 PM, all my frustration about life is directed at someone in Route 17 who is wealthy enough to buy a BMW, but apparently not wealthy enough to afford one with a turn signal. But at 3 AM? At 3 AM, it's just me staring at the wall.

And so Jacob, just like all of us, wrestles. He struggles. The text itself is a little bit evasive on who exactly he's wrestling with. Some people think it's God, some think it's Esau, or maybe some kind of divine messenger. That ambiguity is frustrating, but it also seems to be part of the point. Is Jacob struggling with God? Or is he struggling with these people from his life? And the answer is: yes. That in our struggles with God, we are always involved with the lives of others. And, more important, in our struggles with others, we are always wondering where, how, and maybe even if God is present.

So Jacob struggles. And this struggle continues until the sun is about to rise. And this other man may have started the fight, but Jacob won't give it up. He won't let go. And he won't give it up until he receives a blessing.

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For us, this is where the real heart of the story lies. Jacob has spent his whole life scheming for blessings. Those are blessings that he has taken, oftentimes from other people. But now Jacob realizes he needs a different kind of blessing. Not a blessing he can take, but the kind of blessing that has to be received. The kind of blessing that has to be given to him.

And in this moment of struggle, what Jacob wants most of all is to know that his life, full of mistakes as it is, is capable of being redeemed. “Redeemed” doesn’t mean that it can all be fixed or undone. That’s not going to happen. Redemption means that all of his suffering and regret and confusion has meaning to it. And that is something that he can’t come up with for himself or steal from someone else. It’s something that can only be given to him.

The late Jonathan Sacks, the former chief rabbi of the UK, wrote a good column on this story where he relates it to his own struggles in life. These struggles are terrible. We would never wish them on anyone. We would avoid them if we could. And yet, he writes, “They moved us from the surface to the depths, where we discovered strengths we did not know we had, and a clarity of purpose we had hitherto lacked. I have learnt to say to every crisis: ‘I will not let you go until you bless me.’”¹

The point Rabbi Sacks is making here is not that it’s good to look on the bright side or see the glass as half full or that things that seem bad are actually good. The point is that even in our struggles, our stories and histories are capable of being redeemed. God gives us courage so that our pain makes us compassionate toward the pain of others. God gives us endurance so that our struggles help us understand the struggles of others. And God gives us wisdom so that our failures make us sympathetic toward the failures of others. That’s what Sacks means when he talks about being blessed by a crisis.

That idea isn’t quite as strange as it might seem at first glance. If you were here at our blessing of the animals last Sunday, you may remember that we read the well-known prayer of St. Francis together. And part of that prayer goes, “Grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love.” Same idea. The way I redeem my grief is by consoling others. The way I redeem my loneliness is by caring for others. And the way I redeem my despair is by loving others.

When we console, understand, and love, we are redeeming our histories and finding blessing in the crisis. It is as if the whole of our life, all of our joys and sorrows, complaints and hopes, tears and laughter, were brought to bear in this one moment. Because all of God’s great love for the world has been poured into our lives.

This is how God blesses Jacob and all of us. Not with anything that can be taken or bought or gained for ourselves. But with something that can only be given to us: a life that has been redeemed. A life that is still full of hurts and pains and struggles. A life that often feels out of joint and confused. And yet, a life that perseveres in bearing the mercy of Jesus to a world in need.

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¹ Jonathan Sacks, *The Power of Ideas: Words of Faith and Wisdom* (John Murray Press, 2021), 115.