

The Blessing is in the Struggle
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Genesis 32:22-32

²² The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³ He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. ²⁴ Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. ²⁵ When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. ²⁶ Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."

²⁷ So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." ²⁸ Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." ²⁹ Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. ³⁰ So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." ³¹ The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip. ³² Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle.

This is the Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

My favorite book growing up is called *A Barrell of Laughs, A Vale of Tears* by Jules Pfeiffer. Even as an adult I will open it every couple years and read it with delight. It was actually the first book I read to Alanna after she was born.

The book is about a prince named Roger who starts off always smiling and laughing. And his laughter is so contagious, that whenever he gets close to another human being they immediately burst out laughing too. So Roger grows up knowing nothing but smiles and laughter. He doesn't work. He doesn't struggle. He's never sad or troubled or stressed. But he also has no true relationships, no true connection with other people or the world, or even a sense of who he is, beyond someone who always smiles and laughs.

So the wise wizard J. Wellington Wizard sends Roger on a quest. On this quest, Roger is changed into different animals and objects so that people will stop laughing around him, and can actually be themselves. The quest starts out with Prince Roger loafing around for years in the Forever Forest. It's a place you can enter, but is almost impossible to leave. He stills his days laughing and joking and never getting too close to other people. A few years in, though, he finally starts spending more time around the people who are lost in the Forever Forest with him. He hears for the first time real stories, real laughter, real singing, and real heartache and pain. And surprising to him, he starts caring about them.

As the story continues on to the Dastardly Divide and Sea of Screams and Mountain of Malice, Roger starts to experience some of real life himself. He faces hunger and thirst. He gets betrayed by a best friend. He falls in love. He gets his heart broken. He is mocked and scorned by friends, and helped by

complete strangers. He gets tired and worn down and sacrifices his own strength and health for others.

At the end of the book Roger is no longer always smiling or laughing. And he can no longer force other people to laugh in his presence. But somehow, he is actually happier than when he first started out. There is something more to his life now. There's connection. There's friendship. There's sacrifice. There's love. Prince Roger discovers a much bigger and more complicated world, full of life and love, relationships and struggle. It is in that struggle and in that journey that Roger experiences true blessing and true life.

I love this book, partly because it's funny and smart and well written and full of great characters. But I also love the book because I find that like Roger, I too experience more life and love and true joy not when everything is easy, not when I am escaping the world and its troubles. But instead I find true blessing in the times of struggle and messiness. I find true blessing in moments of real connection with others, when I face real stories and pain and joy, when I not just receive, but give and sacrifice, love and am loved. It is not when I play it safe that life is best, but when I follow God into the broken places, the messy places, the hard places, and see God at work there.

The story of Jacob in Genesis could have been a simple one. God could have blessed Jacob 20 years earlier and given him his wealth, his safety, his family, and promise then and there. But God works differently. God's blessing doesn't come with a snap of a finger. It doesn't come as a single mountaintop moment.

For Jacob, this blessing comes only after years of leaving home, sleeping without a bed, working under the sun each day, knowing what its like to be on the other side of deception and trickery, experiencing love and loving others, and seeing hope and beauty and God in all the messiness of life. And here on the river bank, Jacob's greatest blessing comes in a night he can't sleep, on the day before he must face the wrong he did to his own brother, and with a divine being who won't let him go no matter how hard he tries to wrestle him away.

God's blessing comes through struggling, through journeying, through wrestling with God and others, and growing as beautiful and imperfect humans made in the image of God.

We see this most fully in the life of Jesus. Jesus doesn't stay hidden away on a mountaintop or Temple. He walks down dusty roads and sails on troubled seas. He touches lepers and eats with outcasts. He has little money and trusts in the hospitality of strangers. He goes not where the world is neat and clean and easy, but where things are messy and dirty, and where true healing and grace is needed. Instead of a throne of power or privilege, Jesus follows the path that leads him to wrestling with God in the Garden of Gethsemane and dying on the cross on Golgotha. He does this, not because it is easy or comfortable or safe. But because that is where real love, real healing, real holiness is. That is where the the full blessing is given, not just for him, but for the whole world.

None of us are Jesus. But we are people of faith, called to follow God as a lifelong journey. We are people who are called to join in Jacob's wrestling, not seeking the easy blessing, but the full and real one.

Reflection Questions:

This week I invite you to reflect on two questions. I find it can be helpful to have a journal or notebook with you and write down your responses. Writing them as letter directly to God can be especially helpful.

1. Is there a moment in your life that was a struggle, but also brought you closer to God and other people? Write about that moment and share with God what it meant to you.
2. If our greatest blessings come in the midst of struggle, where may God be calling you to go? Is there a place in our community or world that's not safe or easy, but where you can go and get messy and love others?

Closing Prayer:

Thank you God, that even in our greatest struggles you are there, striving with us, never leaving our side, and blessing us through love and grace. Help me to see your presence. And guide me to enter into the broken and messy places of our world, knowing your light shines brightly there. Amen.