

The Revered Theo Robinson's Sermon for August 2, 2026

Genesis 32:22-31 - "The Blessing"

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Continuing with Jacob's story, a lot has happened since last week's fiasco. Jacob is homeward bound after 20 years in Paddan-aram. During his two-decade sojourn in Haran, he has become exceedingly rich and the father of 12 sons who will become the namesakes for the 12 tribes of Israel. Despite the trickery and manipulation that we have experienced from Jacob, God seems to have been with him at every turn, working continually for his good and ensuring Jacob's success in every endeavor.

But now, Jacob faces danger all around. Going back over the events that have transpired during the chapters of Genesis since last week, Jacob has made promises never to go north again (Genesis 31:43-53). Forced south, he learns that his brother Esau – whom Jacob treated horribly in the past, as you remember (25:29-34; 27:1-45) – approaches with 400 men. Jacob divides his camp into two, accepting the reality that Esau may easily strike down one of them (32:7-8). He prays a desperate prayer to God, begging to be delivered from the hand of his brother (32:9-12). He lines up gifts to alleviate Esau's anger (32:13-21). Then, at the outset of today's passage, under the cover of darkness, he sends his family and belongings across the Jabbok River (32:22-23). We're not given a reason why Jacob is off standing alone, why he didn't go with his family, but while he is alone, out of nowhere, someone wrestles with him. The text doesn't tell us who the assailant is, making us wonder if Esau is finally getting his long-sought revenge.

It is a curious incident. An unidentified man wrestles with Jacob until dawn. There's no information about who this man is, or where he came from, or why he attacked Jacob. When this strange man realizes he isn't going to win the fight, he hits Jacob in the hip, injuring him. The man begs Jacob to let him go, which he does, on one condition. Jacob asks for a blessing. What an interesting thing to request of a man who wrestles you in the dead of night for no obvious reason. Why would Jacob request a blessing from his assailant?

When we think of a blessing, we think of receiving the blessing of God. It's something good and wholesome. Something to be cherished. It brings us comfort. However, to bless each other is to lay aside all hostilities and affirm the goodness in the other person. Good things often accompany blessings, like generous gifts. When God blesses someone, it means that their needs are met. They're made whole and surrounded by peace. When Jacob requests a blessing, he is asking for the wrestling to stop and that there be peace between the two men.

Ultimately, this odd stranger gives Jacob a blessing, and renames him "Israel", while refusing to provide Jacob with his own name. Then he disappears as mysteriously as he came. But who was this man? The name Jacob gives to the place, Peniel, let us know that his assailant was God. In Hebrew, Peniel (or Penuel) means "the face of God".

We often shy away from this story because Jacob's wrestling with God is not always seen in a good light. It's more likely to be read as Jacob's lack of faith in God. And a lack of faith, in many circles, is deemed a crisis. However, if we don't wrestle or struggle with God, our faith remains at a basic level, untested and

unexamined. We sometimes feel like we need to be at peace with God before entering a church or other sacred spaces. But the Bible welcomes those struggling with the divine – seeing this struggle as central to Israel’s identity. In fact, even the name Israel proves this statement. In Hebrew, there are several translations for “Israel”, including “God is righteous”, “God is exalted”, “God shines”, and “God rules”. Israel can also be translated as “wrestles with God”.

God doesn’t expect us, or our faith, to be perfect. Jacob’s blessing from God doesn’t come when he’s achieved superstar status as a saint. It comes when he’s made a mess of his life, feels trapped, is all alone, and has nowhere to go. He’s in the middle of a wrestling match. But there, amid darkness and confusion, God gives him goodness. We too, amid our struggles, can be assured that God still has good things in store for us.

This is the story of Jacob, and of God’s people Israel, who will grow from his 12 sons. Jacob’s refusal to let go of God is what raw, honest faith looks like. Faith is not just passively submitting to God; it is grappling, contending, tenacious, and persistent. Faith is a wrestling match. It’s grabbing hold of God and refusing to let go, despite the struggle, the time, the risks, the injury. Because, in the end, the blessing is worth it. This is the story of Jacob, and of Israel. And it is our story too.

So, what is your “Peniel” moment? When have you wrestled with God? When have you seen God’s face? What are the battle scars that have been imprinted on your life and faith? The blessing on offer to us from Genesis 32 is that even in the midst of real struggle, in the darkest of nights, if we refuse to let go, yes, we may come away injured, marked, limping – as did Jacob. But if we just hold on, we might also come away with a blessing and having caught a glimpse of the very face of God. We *will* wrestle with our faith at times in our lives, and sometimes faith itself feels like wrestling. And we won’t come out of the match unscathed, but we *will* emerge blessed and changed.

As Glinda and Elphaba say, “Who can say if I’ve been changed for the better? But because I knew you, I have been changed for good.”

Amen.