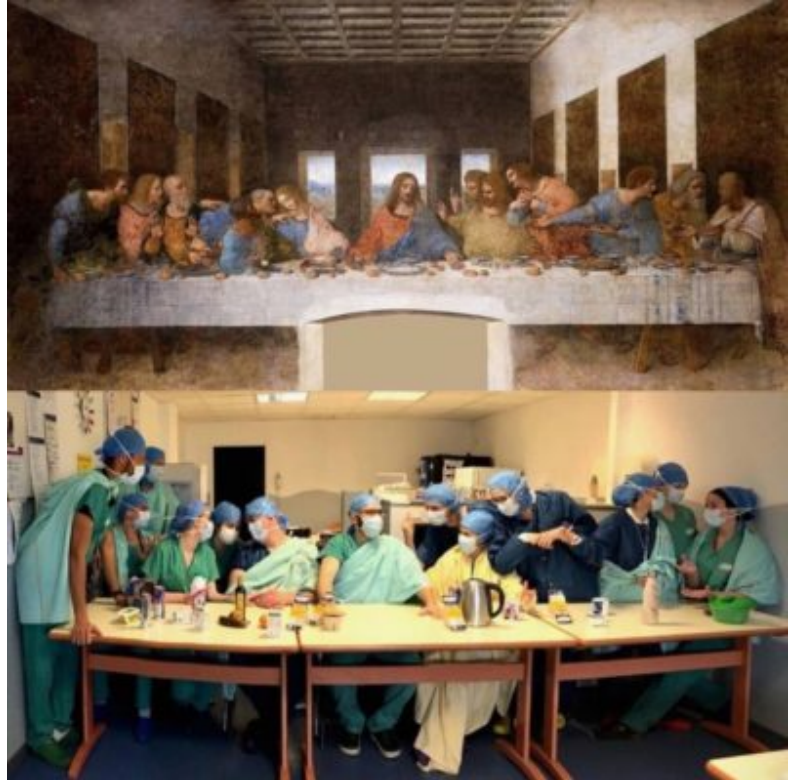


“Wrestling in the Dark” by Erica Lloyd



Top, Leonardo da Vinci's The Last Supper, 1495-98. Bottom, doctors at a hospital in Paris performing a tableau vivant of the painting.

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Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

I'm in a season of my spiritual journey where the Spirit seems to speak loudest to me through scriptures that drive me crazy. When it comes to my favorite verses, the Spirit and I sit in companionable silence like an old married couple. It's stories like today's Genesis reading – with a human that annoys me and a God who confounds me – where the Spirit seems bent on conversation. The scripture keeps popping up in my head, plaguing me with questions days later until I finally concede

and decide to engage. And so, like Jacob, I wrestle.

First: there is the problem of Jacob. There are a lot of imperfect humans in the Bible that I love – if you heard me preach back in April, you know I'm partial to Thomas, but I also love poor, hapless Peter, and Martha and Mary, and so many others – but Jacob was just not one of them.

A little recap of Jacob's life to this point: He emerges from the womb already grasping at his brother's heels. As a young man he withholds food from his starving brother until Esau hands over his birthright, which confers 'head of household' status and the right to a double portion of the inheritance. To add insult to financial injury, Jacob lies to his elderly father to steal Esau's blessing. While it's Jacob's mother who suggests this deception, Jacob buys in once he begins, lying to his blind father twice to affirm that it is Esau that stands before him. When the plot is discovered, Jacob flees, taking refuge at his uncle Laban's home. Jacob gets a taste of his own medicine when Laban deceives him into marrying Leah, the older sister of his beloved Rachel. Jacob eventually gets his preferred bride, but is quickly back to scheming for material wealth by breeding his uncle's flocks to his own advantage. His relationship with Laban's family begins to deteriorate as his cousins start to feel jealousy at Jacob's burgeoning wealth; his scheme is discovered, and again Jacob flees, this time with two wives, two maids, and 11 sons in tow.

It's on this journey that Jacob prepares to meet Esau for the first time since stealing his blessing. And this is where we pick up with today's Old Testament reading. After Jacob hears that his brother is approaching with a small army, he sends his family away and spends the night alone, and, one can imagine, more than a little afraid – until God shows up as a mysterious stranger and wrestles with him until daybreak. Once again, Jacob grasps at blessing, has the audacity to hold the Creator of the Universe in a Full Nelson until he gets what he

wants. "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

In sum: Jacob is always wanting more, and it seems there's little he won't do to get it; he runs from the consequences of his shady dealings; and always hyperaware of his status, he seems to infect everyone he meets – his uncle and cousins, his wives, his children – with the urge to struggle for position and power. I want likeable main characters – and Jacob ain't it.

As much as I dislike Jacob, the harder thing for me to swallow in this passage was the way God acts. Why show up to wrestle with Jacob in the dark? And on top of that, being a *bad* wrestler? Omnipotent Creator of the Universe struggling to take on Jacob – he wasn't even the tough brother?! And most troubling, there's that issue of striking Jacob's hip. Maybe I was being a little over-sensitive, but I began chewing on this scripture back in April, around the time I was doing a risk-benefit analysis of seeing my chiropractor to work on my left hip in the midst of a global pandemic killing hundreds of thousands of people. So this image of God reaching out and striking this human body felt a little... personal.

A few years ago I wrestled hard with theodicy and trying to understand why suffering happens. The place I landed, the place that, right or wrong, allowed me to love God again, is to believe that God always wants wholeness – and anything else comes from someone or something that is Not God. I had come too far and fought too hard to believe in God's goodness to accept this anecdote like it was no big deal that God is lightly maiming someone – even someone I don't particularly like.

So what did this passage have to say to me?

My first take was to question the account of God hurting Jacob. Did God *really* strike Jacob's hip, or did Jacob injure *himself* while wrestling and merely assign the blame to God?

While Jacob may have been one of the first, he certainly wouldn't be the last human to fault God for the suffering that resulted from his own actions.

Indeed, I discovered that in the Schocken translation of the first five books of the Bible, which seeks to preserve the literary devices of the Hebrew original, Jacob's injury occurs in the passive voice, without ascribing the action to God: "The socket of Yaakov's thigh **had been dislocated** as he wrestled with him."

That simple change in perspective seemed to me like the Holy Spirit saying: Erica, try not to get angry at Me for things that aren't My fault. I don't always succeed, but I do have a little mantra that I say to myself in situations where it feels like I'm being kicked when I'm down: *Remember who is doing the kicking*. Regardless as to whether it's the enemy, my own hubris, or other people who are responsible for my suffering – I have to remind myself to resist the instinctual urge to blame God.

But it's hard. And so I actually found a tiny bit of compassion for Jacob: this was an imperfect human's imperfect understanding of his strange encounter with the Almighty – that's actually kind of relatable.

But as I continued to chew on this passage, I kept thinking: well what if God *did* strike Jacob's hip? After all, Jacob fled first from Esau, then Laban. What if a hobbled hip *is* wholeness for someone whose life has been built on running away? Just before Jacob must face his oldest deception, the one that has shaped so much of his own life and his brother's destiny as well, God makes it clear there is no exit strategy.

There is something both appealing and problematic in this interpretation. On the one hand, it seems to make a lot of sense – *I* would certainly entertain the idea if I were in God's shoes. On the other hand, there is a logical extension

to this idea that God would make us suffer for our own good, and as previously stated, I do not cosign that argument. I believe whole-heartedly that God can redeem and transform our suffering, but *causing* the suffering to happen is a different thing. A God who harms people, even in the service of some greater end, is not a God I'm able to love.

So then what? I sat with these first two interpretations of the reading for a few weeks: God didn't strike Jacob's hip, God did, God didn't... feeling like I was still missing something. It wasn't until my body started to loosen up that I could shake off my preoccupation with whether or not God is going around breaking legs, and remembered that, right, the *physical* wrestling match has always been a metaphor for a *spiritual* one. This scripture really isn't about hips, Erica.

So I turned back to the story, and reread the Schocken translation again. It sets the scene along the Yabbok river as a turning point for Jacob. "He arose during that night, took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children to **cross** the Yabbok **crossing**. He took them and brought them **across** the river; he brought **across** what belonged to them. And Yaakov was left alone."

As the translation notes: "The stage has been set for something mysterious to happen with a nighttime backdrop and the accented references to crossing, which clearly refer to more than just the river... At issue is Yaakov's whole life and personality."

That explanation made me I realize: this story is about being at a crossroads. In approaching the brother that he wronged so many years ago, Jacob has the opportunity to redefine how he interacts with others, and therefore, also redefine his relationship with God. And of course that makes sense of why God was faring so poorly in this wrestling match – God will struggle with us but never *force* us to follow. God wrestles with Jacob to see if he will lay aside his old ways. *This is*

the kind of fight God can lose every time.

Indeed, as dawn approaches, God is ready to accept defeat and walk away, but Jacob will not let go. "I will not let you go until you bless me," he says. God does, but only after a last-ditch effort to win Jacob over to a new identity, giving him new name. *You are no longer Jacob ("Heel-Snatcher") but your name shall henceforth be Israel ("God-fighter").*

But the new name didn't stick. Unlike Abraham, Sarah, Paul, and Peter, who – as far as I could confirm – all go by their new God-given names for the rest of their narratives, even in the midst of further episodes of deception, pettiness, and doubt – Jacob's new name is somehow lost for quite a while. In fact, Jacob is still referred to as Jacob for most of the next 5 chapters of Genesis; it isn't until his son Joseph takes over as the central character that Jacob is consistently called Israel.

So I see Jacob leaving this wrestling match with his old identity still intact. As Jacob, he reconciles with his brother but then immediately reject Esau's offer to travel together. As Jacob, he promises to catch up with Esau again in Seir, to the South, but instead immediately takes his family west and settles down in Succoth, seemingly without a further thought of his promise once Esau no longer seemed like a threat.

I can't help but think that Jacob seems to have totally missed the point of the wrestling match. His self-centered perspective was not shaken one iota; in his eyes, he won – he survived a face-to-face encounter with God *and* knuckled out another blessing. Jacob does not see the missed opportunity to let a personal encounter with the Almighty change him. Yet again, in his tunnel vision for what's gained, he doesn't notice what is lost.

Which made me think: when have I wrestled with God, and which

of those matches have I limped away from having totally missed the point?

The painfully obvious one is romantic relationships – the area of my life where I am most resistant to letting God have any control over the narrative. I have good judgment about a lot of things in life; picking boyfriends is not necessarily one of them. I have a pretty good idea of what I'm looking for in a partner, and yet I always seem to date someone who is... not it. God has tried to wrestle me away from men who could not be more clearly wrong for me if they had giant red Xs blinking over their heads. Over and over I emerge from the wrestling match feeling pleased as punch to have survived God's ill-fated attempts to change my mind.

How often have I limped because I struggled against God, rather than accepting the identity that God has for me? Why do I hang on to old habits and ways of being? Why am I convinced that in doing so, I've "won," when I'm clearly worse off for the fight?

Maybe because I have more in common with Jacob than I'd like to admit.

Maybe the next time God shows up in the dark with some hard questions, I'd be best served to sit down and listen instead of engaging in some misguided attempt at self-defense. Maybe the next time God wants to wrestle, I can set aside my need to be in control, and instead see what I can learn if I lay down the fight.

I pray that it might be so. AMEN.