

“GRAPPLING WITH FAITH”

Genesis 32:22-32; Philippians 2:1-13

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Today we’re going to examine the story of Jacob wrestling with an unnamed man in light of Paul Gauguin’s painting entitled “Vision After the Sermon.” This painting represents a major departure from the impressionism in which Gauguin first began to paint.



The impressionists rejected the notion that the truth of an object was captured in reproducing an object exactly as one encountered it in the world. They were fascinated with the ways in which light changed an object and devoted themselves not to an exact reproduction of an object, but to the impression it made on the mind. They were moving toward the practice of painting ideas rather than things, with the feelings produced in people from the objects.

With this work Gauguin is less concerned with the feelings behind a scene and more interested in ideas themselves. There’s a level of abstraction here that is a kind of precursor to Picasso. It’s not an abstract painting, but it is loaded with symbolism.

Notice the branch of an apple tree that divides the canvas in half, separating the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel from the women dressed in traditional Breton garb. The patch of red on which the scene takes place is meant to obscure the landscape and leave with the impression that it’s actually taking place in the women’s minds. They’re thinking on what the priest has been saying in the sermon, absorbing the message as spiritual insight.

Kelly Bagdanov expounds on its meaning in a post from 2021. She identifies the priest in the bottom right as Gauguin and the woman in the bottom left as Madeleine Bernard, the younger sister of his friend Emile. Gauguin is in love with Madeleine, but being married and various other reasons, she is “unavailable” to him. They are separated by the branch from the apple tree (symbol for the Garden of Eden) indicating that he has overcome temptation. That’s what Jacob’s struggle is about for him, the overcoming of temptation.

(<https://www.kellybagdanov.com/2021/01/08/vision-after-the-sermon/>).

That’s the lens I want to use as we look now at the story as told by scripture.

First, a little context: Jacob is on his way to meet up with his older (by a few minutes) twin brother, Esau. They have some bad history between them. When Jacob last saw him about fifteen years prior, Esau was looking to kill him. Jacob, whose name can mean “trickster” had cheated Esau first out of his birthright and then out of his father’s blessing reserved for the eldest son. He had the help of his mother Rebekah for the latter, who tells him to flee to her homeland where he settles with his uncle Laban and marries his two daughters, Leah and Rachel. While there he became a wealthy man by some sort of trickery. Then God tells him to go back to Canaan, the land promised first to Abraham, then Isaac and now Jacob

But Esau is still alive, and Jacob has no idea whether his anger has cooled or not. He does know that Esau is not a gentle man, a hunter by profession, used to killing things, and he knows that he possesses two things which by tradition should belong to Esau: the inheritance and the blessing. Jacob is the family patriarch, an honor and a position of power that by custom should have been Esau’s. So we should not be surprised that he sends his family, his servants, all his possessions across the river Jabok and remains behind while he waits to see whether Esau will receive the very generous gift marching at the head of the procession

This is when the man shows up who wrestles with Jacob through the night. We aren’t told who this man is. It’s possible that the storyteller records a dream in which Jacob wrestles with his conscience. Some Jewish commentary suggests that it’s Esau, while other scriptures referring to this story believe him to be either an angel or the “Lord, Himself.”

If we accept Bagdanov’s interpretation of the painting, Gauguin sees Jacob struggling with an ethical issue. He has cheated Esau out of what tradition would give him. The law of Primogeniture gives everything to the first-born son and Jacob circumvented that law. The problem with seeing the story as a struggle with one’s conscience is that God seems to have worked on Jacob’s behalf to bring these circumstances about. It’s not just about Jacob’s deception, but also about God’s desire that the tradition be overturned in favor of the younger son. What do you do when the faith God calls us to is countercultural?

Let’s set aside for a minute Gauguin’s personal struggle with conscience. Let’s put ourselves in the shoes of one of these other women who have heard the sermon and have come away with this vision of Jacob grappling with an angel. Perhaps the preacher has told us Jacob’s story of overcoming the ways in which life has disadvantaged him, the second son.

Perhaps Jacob is wrestling with the divine because he’s not sure there ever should have been a law or custom that gave everything to the first-born. Perhaps he resents the need to resort to trickery to get ahead in life, resents the danger that forced him to flee his home, and resents the fear he feels in the face of his brother’s anger. Perhaps his grip is strengthened by the sense of injustice that God has placed him in this awkward position. Perhaps his demand for a blessing is born of his faith in what the world should look like.

In Jacob’s grappling with God, could we not also see the struggle of indigenous peoples to exercise their right to maintain a homeland and a culture that honors their tradition? Could we

not see women who insisted on the vote, on equal pay, on respect and dignity? Could we not see people of color who opposed slavery, and fought for civil rights?

Life's not fair. We say this all the time. We say it stoically to ourselves and to our children as a way of getting over whatever injustice we may have experienced so that we can move on with life. But there are times when we just can't, when we need to stop and address the complaint to God and to hold on until we see or hear what God is doing, until the blessing comes. We can't go on tricking our way through life.

For his troubles, Jacob gets a new name: Israel. From "trickster" to "strives with God." From here on Judaism understands that first and foremost it has God to contend with. Always, it wants to know what God is doing in their world. Always, it looks to God for deliverance. Always it struggles to be faithful to God and when they fail, they look to God for forgiveness.

It is the same for us, who look to Jesus for our example, to Jesus who was not afraid to lay the charge of abandonment at God's feet. From the cross, he cries out that God had forsaken him. For his trouble he got a new name; not just the one who saves, but the one who lives!.

We live in a world that is not fair, and say we entrust to God's care the hungry and thirsty, the imprisoned and condemned, the stranger and the foe, the sick and the suffering. These and so many others are the ones we fight for on that blank red canvas. But it's not enough that we hold them before God because the preacher has reminded his audience that the story is about a struggle between Jacob and Esau.

There is a fundamental inequality between Esau and Jacob. The difference is resolved by both Jacob's generosity and Esau's letting go of his anger. As I think about the vision, I realize that I could be either Jacob or Esau. I have privileges in this life based on being what, on being male, on being educated. Unlike Jacob, my life has been gifted to me. Not that I haven't worked hard, but there are people who worked harder who have less. So grappling with faith means not just laying the injustices before God, but engaging the injustices I see in the world. It means not just praying for the hungry, but feeding the hungry, not just praying for the stranger, but welcoming the stranger; not just becoming aware of my implicit biases, but being actively anti-racist.

But that's my vision after the sermon. The struggle takes place in an undefined red space on the canvas. You have to fill in the context with those things about your life that disturb you. There are things which we need to bring to God, things we struggle over and with God. Do as Jacob. Hold on through the night. Insist on the blessing. Be the blessing to a world much in need of God's goodness and your love. Don't be afraid to grapple with faith. Amen.