

Blessed

Genesis 32:22-31



©Rev. Sarah Cooper Searight
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Stay at an AirBnb over the weekend and you could come across a stylishly distressed piece of wall art with some form of the phrase, “Blessed to be a blessing.”

Ask the person next to you at the grocery checkout line how they’re doing, they might say with a bright smile, “I’m blessed!”.

A while back, someone shared with me a delightful meme with the image of Fred Flintstone and the text, “Hold on Devil...not today or any other day! Feeling blessed and covered under the blood of Jesus!”

Open your mail and on the letter promising prayers of the congregation this week, is a hand-written note of blessing from your pastors.

Stand for a moment at the threshold of change—a hospital bed, a car packed with all your earthly belongings, the last meal for a while with everyone around the table—and a blessing bubbles up.

Look into the eyes of that neighbor who just proclaimed, “I’m blessed” in the grocery store line and realize that it is hard-won, and earnest, and might not be the same answer tomorrow.

As I allowed it to wander around in my head this week, I noticed that the language of blessing feels as ubiquitous as it is undefined. What is it to be blessed? Who does the blessing? Who is blessed? On one hand might it roll a bit too easily off the tongue, on the other hand doesn’t it breathe much needed space for the sacred into the ordinary.

I can’t help but conclude that one way or another, we yearn for it almost as badly as our brother Jacob did, all those many generations ago.

When the story of Jacob and Esau began, it was shrouded with blessing. That which was given by God to grandpa Abraham. Yet, even draped in it, the conflict in the womb was almost unbearable to their momma Rebecca as she carried them and wondered if it was worth living to endure this anymore.

From the beginning, always battling, struggling, wrestling, hustling, Jacob was of course right in the middle of it all; displaying a constant awareness of and need for blessing, which in the end, he could never quite possess as fully as it possessed him.

Remember:

It’s this same Israel, ne’ Jacob, who grabbed ahold of his brother Esau’s heel on the way out of the womb. Didn’t want to be left in...or out for a minute.

It’s this same younger twin, fairer and quieter but quite the up and coming trickster (that was in his name, you know), who bargained the birthright from his older brother for a bowl of hot lentil stew.

It’s this same momma’s boy who on her urging, donned the skins of goats on his smooth hands and neck to bring his old, blind papa a meal, so that the second-born might usurp the blessing meant for the first.

It’s this same prosperous yet cast-about man: One negotiated birth-right, one stolen blessing, two wives, two maids, eleven children and a whole host of possessions later who now heads back home

after twenty years and on a collision course with his brother. His greatest hope, perhaps his greatest trick, would be to pay his debt with as much as several herds of livestock, and escape with his life.

Not so fast.

Whoever this man was who met Jacob, and whether or not Jacob truly saw God and lived, the night's events served to disrupt the carefully laid plans. Plans so strategic, that if Esau and the 400 men with him coming to meet his younger brother were to be violent, Jacob would be forewarned and could easily flee both with his pride intact and his most prized possessions.

Yet God had different plans.

Isn't that often the way of it?

Jan Richardson is an artist and writer, an ordained minister in the United Methodist Church. She has for a long time been interested in liturgy of blessings, and has for a long time put effort into writing her own. The most recent ones are collected in a book entitled, *The Cure for Sorrow: A Book of Blessings for Times of Grief*.

These are deeply personal, more so perhaps than any others she's written, for they came to life in the time just before and in the three years following the sudden death of her husband Gary. It was supposed to have been ok, for the aneurysm was caught early. It was supposed to have been an easy fix. It wasn't.

With certainty we know that God's plan was not for her husband to die. That was the complications from surgery and the massive stroke he endured.

The disruption of his death, the upheaval of grief and reordering life, did however give a different lens to God's way and purpose for blessing. She says in the introduction to this collection that she persisted to write blessings even amid wrestling with God, and death, and life somehow to be lived after death, because of a conviction "that a blessing conveys God's desire for our wholeness and that it holds the ability to open us to the presence of God in any circumstance."

One of the blessings Richardson includes is called, "Jacob's Blessing". Named for and reflecting on this very Genesis text. It begins, "If this blessing were easy, anyone could claim it. As it is, I am here to tell you that it will take some work."

And so it did—a full night's work to secure it. In fact, it cost him significantly in time and ability. He lost the time he could have possibly traveled farther. He came away with a limp, causing him to physically move more slowly. After all that hard work of strategic planning and then struggle in the night, it turned out that Esau could advance far faster than Jacob hoped.

But there it was, the blessing: reconciliation.

For Esau did not come in violence but with tears of joy, arms open for a bear hug, turning down the offer of debt repayment in a scene reminiscent of a prodigal and his father. Reflective of this, Richardson thus ends this specific blessing saying, "It will wound you, but I will tell you there will come a day when what felt to you like limping was something more like dancing as you moved into the cadence of your new and blessed name."ⁱ

We know struggle—whether it comes from outside of ourselves or within, whether it has divine strength or power just enough to bring us to a draw. In those moments are we even thinking about blessing, or is it just a matter of figuring out how to make it through? Certainly we can look back and eke out the language of God's presence, but in the midst of it would we have the wherewithal to demand it, to work for it, as Jacob does?

Faith tells us that God desires for our wholeness and that God is everywhere present. Even when all the air feels as though it has been sucked out of the room in which we sit. Even when we stand with five loaves and two fishes, staring out at 5000 hungry faces and break out into a cold sweat—*really?*

The world could do with the ubiquity of this particular assurance.

Yet we know that wholeness is not an easy accomplishment. Recognizing where God abides in the wrestling of our own lives, much less in the sorrows and traumas and true need of our world, *that* is work. So often we want to claim the ease that equates what we have, to blessing.

But it is not about what we have, but what God has for us.

Jesus knew that as he stood with his disciples and that hungry crowd.

For he had just enough for them, even though it did not look like much. He was filled with compassion for them, and he went to work making sure that they received just what they needed.

Healing from what made them sick.

Bread and fish to fill their empty bellies.

Jesus blessed the crowd that day,
just as he did the food he gave to them.

God works for all people to know wholeness,
to get what it is that they need.

Jesus made this all pretty clear earlier on in his ministry as Matthew recounts,

Blessed are the poor in spirit.

Blessed are those who mourn.

Blessed are the meek,

the pure in heart,

the peacemakers,

those who work for righteousness,

those who are oppressed.

Perhaps this is why the language of blessing lies fallow when it is harvested like a bumper crop, like a shrewd accrual of brownie points for good behavior and strategic planning.

Truth is, some days it might be that blessing arrives warm and fragrant and free for the taking, so that all we have to do is receive it with grateful hearts. But on many other days it takes work to recognize, so that the haphazard ways that we used to claim God's blessing are caught off-guard, changed, in sight of the true gifts of reconciliation, justice, and grace.

This comes, my friends, time and again in relationship. Humble, compassionate, generous, forgiving relationship. Erasing the clear lines of good or bad, conservative or liberal, from here or from there, taker or giver, relationships that yield blessing are those that stretch us far beyond the capacity we thought we had. Far beyond what is comfortable, to the place where we will very well be marked and changed before we even know the full benefit. But here, here where we thought we might just have reached our end; here the sacred breathes into the ordinary and our limping turns to dancing as we move to the cadence of our new and blessed life.

ⁱ Richardson, Jan. *The Cure for Sorrow: A Book of Blessings for Times of Grief*. (Orlando: Wanton Gospeller Press, 2016), *Introduction* and 68-70.