



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God, our Father, and from the Lord, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Now perhaps your household is like mine. We have many, many, many books. And thank God for Kindle, otherwise we'd have many, many, many more. Now, I counted the number of bookcases in our home. Seventeen. Our books make us very, very, very happy. Now, you are welcome to come and speak to me after service, either about your own joy and love of reading, or about my appalling lack of stewardship by having too many books.

I would be open to both conversations. And I will actually refrain from pointing out that the ridiculous abundance that Jesus seems to create everywhere He goes, by blessing five loaves of bread and two fish, and satiating everyone fully, and then still having enough leftovers to feed a small village, abundance. It can come off as quite ostentatious and conspicuous, but it feeds the soul. Such is the complex nature of life.

Anyhow, my promise to myself this summer while I was on sabbatical was to have all of my books in one place, because I'm forever not knowing where a book is. So I'll be like, I wonder where that book is. And I'll go and I'll search and I can't find it and I give up. And I can't enjoy this embarrassing amount of riches. So I'm happy to report that all my books are now in the basement. And they're in one place. And should I wish to find something, it is now an utter joy. And when I mean joy, I mean total joy. Because to know that you want something, to know that you need something, and there it is right at your disposal, well, my friends, that is the stuff of a good life.

So as I was preparing for this sermon on our passage from the book of Genesis, in the part of the Bible that is read by both Christians and Jews, I realized that I really wanted to find two books that were written by Jewish rabbis. The first is called *Covenant and Conversations* by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. Now, Rabbi Jonathan was the chief rabbi in the United Kingdom and an amazing scholar. He suddenly died in 2020 at 70 or 72 years old. And it wasn't from COVID, but this quick bout of cancer. But when he was alive, he was accused of being a Universalist because he felt that God was greater than any one faith could ever articulate. And maybe he felt this way because interestingly, unlike his rabbi friends, his young and formative years were spent not in Hebrew schools, but in Anglican schools.

And the second book that I was searching for was a book that was written by many rabbis, and it's called The Women's Torah Commentary, and all the rabbis are female. And it was recommended to me by Rabbi Megan Brudney over at Temple Beth El, which is our sister synagogue in Bloomfield Hills, and I'm so grateful that she told me about it. It's a gem.

And guess what? I found them both! My sabbatical was a success. Now, Rabbi Jonathan's book had not one but four different essays that centered around Jacob's wrestling at the ford of Jabbok River with that mysterious figure. And all of the essays concentrated on Jacob's relationship with his fraternal twin brother, Esau, E-S-A-U.

So, let me give you a little bit of the back story about Jacob and Esau. They had this really sordid history, and it began even before they were born. They were like in the womb, and they were trying to figure out who was going to come first. And they wrestled in the womb and Esau won, but only by a heel, because Jacob was holding on to his heel. And that's actually what Jacob means, heel.

So Esau was counted as the firstborn. And back in those days, to be the firstborn was everything. You got the birthright, the blessing, the inheritance, the wealth, the power. And if you weren't firstborn, you got nothing. But when they grew to be adults, Jacob tricks his father and cheats Esau out of everything. So Jacob receives the blessing, the birthright, the wealth, the power, and the inheritance. And Esau receives nothing. And when this deception happens, Esau is enraged, and he decides as soon as his father dies, he's going to kill his lying, cheating, devious little brother. And so Jacob flees for his life.

But the blessings were Jacob's. And he is indeed blessed. He ends up with four wives. Two of them are sisters, and more on that later, 12 sons, one daughter, hundreds of animals, and a massive amount of wealth. And he is, of course, true to form on how he gets that wealth. It's not above board. But it all seems to be going well for him in this foreign land until it isn't and he realizes he's no longer welcome there and he has to flee again for his life. But he decides he can't keep running away. It's time for him to return home and figure out what to do about his brother Esau. It has been 22 years.

So Jacob sends a messenger to his brother Esau to tell him he's coming. And the messenger returns to Jacob and said, your brother is coming to you with 400 men. And the scripture says Jacob is afraid and distressed. So, he packs up all of his wealth, his hundreds of animals, his wives and his kids, and he sends them across the river bank and waits alone in the dark to wrestle with that strange figure who we read about in the Old Testament passage for today. And he wrestles all night with this figure and he prevails. And Jacob wrests yet another blessing for himself. But then Jacob says the most amazing thing. He says, I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved. The next day, Jacob comes

face to face with his brother. And what does Esau do? Does he seek revenge and attack his brother? Esau embraces his brother and weeps and kisses him.

So what are you and I to learn from Jacob's story? Rabbi Jonathan, he gleaned so much from these short nine verses in the scripture, but my favorite interpretation of his is that he sees the wrestling match as Jacob trying to figure out who Jacob is, because all of his life he was trying to be like Esau. That's why he took everything away from him because he wanted to be Esau. He didn't want to be Jacob. So when Jacob pins this strange man down at the fort of Japheth and receives a blessing, the blessing that he receives is his own identity. Who he really is, apart from Esau, apart from anyone else. He is Israel. He's the one who can wrestle with God and with man and overcome.

I mean, searching for our identity, who we are, this is a universal experience. We're all doing it. And I find it extremely comforting that this kind of searching for identity is lifted up in the scriptures for all of us. So don't be afraid to ask those questions about who you really are, who are you supposed to be in this time, in this place, in your life. These are life giving questions that you're actually supposed to be asking. And so give yourself permission to do so, because finding out who you are, that is the stuff of a good life.

Now the other super cool interpretation of this story, and really it's the whole purpose of this sermon, and telling you about the saga of Jacob and Esau, is an interpretation that isn't even about them. It's about those sisters that I mentioned, the two of Jacob's wives. Their names were Leah and Rachel. Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso writes an essay in the Women's Torah Commentary that reminds us to remember that there are stories behind the stories that show up in the scriptures. There are stories that are not being heard and not being told so that there can be the stories in the scripture that you hear and that are told.

And so she brings up that story about Leah and Rachel. Now, they were two of the four wives of Jacob. They were two sisters. And they were given to Jacob by marriage by their daddy. And these sisters, they spend the rest of their lives vying for Jacob's love. And then they have to deal with the cultural norm of a woman's identity being wrapped up in being able to bear children. And then they have to understand what it means to be a sister to someone and be placed in a painful situation where when your sister has the husband and the partner and the helpmate, you don't. Polygamy, that's a complex and messy life.

Rabbi Sandy realizes that as Jacob was trying to figure out how to reconcile with his brother Esau, Leah and Rachel had been doing that all along because they had to. They had to live with one another. They couldn't flee from the pain and ignore it for 22 years. They had to face it every day. And it occurs to me that both Leah and Rachel, they had their nights with God as well. Right? I mean, they were asking questions of who they were in the midst of one another, especially

compared to the other sister. And here's what I know about being enculturated as a female.

Women generally do not wrestle. We don't wrestle. We don't need to use brute strength to accomplish inner strength. Women are enculturated to do something quite different. We embrace. We invite intimacy. We want to have coffee with one another in order to figure out the existential answers to the hard questions. We want to go for walks, side by side, in order to solve the problems of our lives and the world. We want everyone to sit down at the table, make yourself comfortable, so we can all kind of see each other face to face, and there's an equality of power, and we can figure it out together. And above all, we do not want to wrestle with God. We want a personal relationship with God.

And so what we can learn from this story of Jacob wrestling the angel may not be that in order to deal with God you need to remove all obstacles and send them away across the ford of Jabbok and gird up your loins and get ready to fight. Maybe what we can learn from this story is what Leah and Rachel have to teach us. You want to ask something of God? You can do it in the midst of your messy life, and God is ready to listen to you, to embrace you, and respond to you with kindness, compassion, and loads of mercy.

When I was on sabbatical, I had some big identity questions for God, and I admit I was ready to do battle. I used Jacob as my role model. And what I found, instead, is that God has no desire to fight me. God's deepest desire was to embrace me. Was to take care of me, was to recreate me, give me what I needed to live the life that the Spirit has blessed me with, so that I could have a good life. It's a completely different vision from going to the mat with God and duking it out until the stronger one wins. Leah and Rachel knew this, and now you and I know it.

And I want to be clear about something approaching God with this beautiful understanding of intimacy and not action. Although it is a part of a cultural way of indicating differences between a more feminine approach and a more masculine approach, it is in no way limited to our genders. And at this point, I need to shout out to Phoebe Danaher, who taught me this. Phoebe is 25 years old and she has been studying gender and culture and she teaches me regularly. And what she taught me was that we create cultural constructs so that we can actually understand our identities. But our identities, they are gifts from God. And sometimes you need to go to the maker to fully understand who you are.

And just to prove that intimate relations with God, the hugging and the wanting to be near God and just simply be with God is not just a decidedly female interpretation, I'm going to commend that you look at the art that is on your cover. It is a painting by Rembrandt and it's called Jacob Wrestling with the

Angel. This was done later in his life, and there can be no doubt what these two figures are doing. It is not a fight. It's an embrace.

So here's what I want you to know. When you approach God with all of your turmoil and your tribulation, all your pain and suffering, all your guilt and shame, All your anger, all your questions, you will indeed see God. That is the promise of Jesus Christ. But don't expect to fight. Expect to be embraced. The Spirit of God welcomes you. Jesus Christ loves you. God the Father made you because He delights in you. You are being embraced by God, who will then bless you.

And can I just tell you, to have this at your fingertips, to know that you need something, that you want something, and there, right at your disposal, well, my friends, that is the stuff of a very good life.

Amen.