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Recommended Citation

Johnson-Miller, Betsy, "Jacob's Daughter" (2012). *English Faculty Publications*. 3.

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Jacob's Daughter

by
Betsy Johnson-Miller

The two women facing off for the last wrestling match of the day mesmerized me like the big cats at the zoo. Something raw, wild and powerful lurked in both of them as they shook hands. When the ref blew his whistle, the two of them began to circle. One tried “shooting” several times—she lunged in and made a grab for the other girl’s leg. The other girl, almost looking bored, slapped her attempts away and kept circling. Finally, the two of them locked together, each trying to drag the other to the mat, but neither of them could ever gain control. Breaking apart, circling some more, slamming back together . . . by the time the first period ended, no points had been scored.

Nor were any points scored in the second or third periods. These two women were like Jacob wrestling the divine in the desert that night—matched so evenly, neither of them could win. After four sudden death overtimes where not a single point had been scored, the ref finally told the exhausted wrestlers and the riveted crowd that they were going to wrestle one last period. If the woman on the bottom could get up and away (an escape), she would win. If the other woman could stay on top, she would win.

The ref’s whistle started the action and the woman on the bottom strained and pushed, she tried to sit out and stand up, she tried to roll her opponent on her back. The woman on top just . . . held . . . on. As the seconds ticked away, I remember holding my hands to my lips as tears stung my eyes. It was such a mighty battle, I didn’t know who to cheer for.

When the big clock on the gymnasium wall finally buzzed, the woman who was on the bottom had not gotten away, which meant the woman on top had won. The crowd, which had been on its feet since the first sudden death overtime, clapped for a full two minutes.

“That was like watching Jacob,” I told my husband on the way home. He nodded, and as we rushed through the deepening darkness along the interstate, I thought about that biblical story. It has always bothered me—why wouldn’t whatever Jacob was wrestling with just say its name? Was it God or an angel? How could a divine being be so evenly matched with a human? Most importantly, why did Jacob have to be hurt before he could be blessed?

When I was in seminary, stories like this one left me standing on the margins, looking for gaps, asking question after question and eventually I decided not to be ordained: I didn’t think my spirit would ever be quiet or faithful enough. Back then I was sure the purpose of religion was to give answers, not produce more questions. Religion needed to satisfy, to leave us with something to hold onto, because questions bred discontent. Snarling, maddening discontent.

But lately, I have been growing more and more annoyed at things that try to give me sure answers about God, like the sign outside a local church I drive by every morning that informed us this summer, “No, it has not been as hot as hell this summer,” or that currently warns, “Jesus is making his list and checking it twice.”

I have been trained as a poet, which means I’m usually of the mind that the less said, the better. In fact, one of the psalms takes only eight words to sustain and feed me: “Be still and know that I am God.” Rumi doesn’t take many more to give a delicious insight on prayer: “Prayer is an egg. Hatch out the total helplessness inside.” So this church sign doesn’t bother me because of its brevity, but because it often implies a certainty about what God is like, and it reminds me of

people who believe they have a secure hold on God, or that God has a secure hold on them. Faith like this feels simple, easy. But it feels too simple. Too easy. I almost always lack that kind of faith—the kind where I believe God is intimately involved in every aspect of my life, telling me what job to take, where to move, how many children to have. The kind of faith where every blessing is God's blessing, where every trial is equally meted out by God, but always and only for some higher purpose. What must it be like—to feel God there, to have God move me where I need to be moved?

Several years ago, my husband and I struggled with the question of whether or not we should move back to my home state of Minnesota. My husband had been offered a job at a private liberal arts university in the central part of the state, and even though there were strong arguments for staying where we were in Illinois, we decided he should take the job.

That year was one of those rare times when I felt certain and faithful, when I did feel as if the hand of God was directing multiple aspects of our lives, intervening on our behalf. We sold our house on our own in less than three weeks. Before my husband signed his contract, the university had no work to offer me; within two weeks, I had a full load of teaching. Three months after we moved, my father was diagnosed with incurable leukemia and given a year to live. It had taken twelve hours to get to my parents' house when we lived in Illinois; now it took only two, so I could be with them for doctors' visits. I could be there more and more often as my father's life neared its end. Throughout it all—even his death one year and nineteen days after his diagnosis—

there was a sense of being carried or buoyed, as if my head would never sink under, as if a light inside would remain steady and strong. I felt that way until three months later, when another man, who had been like a second father to me, also died.

My parents had moved away from my hometown after I graduated from high school, so when I returned for his funeral, I saw people I hadn't seen in over twenty years. It hit me hard, what age had done to the giants of my childhood. That kind of life—which included hearing aids and canes and long ears—was supposed to be reserved for my grandparents, who were old all the days I knew them. It shook me to see, for the first time, people who had been forced to surrender their beauty, power and vitality to the relentless march of age.

And this was nowhere more apparent than in the woman who kept running her hand over the coffin that was now the forever resting place of her husband. Because she was in the middle stages of Alzheimer's, she had to be reminded that day that her husband of sixty years had died. As I watched her—one of the most capable women I have ever met, a woman I loved almost as much as my own mother—I saw that she had been reduced to a sort of childish acting—as if she knew what was going on. I decided then and there that God was absent, cruel, or disturbingly indifferent. If God's plan for her was that she should have to be reminded that her beloved husband was dead, that she should lose her mind, her force, her verve, well, I wanted no relationship at all with a God like that.

When I returned home, I had the flu for almost a week.

Simone Weil said, “one can never wrestle enough with God if one does so out of pure regard for the truth,” and my father would have agreed. An agnostic, he turned our dinner table into a theater for the Socratic method, always asking me questions about God, making me think, argue, engage. Because of this, God and faith became things I had to work at and wrestle with, not things I accepted or adored. So even though I thought I should have faith and answers in seminary, something in me was glad that I did not. Because if I had, I would have been taking the easy way out.

I don't know how to sit politely and listen for the word of God. I wrangle and thrash. I see others quiet and calm, and yes, if I can't have their equanimity, I want to throw them to the ground and sit on them.

That's why I am inclined to question those who are certain in their faith, because I see them as constructing God in ways that reduce God, in ways that make the divine something neat to chuckle at or something to be so feared that we all end up cowering like misbehaving dogs. That's why I want to drive by the sign and have it read: “We don't know. We really don't know.” Because we can't know. Why not? Because God is quiet now . . . there are no burning bushes to pay attention to, no arks to build, no saviors to worship in a barn. I guess Jesus will sometimes make an appearance on a piece of toast, but mostly we're blind fish at the bottom of the crushing sea called life.

When my five-year high school reunion rolled around, I had just finished my first year in seminary. I called ahead to some long-time family friends and asked if I could stop by for a visit while I was in town for the reunion. They invited me over for lunch. Their eldest daughter, Erin, who was three years older than I was and who had always taken me under her wing when our families got together, would be there with her new husband.

Erin's father was the cook in the family, and lunch confirmed what I remembered: he was one of the best cooks I knew. When I finally put down my fork, I felt satisfied.

The feeling didn't last long.

Erin asked my opinion on abortion. I had heard that religion had become very important to her, so her choice to bring this subject up wasn't a complete surprise. But since my parents had moved away, I didn't get back to my hometown often. I didn't want to ruin things.

Evidently Erin didn't appreciate me hedging because next she brought up a teacher at the high school who was daring to teach Nietzsche, "who said God is dead, you know."

I knew exactly whom she was referring to because I had taken that very class—it had been a gift to me, giving me new ways of thinking and wondering about the world.

As we sat in the living room, though, I saw Erin expected me to agree with her, but more than that, I could tell she expected me to be the kind of person who had answers. Two months after this encounter, my husband would find me crying one night on the kitchen floor, and not long after that, we would decide it best for me to quit seminary. But even at this point, amongst

old friends in a nice living room, my soul was tired and sad. I answered Erin, “How do we know? Maybe God is dead.”

She almost stood up. “How can you, you of all people say that?”

I didn’t like the way she looked at me. I wished we could go back to the way it used to be. I wished we could go downstairs to her old bedroom with the white and pink checked curtains and listen to some Michael Jackson, or at the very least, keep talking about the pie. “You know, this is why we are taking our kids out of school and teaching them at home,” she said. “They need to learn the Truth.”

“But is there a Truth, capital t?” I asked.

And and and.

Soon after I arrived home from my reunion, I received a letter from Erin that said she and her husband would be praying for my soul. This could have been kind. Like when I contacted one of my college professors and told him I wasn’t going to be ordained because I didn’t believe in God anymore. He asked if I was praying, and I told him I couldn’t. He responded, “Then I will pray *for* you.”

I tucked Erin’s letter into the back of my Bible, because it captured the difficulty of it all—wrestling, staying kind.

Some unknown soul once said, "Humanity's first sin was faith; the first virtue doubt." It sure feels like I agree. Wrestling is personal. It demands constant contact, full engagement. To wrestle means to work hard, to grab hold and never . . . let . . . go. But it occurs to me, maybe I want to construct the divine as Some Thing that will save *me*, and since I wrestle and struggle and doubt, then the divine must like people who wrestle and struggle and doubt. Which makes me guilty of the very things I was accusing the sign of as I drove past it every day. Yes, faith needs struggle and thrill, but shouldn't it also have ease? It should offer the breathless excitement of not knowing how things are going to turn out, and it should help us to know the quiet love that lasts all of our days. It should offer us the possibility of a God who will not bless us until we have wrestled our way through an entire darkness as well as the possibility of a God who greets us with open arms. One who invites us to come and be still.

In the silence that descends after my kids have caught the bus for school, I sip my coffee and read in the newspaper that we could be in for the snowiest winter in Minnesota history. This surprises me because we haven't been dumped on this winter, but the more I think about it, the more I realize it must be true. For the past month and a half, an inch or two or three has fallen every other day. So while it has never been enough to get the kids out of school (much to their chagrin), the drifts still climb, as do the mountains of snow shoved to the edges of parking lots.

When I get into my car to drive to work, I see another three inches fell in the night. Since I need to slow down for the hulking orange plow that I follow through town, I have plenty of time

to read the church sign as I pass it. I smile, chagrined, because today's sign elicits a soft "Amen," from me. It reads, "Whoever is praying for snow, please stop."