

## Wrestling with angels

Genesis 32: 22-31

[Augsburg University Chapel, 10/25/24)

Next week, we will mark the 507<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the day in 1517 when Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, thus launching what came to be known as the Reformation. For those of us – personally and institutionally – who are part of the Lutheran faith tradition, these are important moments in which to consider how that tradition continues to shape our lives in the world today.

Here at Augsburg, we claim both a Lutheran faith tradition, as well as an intellectual tradition – remember that Luther himself was a university professor – that continues to guide and shape what we do here every day. Though not many of us identify as Lutheran, we all have the gift of being in and belonging to a tradition that has made Augsburg the place, the university, it is today.

There are many ways to witness how the Lutheran tradition shapes our lives together – think about a liberal arts tradition that honors many ways of knowing, or about a commitment to serving our neighbors and neighborhood, or a willingness to constantly consider how we can do what we do better and more faithfully. These are all aspects of the Lutheran tradition that are integrated into all we do at this university.

This morning, though, I want to focus on the ways we understand the sort of education we seek to offer in what I would call a “Lutheran key” by reflecting on the familiar story of Jacob wrestling with the angel.

Now before I offer a few thoughts about the story, let me say – with all due respect to the Men’s basketball team here with us this morning – that it seems quite remarkable that the top two men’s wrestling teams in the country are found at Lutheran colleges – Augsburg and Wartburg. What is that about? Maybe Jacob is the patron saint for wrestling champions! But I digress...

I want to suggest that wrestling with angels is a fitting way to describe an Augsburg education, shaped by the Lutheran tradition. Let me name three aspects of the story to illustrate what I mean.

First, it’s about wrestling. Now I don’t know much about wrestling moves and our story doesn’t provide any details about how they wrestled, except to say that Jacob never gave up – he never gave up. Such is the path of education. It requires courage, resilience, a willingness to risk and lean into difficult relationships and questions and experiences. You must be persistent and patient. Because it is hard – wrestling in your educational journey challenges your mind, body, and spirit. Not to mention all of the external challenges you face in your life as you pursue your education. One of the many things I most value in our students here at Augsburg is your lack of entitlement. You understand that education is a gift that will equip you to live a better life, to give back to your families and communities, to make a difference in the world. And it’s hard and it’s what you must do – wrestling with your education is the foundation for following your calls in the world. Never give up.

And then there's these angels that are sent to wrestle with you in your educational journeys. Here's the thing. What we believe is that God sends us angels in the form of fellow students and teachers, in the questions and experiences you will face, in the surprises and disappointments that we inevitably will find. One of the things Martin Luther taught us about our lives of faith – and I would suggest about our educations – is that we are called to ask questions about everything. In his catechism, Luther premises all of his teachings with the charge to ask “What does this mean?” As you engage in the classroom, on campus, and in the world, believing that God is in the questions means that we will see angels in everything you experience in your education. As difficult as it may seem – and we will be tempted to see those difficulties as anything but divinely-sent – we must believe that education is about loving the questions, the experiences, the relationships, as challenging as they may be, because as the writer of Hebrews exhorts us: “<sup>2</sup> Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” Remember, the angels we are called to wrestle come in many forms.

Finally, there is where all of this education – this wrestling with angels – leads. For Jacob, his night of wrestling with the angel leads to his demanding a blessing, and the angel then claiming and naming him for the journey ahead. Jacob is now Israel, the one who carries the covenant for his people – his calling. For all of us – and especially for our students – wrestling with angels in our education leads to callings discerned, lives transformed, promises made and kept, blessings conferred. You are claimed and named as those called to do God's work in the world – in your careers and professions, in your families and neighborhoods, in the institutions and organizations that help build public trust. We wrestle with angels – we strive (as Jacob did) with humans and the divine – so that justice and compassion and love might flourish.

But there's one thing more – a thing we must acknowledge and embrace as we wrestle with angels. For Jacob, wrestling with the angel led to an injury that would stay with him for his life – his hip was put out of its joint. Likewise, for those of us who wrestle with angels in our educational journeys, we too may be wounded. Perhaps it won't be a physical wound, but wounds to our minds and hearts and spirits are very possible, wounds that are the result of the hard questions and experiences that education requires. And those wounds will stay with us for our entire lives. Here is what that will mean for us: We will never be able to do anything meaningful on our own without the help of others. Therein is the fact that following our calls in the world is never a solitary affair; it always means that my education, my gifts and talents, my call, is followed in community with those whose calls complement mine, ensuring that our work together models the covenant God has made with God's people.

God keep you as you wrestle with angels – an education made possible because we are grounded in a faith and intellectual tradition that may be more relevant than ever before. Thanks be to God.. Amen.