

The Conundrum of Jacob
Genesis 32:22-31, Pentecost 12, Year A
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When we enter today's story darkness is falling, and the sound of the River Jabbok mocks Jacob at his back. Jacob's tactics have failed him. Four hundred men are heading his direction, most likely to kill him. He is exhausted and scared, and it is at this moment—this dark, vulnerable, and pregnant moment—that a figure emerges from the shadows and leaps upon him. But first there is more to the story.

Jacob has bargained and connived his way through his entire life. To be fair, he had a great teacher in his mother Rebekah, but in his adulthood Jacob has made an art form of subterfuge. He has tricked and beguiled his father and his uncle. Most dangerously, he has cheated his older brother Esau, who we are led to believe is a strong, impulsive, and potentially violent man. After that incident, Jacob so worried about his brother's wrath that he fled his homeland and stayed away for two decades. But he now finds himself compelled to return, and he is afraid.

Jacob has for so long lived his life in a way that puts him in the center he doesn't know how to live differently. What's more, because Jacob has been so careful and clever about all his deceptions, to the outside world his way of living appears respectable, and certainly prosperous. He is surrounded by the fruit of his labors: family, wealth, material abundance, and the admiration of those around him. In our day and age he would have a fine home, a boilerplate car, memberships at all the right places, and enough charitable contributions to his name that people talk about his benevolence over lunch. It would never be spoken, at least not in polite conversation, of the tactics he has used to build this life, or the people he has sullied and harmed along the way.

As Jacob has moved ever closer to home and to his brother Esau, he has taken the bull by the horns and dealt with the situation the only way he knows how. He's attempted to buy his brother off. He has sent in front of him to Esau wave after wave of appeasement: servants and camels and riches as gifts to shield himself from Esau's condemnation. It is a plan that would have worked in any prior instance in his life. But as the day wanes and the sounds of the River Jabbok mock him at his back, Jacob realizes that his plan is as bankrupt as he now finds himself to be. Esau and those four hundred men are still coming. Jacob's things have left him. The

layers, material and otherwise, that he has long believed protect him from all threats are gone. Darkness is falling, and Jacob feels naked and exposed.

We know that feeling, don't we? We, like Jacob, labor to build a life around us that reflects our value in the eyes of others. We attempt to gather layers of wealth, material abundance, and social regard around ourselves to shield us from the critique of a hostile world, whether that world is hostile towards us by nature or whether, as in Jacob's case, it is hostile because we have so often used and abused it to our own advantage. Sometimes we build up these layers mostly to shield us from ourselves, to trick ourselves into believing that the accumulation of our lives has all been pristinely attained, that we have always acted in ways that would make ourselves, our communities, and our God take joy. The more gilded and abundant our lives, the less likely anyone—including ourselves—will notice the ways in which we have acted uncharitably, with deception, and with ourselves and our place in the world always at the center.

But then darkness falls. The world becomes quiet. We change out of all those built-up layers our daytime lives and into the thin fabric of the night. Our defensive walls fall. The ruse is no longer convincing. We feel naked and exposed, and we are afraid.

It is at this moment that Jacob is leapt upon from the darkness. He has no servant to guard his back. He has no money to pay off this mugger. He has no time to come up with some convoluted scheme. He has only those two visceral options: fight or flight. And somehow, somehow (by God's grace, undoubtedly) Jacob responds in his moment of panic in a way counter to the manner in which he has lived his entire life to this point. He grabs hold of his attacker and will not let go. He holds so tightly that he can feel the other's heartbeat as closely as he feels his own. Now, Jacob is no fool. He recognizes that wrestling with this figure from the darkness could scar him for life, as indeed it does when the attacker strikes Jacob's hip. But he also senses that, somehow, *his life is to be found in the struggle*. No longer can he hide behind his things. No longer can he resort to subterfuge. Now there is only this honest, life-dependending, *live-giving* embrace.

“Bless me!” Jacob cries to the man, and the response is stunning.

“You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel,” says his combatant, “because you have striven *with God*...and you have prevailed.”

Jacob's assessment of what has occurred is the clearest insight he has ever or will ever have. "I have seen God face to face," he says, "and my life is preserved."

And with that, the figure is gone. Day breaks—a day like no other—and Jacob stands and faces the place where his brother is to be found. He sets out without pause, and we are told that he limps then and ever after.

It is a most important lesson and one our daytime lives would rather not consider. We *cannot* know God so long as we stay hidden and protected behind the layers and walls of our lives, defining ourselves by them and willfully forgetting the things we've done to accumulate them. It is when, like Jacob, we find ourselves bereft of these pretend defenses that we experience the vulnerability necessary to meet God. And then, we must be prepared that God may leap upon us with the rough and tumble of a wrestler rather than meet us with the gentleness of an outstretched hand. God may seek to grab us and jar us into a realization that our old way of being will no longer suffice.

And we have two options: We can run away as fast and as furiously as we are able, or we can latch hold to God as Jacob did, so that our hearts are pulled so close to his that we begin to hear the synchronicity of their beating. In that moment, we can understand that this is what it means to be in relationship with God: to struggle, to be challenged, to render ourselves vulnerable to journeys God would have us take and to the rivers he would have us cross.

And, like Jacob, we may get scars. But they are always akin to the scars one receives after something like open heart surgery. They are the kind of scars that forever remain but remind us that through this struggle we find new life; we find purpose; we find the strength of a companion whose heart will beat as our own as long as we seek his embrace.

This is the great moment in Jacob's life. I wish that his Genesis story ended here, but it doesn't. Very soon Jacob meets his brother Esau, and instead of condemnation he receives grace. The Genesis narrator tells us that in Esau Jacob sees the face of God. Esau—who represents now in the story the same God with whom Jacob has so recently wrestled—wishes Jacob nothing but good. He invites Jacob to stay with him, to live as one family, in love, joy, and mutual strength. We who have just heard the story of the River Jabbok are ready for Jacob's reply. "Yes!" he'll surely say, "I'm now ready to live with God, to respond to him though it be a struggle, to define my life by him and no other."

But Jacob does not. Doubt creeps in. The lure of that old life beckons. And Jacob turns away from Esau, from the very face of God. He reclaims all those things he has earlier shed and walks another way. And in next week's reading, Jacob has receded from the scene. Jacob is mentioned again, but the main character in the Genesis story shifts to Joseph, his son. In other words, Holy Scripture leaves us with this tantalizing dual image of Jacob.

On the one hand we have the Jacob who comes to understand the full implications of his relationship with God, that it is neither occasional nor convenient. We have the Jacob who welcomes the struggle with God in his life and draws his heart close to God's own.

On the other hand, we have the Jacob who cannot stand to remain in the gaze of God. We have the Jacob who falters when Esau the God-figure rebuffs his every effort to buy forgiveness and love and asks only that Jacob remain in his presence. The Jacob who only hours before held God heart-to-heart now can't bear even to walk with him side-by-side. Jacob makes every excuse to walk away and takes his family and belongings and moves in the direction opposite God.

Scripture leaves with us no tidy ending to this story, because neither our lives nor our walk with God is ever tidy. What Scripture leaves with us are two options, both found in this one patriarch of our faith. In the vulnerable moments of our lives, no matter how dark they may seem, God will be present. He seeks us out to wrestle with us, challenging us to keep nothing between his heart and ours. God is there. We can run away, or we can grab hold. And when we accept God's holy embrace and cling with all our might, we may find that we say with Jacob who becomes Israel, "I have looked upon the face of God, and my life is preserved."

Amen.