

Last week we were introduced to the highly dysfunctional family of Isaac and Rebecca, Esau and Jacob. We saw how Isaac blatantly favored Esau, and how Rebecca blatantly favored Jacob. Early on we witnessed Jacob's manipulation of his brother to trick him out of his birthright. Concurrently, we witnessed Esau's focus on immediate gratification, and how he nonchalantly sold his birthright for a bowl of lentil soup. Things went from bad to worse when Isaac was ready to bestow his solemn blessing on his eldest son, Esau. And Rebecca and Jacob successfully connived to steal Esau's blessing as well.

Not surprisingly, Esau threatened to kill Jacob, and Jacob fled for his life to the land of Haran to find shelter in the family of a distant relative, Laban. On his journey to Haran Jacob had his wonderful dream of a ladder populated with ascending and descending angels. Upon waking, Jacob spontaneously uttered a phrase with which many of us can identify: "Surely the Lord is in this place -- and I did not know it!" In the dream God had graciously told Jacob, "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go." Instead of celebrating God's promise, Jacob had the cheek to attempt to make a deal with God.

He said to God: "*If*[you] will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear... *then* [you] shall be my God..." Up to this point Jacob has exhibited a boatload of character defects, and has not shown much maturity of any kind. He makes it to Haran, is taken into the care of Laban's household, falls in love with Rachel, Laban's younger daughter, and agrees to work for Laban for seven years in order to "earn" Rachel. On the night of Jacob's marriage Laban pulls a fast one on Jacob, much like the "fast ones" Jacob had pulled himself. Laban gets Jacob drunk at the wedding feast and slips Leah, his eldest daughter, into the wedding tent instead of Rachel. Jacob wakes up the next morning next to Leah, not Rachel, and learns that he has to work another seven years for Rachel. Jacob has met his match in trickery.

The Bible seems to be teaching us a lesson in karma here: Watch what you do -- It's liable to come back to haunt you. Jacob puts in seven more years and marries Rachel. He has been a genius at raising sheep and by now is exceedingly wealthy. Fourteen years have come and gone. Jacob yearns to return home. He has to sneak away from Laban's territory, because Laban would like to detain him indefinitely. Jacob, Rachel, Leah, and his large entourage of servants and large flocks of livestock are now on their way back to Canaan. This provides the context for our text for today.

There is one huge catch to Jacob's successfully returning to his homeland, and that catch is the fact that he has to journey through his estranged brother Esau's territory to get there. He sends messengers to Esau, taking a subservient position in instructing his servants to address his brother on his behalf as "my lord Esau."

Jacob's fear grows with the return of his messengers and their laconic announcement that Esau is coming to meet him, and coming with him are four hundred, presumably armed, men. Jacob's first reaction is to fall back on his own cleverness: he shrewdly splits his camp in two, reasoning that if one of the camps is overcome, the other may be able to escape. Given the seriousness of the situation, however, Jacob realizes that even his cunning may not be able to save him this time. So he does a very curious thing: he prays. Unlike his previous *if... then* prayer, this one -- necessitated by circumstance, a "foxhole prayer," so to speak -- is a real prayer. His real fear has pushed him to offer a real prayer: essentially, he pleads for God's protection, especially for the women and children in his camp.

Even so, a lot of Jacob's "old" character comes through: he begins his prayer with a phrase which is hard not to see as a whining complaint. He says to God: "*You told me...*" and in closing he has the gall to remind God of God's promises to him: "*You yourself said...*" Thus, Jacob's prayer is a mixed bag... like many of my prayers, and perhaps like some of yours. Even the ambiguous nature of this prayer, however, stands in favorable contrast to the rather unmixed treachery and deceitfulness which Jacob has displayed up till now. Ambivalent goodness is still a moral and spiritual improvement over consistent deceit and treachery. Jacob appears to be maturing, albeit slowly.

Jacob had offered this prayer during the night, a time for many of us when our fears escape their cages and prowl around at will. With the clear light of day, Jacob devises another clever scheme to win over his brother. Jacob decides to bribe his brother into forgiving him by sending him a truly overwhelming gift. The gift is made in installments designed to keep Esau guessing and to gradually overwhelm him with Jacob's generosity. So, in stages, Esau receives two hundred female goats and twenty male goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, thirty milch camels and their colts, forty cows and ten bulls, and finally, twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys. The gifts have been delivered. Jacob is still in unbearable suspense as to the spirit in which they were received, and now, once again, it is night, that time of day when Jacob is vulnerable to encounters with the divine.

What happens to him on this particular night is of such consequence that it changes the course of his life. The story of Jacob's struggle with the "mysterious being," -- some translations call him "a man," others "an angel," still others, "God" -- the Hebrew in this case can mean all three -- is, on a surface reading, one of the most perplexing accounts in the entire Bible. At face value, it is riddled with contradictions. The so-called "man" is obviously more than a mere man. According to both Jewish and Christian tradition, he is really an angel. This "angel," however, is obviously more than a mere angel. Otherwise, how could Jacob say at the end of our story, "I have seen God face to face...?" On Jacob's own testimony, his contender was ultimately God.

Assuming this to be the case -- that Jacob was really wrestling with God -- how dare this story claim that Jacob prevailed? I believe that the key to unlock the riddle of this story is the use to which the editor of the book of Genesis has made of it. Looking at the sequence of Jacob stories as a whole, we can see that this one is

pivotal. It is the watershed experience of Jacob's life, his condensed form of a "mid-life crisis," if you will. Before this experience, Jacob was basically a trickster. After his wrestling match with God, Jacob becomes a significantly different person; so different, in fact, that his name is changed from "Jacob" to "Israel." After this one-on-one with God, Jacob's rough edges gradually fade away until he becomes a person with considerable spiritual depth and human compassion. But what really happened by the bank of the stream? The obscurity of Jacob's opponent and the complexity of the questions raised by this story point to the fact that several things were happening at the same time.

The following interpretation is, of course, inferred, but my inferences are, based on strong hints in the biblical text. Jacob's imminent meeting with Esau -- the outcome of which is maddeningly uncertain -- has literally stopped Jacob in his tracks for once and forced him to think about some issues which, until now, he has always been able to escape. Not surprisingly, these are the big questions which all of us must face, and from which most of us try to escape: Who am I? What have I been doing with my life? Do I want to change? Can I change? What is the real meaning of my life?

Jacob needs more time to think and, presumably, to pray. So he moves his camp across the stream, back to the side from which they had come. He himself recrosses the Jabbok so that he can be alone. But he is not alone. He immediately finds himself grappling with another, and this other is, sometimes alternatively, sometimes simultaneously, himself, an angel, and God. The "man" is Jacob himself, because Jacob is a divided self, a person experiencing war between his self-centered past and his high calling. For the first time in his life, by crossing the Jabbok to be alone, Jacob is choosing to allow his yearning for greatness -- the true greatness of real vulnerability toward his brother and toward God -- to do battle with his "normal" self. The battle rages all night until dawn. The "man" with whom Jacob wrestles has been traditionally interpreted by Judaism and Christianity as being Jacob's "guardian angel," who has been patiently waiting for just such an opportunity to contend his human charge into conversion. The "man," finally is God, for it is only God who can remake and rename a person. Jacob's new name, Israel, captures the transformation which takes place in him that night. According to popular etymology, the name "Israel" means "one who has contended with divine and human beings and has prevailed." But isn't this new name simply another example of Jacob's invincible impudence, this time to the extent of usurping even God? Not really.

Jacob's designation as "Israel" is a celebration of the fact that Jacob has finally wrestled with himself and with God, and that precisely through this long-postponed struggle he has at last prevailed in becoming a whole person, an undivided self. It is fitting that when the mysterious being asks Jacob to let go, Jacob boldly replies "I will not let you go unless or until you bless me." (The Hebrew can mean both.) Jacob's old impudence? Yes, but with this all-important difference -- he is using his boldness in a new cause -- his longing to break free from his unprincipled past, his longing to break through to a real relationship with his brother and with God. It is Jacob's willingness to use this "old" trait for this "new" purpose that allows God to step into his life and, through this all-night struggle, to bring about a truly significant transformation and healing in his life.

The battle rages until dawn. At its conclusion Jacob is a changed person. It is not that one self, one side of his personality, has totally triumphed over the other, but that his two sides are finally working with, instead of against each other. He can now use his natural cleverness to further his best interests, instead of his worst ones. While there is much in Jacob that we descendants of his would not want to emulate, this particular event makes him a decisive role model for all of us struggling to grow in maturity and wisdom.

What can we learn from Jacob's example? First, it is significant that Jacob made the choice to be alone with God. Presumably, if he had not done this, he would not have had this encounter, he would not have experienced real conversion, and his later life would have been very different, probably a long succession of his "old" tricks and lies. This raises the obvious questions for each of us: Do I regularly choose to spend some time -- not just an occasional five or ten minutes -- but a sizeable chunk of time -- alone with God? Or, am I like the early Jacob, at war with myself, and running away from any possible confrontation with myself and God that could make me whole? Second, we can learn from Jacob's "I will not let you go until you bless me" not to be so timid in our relationship with God. God wants a real relationship with us, not some pious charade in which we go through polite motions. A real relationship with God will include a certain amount of wrestling and conflict, even expressions of anger, on our part. As we learn from Jacob's example, God is not too "holy" to be "touched," to be grappled with in raw relationship. Our healing and transformation can come about only through our active participation our total engagement, in our own personal encounter with God.

Amen.

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