

Facing Our Fear

Genesis 32:22-31

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Well today, I want to talk about a story that may be familiar to many of us, the story of Jacob wrestling with, well, it says in the text, a man, who Jacob later on discovers is God. And it's a story that almost reads like a myth; as if it kind of describes the landscape of the human soul. And so today I want to talk about the story through a psychological lens, as a story that really has to do with confronting our fear as human beings, because it's a story about Jacob confronting his greatest fear in the middle of his life. So let's talk a little bit about the story and the context of it, the backstory, the plot of Jacob's life.

Of course, Jacob was a twin. His older brother Esau was born mere minutes before him. And, as this story goes, Jacob was clutching his heel, he grabbed his heel as if to try to pull him back into the womb so that Jacob could be the oldest son. Because in that culture being the eldest son conferred huge privileges. The eldest son would inherit the greatest share of the father's wealth, but most importantly would have power over the family, would be ruling the family. And so Jacob wanted to be the oldest son and actually tricks Esau out of his birthright over a bowl of pottage; a bowl of lentil stew, as the story goes. And later on, he tricks his father, Isaac into giving him, Jacob, the blessing of the oldest son. And so when Esau finds out about this, he's just livid. He wants to kill his brother, Jacob. And so on the advice of his mother, Rebecca, Jacob flees from his brother Esau, and goes to his uncle Laban to make a life for himself there in Aram.

And he does. Jacob becomes a very wealthy man, much of it gained through trickery. He marries the love of his life after being tricked by his own uncle Laban into marrying Rachel's sister, Leah. But he ultimately marries the love of his life, Rachel, and attains great wealth. Again, much of it through trickery. When we think of Jacob, we might think of Odysseus in those great poems by Homer, the Iliad and the Odyssey. Because if you recall, the Greeks didn't win the Trojan war because of their skill at warfare. Ultimately it was because of Odysseus and his trickery, in sending the Trojan horse into the Trojan city, into Troy. So Jacob was that kind of character who used trickery to gain all this wealth at the expense of his uncle Laban. Jacob is really a pretty ambiguous figure, morally; strange that God chose him to be the founder of the nation of Israel.

And so this story that we heard from Genesis 32 takes place on the night before Jacob has to face, to confront his brother Esau, fearing that he is going to kill him. The story takes place on what Jacob imagines might be the last night of his life, the night when Jacob has to confront his greatest fear, the fear of death, the fear that his brother might kill him. So take a moment to think about what it is that you fear the most. When I say the word fear, what comes up for you? Is it fear of heights, fear of high places . . . that would be me . . . among other things.... Maybe it's something that has happened to you that represents your fear. But what comes up when I mentioned the word *fear*, what might be your greatest fear or what are your greatest fears? [Stop reading for a moment and] think about that for a while....

Well, as I said before, the story almost reads like a myth; as if it describes the landscape of the human soul. And if that's true, I think it's a story, not just about one human being confronting his greatest fear. It's about all of us as we seek to become fully human. I think that's ultimately what this story is about . . . our quest to become fully human. And one of the things that often impedes us in that process is our fear. One might say it is a corrosive element in the spiritual life. Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "*Do that, which you fear the most and the death of fear is sure to follow.*" I don't know if I'll be skydiving

when I go to Cape Cod, but that might be an interesting thing to try out as a way to confront, to face one of my greatest fears.

But as we think of this story in that way, there are some details that I think that are important to notice if we think of it as a myth. Now, first of all, we read that just before this takes place, Jacob takes all of his wealth (and in that day your stock portfolio was actually livestock)...so think herds and herds of sheep and cattle and goats, and they're fording this shallow river, the Jabbok River along with Jacob's two wives and his two concubines. And at that point, his 11 children are all on the other side of the river. Everything that we might say represents his wealth, his sense of worthiness, his ego, is on the other side of the river.

And he's completely alone. We might think of this story as a story about midlife . . . what often happens in midlife. You know, people achieve some sense of success, some trappings of success, which have to do with outward signs of one being worthy. *You know, I've got a nice house, big stock portfolio, maybe a nice family, but is that what life is all about? Is that what being human is all about, just achieving these things?* And so all that stuff that Jacob might identify himself with . . . his sense of worth . . . all on the other side of the mythical dividing line, this river Jabbok. And he's completely alone. Might be that that's important because often the dark night of the soul only comes when we separate ourselves from those things that might sort of hold ourselves away from our fear. And maybe it's things . . . maybe it's even alcohol . . . that keeps our fear at bay. But we may have that experience sometime in life when we feel completely alone. And it's a painful experience.

Somebody comes in the middle of the night to wrestle with Jacob. Some interpreters have understood that this is actually Esau, come like an assassin in the middle of the night to take care of his brother. I don't think that that's probably a very popular interpretation now. But it's an interesting thing to think about given that at the end of the story again Jacob discovers that this is God he's wrestling with. And he says, at the end - - - *I have seen God face to face*. I have faced God and survived the encounter. Survived to tell the tale on the night before he has to *face* his brother and *face* death.

And what happens is he's not left unscathed, he's injured by that process. And I think what this is about has to do with the idea that we, if we're lucky, come to a time in our life when we understand that life is not about things. Life is not about these outward signs of achievement. It's often a painful process. We might call it a process of transformation, which rarely happens without some pain. When we come to understand who we are truly as human beings and through which we understand what's fundamental about this tradition, the Christian tradition, which is all about grace. As I said before, Jacob is a really ambiguous figure for God to pick, to choose, to create a nation from. It's not because of his moral qualities that God chooses him. It's just because . . . and that's how grace works.

You know, the other day I was leading one of the groups, the book study groups, studying the book *White Fragility*. And that book is really about confronting our fears as white people, our fear of being seen as not good or as racist. And it's all about confronting that fear courageously and a process of becoming fully human and growing by being open and vulnerable to learning and to understanding how we may be part of the problem. And I mentioned a line from a poem by the German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke that goes like this. *Every angel is terrifying*.

I love that. Every angel is terrifying because we think of grace maybe as the warm milk of God's love . . . as warm and fuzzy . . . all of that. And it actually may be that just the opposite is true - - - that grace is that which kind of strips us bare at a certain point and allows us to see a bigger view of the universe. The universe is so much bigger than a nice house and a big salary. The universe is about grace and it's often a painful process for us to come to that understanding. And so Jacob, in this wrestling match, his hip is put out of joint and he limps into the sunrise into a new day having been injured in the encounter, but

having a renewed understanding of himself. And he's literally renamed - - - no longer called Jacob, but Israel.

And if we're lucky life does that to us - - - strips us bare of our illusions and our delusions - - - and gives us a bigger sense of ourselves and who we are in the universe. And most importantly, who God is. And understanding that God has chosen us, not because we're worthy of it, not because of the size of our stock portfolio or our moral achievements, but just because. And that is a profound thing to come to understand that.

So I would invite you to think about the story of Jacob as you also think about your greatest fears. And understand that maybe it's those fears and confronting them, and having the courage to confront them...it's through that process, a process of transformation, that might help us too toward our journey of becoming fully human, toward our coming to understand the grace of God and its incredible power to transform human beings, to transform you and me. May it be so. *Amen*.