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Beyond the Reckoning
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Genesis 32:22-31

Jacob Wrestles at Peniel

²² The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³ He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. ²⁴ Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. ²⁵ When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. ²⁶ Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." ²⁷ So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." ²⁸ Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." ²⁹ Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. ³⁰ So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." ³¹ The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

In Will Campbell's novel *Brother to a Dragonfly*, the preacher explains the gospel to his alcoholic, drug-addicted brother this way: "*We're all bastards, and God loves us anyway.*" It is a truth that both saves and cripples us. It saves us, in that God's unconditional love is the foundation, the very floor of our existence. In Christ Jesus, we are saved. Once. For all.

It is our incapacity to accept our unworthiness of this truth that cripples us. We want to be good enough. We believe we're capable of being good enough to have this salvation, if you will; that we can work hard enough to earn it. We can't. And not because we haven't tried. It's because the love of God is just too big. The love of God bends time; it shifts nature, it drives nature; we could work a thousand lifetimes and not earn it. Most of us don't, of course. Most of us are selfish brats. Our greed and fear leave us oblivious to the banquet God has prepared for us: just like Jacob. Jacob the Liar. Jacob the Trickster. Jacob the Fugitive, again, still in pursuit of what he already has, what he has always had.

First, let's pray: *The raccoons have been on the deck again, O God, and the chipmunks in the garden. Tearing up my tomatoes. Ripping up my flowers. Like they don't have enough already. I'm forever clearing up their plunder and destruction. We know that we are hardly better, tearing up your creation for no better reason than our cravings. Striving to silence the sins and traumas of our past. A reckoning will come one day, according to your*

word. May we be ready for you and the word you bring. Beyond the reckoning, O God, may we wear our scars as boldly as we now wear our vanity and pride.

Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me.

Jacob spent the next decade-and-a-half making babies and trading dirty tricks with Laban. After a complicated scheme of crossbreeding sheep in which he essentially steals from Laban outright, the Lord conveniently tells Jacob it's time to go back to Canaan. So Jacob packs the livestock, and the women pack the kids, and on the way out of town Rachel hides her dad's idol-gods in her apron – unbeknownst to Jacob, or so he says. Laban doesn't find out for three days. It takes seven more for him to catch up with them. By then Jacob's caravan was across the Euphrates and south in the hill country of Gilead, less than halfway to their destination.

God told Jacob to go – though not like a fugitive, it seems to me. God also told Laban not to stop them. But he does want his gods back. That's a good story. He kisses his kids and grandkids goodbye, and thus ends an entire section of the biblical narrative.

Jacob turns his face to Canaan – and Esau. He sends messengers ahead to let Esau know he's coming; that his wives and children and all his property are with him; that he comes in peace, seeking Esau's favor. The messengers return with news from Esau. *“He's coming to meet you. He's bringing 400 of his men with him.”* Unable to imagine Esau might be a better man than he himself has ever been, Jacob is terrified. It's an army, come to slaughter them all!

First he marshals his family into two camps some distance apart, hoping to fool Esau into thinking one or the other is everyone, thus only sacrificing half. Then he prays – prays God will get him out of this mess. Then he slaps together a complicated bribe wherein 580 animals are to be delivered one drove at a time and presented as gifts to Esau – droves of camels and goats and bulls and calves that the men will have to wrangle, burdening their ranks and slowing their march toward Jacob. Once the camps are set and the bribe is organized, Jacob and his immediate family bed down in their camp.

But apparently Jacob can't sleep, so he gets everyone up and moves them across the Jabbok, it says, and I for one cannot shake the sensation that there is a significance in the text right here in verse 24: *“And Jacob was left alone.”* Anyone who has spent any time with this *rascal* can guess what he's up to. He's about to “slip out the back, Jack; make a new plan, Stan; drop off the key, Lee” ... anything to get himself free. Hit the trail, set sail, take a hike, fly the coop, beat a retreat, take flight, cut and run. Anything, anything at all, rather than face the consequences of his own choices and decisions. Including, believe it or not, placing his own children between himself and the enemy.

At which point, into Jacob's life there comes a reckoning. A moment when he is finally able to hear God say, “Enough, Jacob, enough.” Have you ever seen a daddy wrestling with a child, how the kid is fighting so hard and the daddy is being so gentle? It's over

when the little one is worn out. Or the little one is getting too rough and the daddy says, “*Okay, that’s enough.*” Jacob never wears out, even at daybreak when God says, “*Enough.*” Jacob keeps fighting. “*Jacob, enough!*”

My mom’s favorite story to tell about little me was really about my dad. About how I was just like him. How once when I was three he was determined that I pick up some toys. I was just as determined I wouldn’t. He asked me to. He told me to. He put me in time out. He spanked me. He finally put me to bed. But I never picked them up. My mother said she never saw him any angrier than when he lost an argument with a three-year-old.

I won the battle, not the war. Jacob lost a hip and won his very own soul. Even after God dislocated his hip, a devastating injury, he kept on fighting God. Who among us hasn’t, at one time or another, been that desperate to disbelieve our own helplessness?

Have you ever seen a big kid crying from some hurt or humiliation – crying all the harder because they believe they are too big to cry? I expect Jacob cried like that. I expect he cried for the pain in his ruined hip, but even more so for the decades of consequences he’ll never outrun now. I like thinking he cried a long, long time, and God just sat with him while he cried.

When it was finally time for God to go, Jacob sounds a bit like Esau back in chapter 27, after Isaac gave HIS blessing, his birthright, to Jacob instead of him. “*Daddy, don’t you have anything left for me? Please don’t go until you bless me!*” says the birthright boy, the one favored from his mother’s womb. “*Please don’t go until you bless me!*”

How does a human being forget something so fundamental as a birthright? How does one with so much end up so empty? It might be a mystery, were we not so much like Jacob is right here, all red-eyed and snot-nosed from crying over getting blamed for what we did. Exhausted and feeling like exiles and fugitives, never quite admitting that our aloneness is built from the denial and dodginess and divorce we have used to distance ourselves from the messes we ourselves have made, be they personal or marital, familial or professional – not from malice so much as fear, ironically the fear of being alone, of not having what we want. And the failure to trust what we say we believe. That’s the big one, of course.

We may not be as bad as Jacob. But the difference is in scale, not quality itself. What Jacob calls *blessing*, we call *grace*. Grace is **OUR** fundamental birthright as God’s beloved. The truth of the universe, remember?

- God loves us;
- God has redeemed us from death;
- God is with us now.

– the very floor of reality in which we live and move and have our being, yet somehow apart from which we choose to live our lives, entrusting our self-worth to everything but

God's grace. Just like Jacob entrusted himself to everything but God's blessing. He schemed and lied and cheated. We work and spend and eat and drink like there is no tomorrow. We also lie and pretend and hedge our bets, carry all kinds of other little gods in our own pockets too. We trust too little, sleep too little, pray too little. And we worry ourselves sick.

And all that is just what's going on, on the inside. Every bit of it has consequences on the outside – in our relationships, in our work, in the creation, in our life together. Until, if we are very, very lucky, we have our own reckoning; until there comes a day, or a moment in which for whatever reason or for no reason in particular, we are ready to hear God say, *“Enough. Enough. Enough of living your life apart from what you believe.”*

The story is almost over when God asks Jacob, *“What's your name?”* Jacob answers, *“Jacob.”* The name itself means *trickster, supplanter*, someone trying to be someone else. *“No more,”* God says; *“from now on you will be called Israel, for you have striven with God.”* To be rid of the name Jacob amounts to being forgiven everything.

Other people might have said *thank you*. Not Jacob. Notice the text does not, in fact, call him *Israel* from now on. God love him, Jacob simply HAS to argue, HAS to have the last word. *“What's YOUR name?”* he wants to know. Can't you just see God closing her eyes, rubbing her temples for a minute and then smiling, *“Sweetpea, you don't need to know my name,”* and then blessing him again after all. Just like every parent who ever said, *“I'm not reading one more bedtime story.”* And then did read one more bedtime story.

Jacob had the last word. And then, he limped into the day, less crippled than he'd been in a very long time, to face his brother and his past knowing, maybe for the first time in his life, that God loved him no matter what; God had redeemed him from death; and God was with him as he went.