

The Magnificent Defeat

Genesis 32:22-32 (32:3-33:15)

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost/6th August 2023

Scripture

Jacob sent messengers before him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom, instructing them, "Thus you shall say to my lord Esau: Thus says your servant Jacob, 'I have lived with Laban as an alien and stayed until now, and I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, male and female slaves, and I have sent to tell my lord, in order that I may find favor in your sight.' "

The messengers returned to Jacob, saying, "We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him." Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed, and he divided the people who were with him and the flocks and herds and camels into two companies, thinking, "If Esau comes to the one company and destroys it, then the company that is left will escape."

And Jacob said, "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O Lord who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your kindred, and I will do you good,' I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two companies. Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children. Yet you have said, 'I will surely do you good and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted because of their number.' "

So he spent that night there, and from what he had with him he took a present for his brother Esau, 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, twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys. These he delivered into the hand of his servants, every drove by itself, and said to his servants, "Pass on ahead of me, and put a space between drove and drove." He instructed the one in the lead, "When Esau my brother meets you and asks you, 'To whom do you belong? Where are you going? And whose are these ahead of you?' then you shall say, 'They belong to your servant Jacob; they are a present sent to my lord Esau, and moreover he is behind us.' " He likewise instructed the second and the third and all who followed the droves, "You shall say the same thing to Esau when you meet him, and you shall say, 'Moreover your servant Jacob is behind us.' " For he thought, "I may appease him with the present that goes ahead of me, and afterwards I shall see his face; perhaps he will accept me." So the present passed on ahead of him, and he himself spent that night in the camp.

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. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. 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. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." 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." 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. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip. Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle.

Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two maids. He put the maids with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. He himself went on ahead of them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother.

But Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. When Esau looked up and saw the women and children, he said, "Who are these with you?" Jacob said, "The children whom God has graciously given your servant." Then the maids drew near, they and their children, and bowed down; Leah likewise and her children drew near and bowed down; and finally Joseph and Rachel drew near, and they bowed down. Esau said, "What do you mean by all this company that I met?" Jacob answered, "To find favor with my lord." But Esau said, "I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself." Jacob said, "No, please; if I find favor with you, then accept my present from my hand, for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God, since you have received me with such favor. Please accept my gift that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me and because I have everything I want." So he urged him, and he took it.

Then Esau said, "Let us journey on our way, and I will go alongside you." But Jacob said to him, "My lord knows that the children are frail and that the flocks and herds, which are nursing, are a care to me, and if they are overdriven for one day, all the flocks will die. Let my lord pass on ahead of his servant, and I will lead on slowly, according to the pace of the cattle that are before me and according to the pace of the children, until I come to my lord in Seir."

So Esau said, "Let me leave with you some of the people who are with me." But he said, "Why should my lord be so kind to me?"

Sermon

Novelist William Faulkner (1897-1962) once quipped, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." When we meet Jacob in these texts, the past is certainly not dead. It's not even past. His past sins are very much alive within him; they're not dead, even though he's trying very hard to flee from them. Jacob has been fleeing his entire life, from the truth of his existence, fleeing from a place in his family. His father named him well; Jacob means "to follow, be behind." He came into the world "gripping his brother's heel" (Gen. 25:26), striving to be first, to have his brother

Esau's place. Related to the Hebrew word for "heel," Jacob means "to take by the heel, to supplant, circumvent, or overreach." In many respects, Jacob spent most of his life overreaching, trying to supplant his brother, striving to compensate for what he felt he lacked, namely his father's favor. Whether that was the case, we don't know. But it doesn't matter because that's what Jacob believed.

Jacob, in many respects, is a tragic figure. He's also a thief—stealing what doesn't belong to him. He's a trickster. Cunning. Devious. Dishonest. He stole his brother's birthright; later, he deceived his own father, Isaac, who was going blind and cheated his brother out of the blessing. This blessing was no small thing. The blessing is a word of great power; it conveys something of the energy and vitality of one's soul to the one being blessed, and the final blessing of his firstborn son is the most powerful of all. Once given, it can never be taken back.

Esau vowed to kill Jacob. Apart from Esau, though, no one else seemed bothered by the steal. Far from suffering for his dishonesty, Jacob seemed to thrive. His mother, Rebecca, favored Jacob and eventually told him to flee to her brother Laban in Haran for his safety until Esau's fury was cooled. In Haran, Jacob meets Rachel and Leah, marries both, has children, and gathers a family around him, livestock, slaves, and wealth. In time, Jacob prepares to return home to Esau.

In the story, Jacob shows little to no remorse for his thievery. But on the way home, it's clear that the past is not past. He's worried about his brother. Jacob sends messengers ahead to Esau, whom he addresses as "my lord," saying that he was in exile but now returns with all this wealth to curry favor. The messengers return to Jacob and say, "We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him. Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed" (Gen. 32:6-7). Right there—that is a window into Jacob's psyche. Jacob assumes the worst; perhaps you would too. But note that the messengers didn't say Esau's four hundred were armed. Jacob becomes fearful. Jacob, the twin, is divided within himself over what he has done and then divides up the people with him, the flocks, and the herds and camels. "If Esau comes to one company and destroys it," Jacob says, "then the company that is left will escape" (Gen. 32:8).

Jacob assumes destruction. He prays to God, the God who told him to return, but he confesses, "I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness" (Gen. 32:10). He asks God for deliverance from his brother, fearing that Esau will come to slaughter them all. After to face his brother, Jacob decides to offer his possessions as gifts. He divides them up and sends them to Esau in advance of their meeting. Jacob is obviously trying to appease his brother, manipulate his brother. Still, where is there any remorse, any acknowledgment of what he had done? Jacob's fear, guilt, and paranoia are driving him, and his wives, children, servants, and even the innocent animals are now all part of this drama orchestrated by Jacob, out of fear of his brother, for what he had done to him.

From a psychological perspective, Jacob is interpreting the situation through the filter of a complex, many complexes, such as guilt, fear, greed, inferiority, and not-enoughness. We all have complexes, hundreds of complexes, some good, some not so good. Complexes cluster

around feelings associated with different formative experiences in our lives. They have enormous power over us. We assume we are in control of decisions and actions when, in fact, it's often the complex speaking or choosing. "Everyone knows nowadays that people 'have complexes,'" Carl Jung (1875-1961) once wrote, "what is not so well-known...is that complexes can have us." [1] I suspect Jacob's complexes were orchestrating the staged, cowardly return, sending everyone else ahead of him across the Jabbok, while he sleeps alone.

And it was there alone, in the deep of the night, a stranger leaps out from the dark and hurls himself toward Jacob with ferocious strength. They fight, their bodies lashing through the darkness all night long. It's fierce. Intense. Who was this man? This man who was not a man. Was he an angel? Was he a demon? Did it actually happen or was it a dream? Jacob was known for having vivid dreams. With whom was he wrestling? Was it Esau? Was Jacob wrestling with his demons? His guilt? Wrestling with himself for what he had done? Whomever it was, whatever it was, it's clear that Jacob had come face-to-face with this man before he could face his brother. Even here he tries to do what he has done all his life; he tries to supplant, overreach, overcome, subdue this enemy through brute force and will.

It almost works. Jacob is about to overcome his adversary when the mysterious man magically touches the hollow of Jacob's thigh and knocks his hip out of its socket. The NRSV says "struck," but the Hebrew suggests a gentle touch with a devastating blow. [2] Imagine the pain. But Jacob did not stop; he continues to wrestle until first light. The man needs to leave before daybreak and asks to be released. But Jacob says, "I will not let you go until you bless me." Why does Jacob want this man's blessing? Didn't he already have his father's (stolen) blessing? Wasn't that enough? Why, after all this time, does he still need more? There's no indication that Jacob knew whom or what he wrestled with that night. He came face-to-face in this struggle, though, with a force, a mysterious, elusive presence, a person, known-yet-unknown, the likes of which he had never encountered before, who had something that Jacob had never faced before, who allowed Jacob to face, confront, and experience something he had never experienced before, what could be a humbling defeat—or magnificent defeat. That's how Frederick Buechner (1926-2022), Presbyterian minister and writer, described it in his classic sermon on this text. It's the title he gave to his sermon, and I couldn't come up with anything better. "The magnificent defeat of the human soul," Buechner explains, "at the hands of God." [3] All by the grace of God.

Why does Jacob ask, why does Jacob need to be blessed by this stranger? Was it because this stranger possesses an uncanny power that allowed him to face himself, face his struggles, face his past, the wrong done to his brother and father, face a lifetime of endlessly striving for acceptance and blessing and things and possessions to fill the void and emptiness of his life, for never feeling "enough," being second, unsure about his place in the world, and then shrewdly, violently, aggressively trying to fill that void, endlessly striving, for what? Buechner seems to think that when the man gently touches Jacob and cripples him, there is the sense that maybe Jacob discovered at that moment "that the whole battle was from the beginning fated to end this way, that the stranger had simply held back until, that moment, letting Jacob exert all his strength and almost win so that when he was defeated, he would know that he was truly

defeated; so that he would know that not all the shrewdness, will, brute force that he could muster were enough" to win. [4]

Why does Jacob refuse to let him go? Jacob has met his match; he knows he's defeated. Buechner, though, has an insight here, as only Buechner could (what an eye, what vision he had). "Jacob will not release his grip, only now it's not of violence but of need, like the grip of a drowning man." This is how Buechner imagines it, "The darkness has faded just enough so that for the first time [Jacob] can dimly see his opponent's face. And what he sees is something more terrible than the face of death—the face of love. It is vast and strong, half ruined with suffering and fierce with joy, the face a man flees down all the darkness of his days until at least he cries out, 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me!' Not a blessing that he can have by the strength of his cunning or the force of his will, but a blessing that he can have only as a gift."

"Power, success, happiness, as the world knows them, are his who will fight for them hard enough; but peace, love, joy, are only from God. And God is the enemy whom Jacob fought there by the river, of course, and whom in one way or another we are all of us fight— God, the beloved enemy."

Look at Jacob, limping his way into a new day after wrestling with God all night, who brought him to his limits, forced him, allowed him to face his life, face his complexes, and offered a blessing no earthly father could ever grant to a child. Everyone who has faced themselves and the terrifying grace of God, like Jacob, knows what it's like to be the wonder-wounded heir of grace. We know that place called Peniel, "the face of God." "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved" (Gen. 33:30).

Jacob's experience along the Jabbok prepared the way for him to discover in the face of his brother not vengeance and hate but grace. Initially, though, Jacob, still limping, hears that Esau is approaching with four hundred, divides up the children. But now Jacob goes out ahead of them all to face his brother. Then, to Jacob's surprise, "Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept." Esau was not stuck in the past, like Jacob, and so strives to catch up to be in the present. Jacob wants to be accepted. Esau has all that he needs. It is enough. But Jacob insists—listen again to these words from a man with a heart transformed, who seems to have grown up overnight, "No, please; if I find favor with you, then accept my present from my hand;"—note, instead of grasping after his hands are now free to give because he knows something now that he didn't know before that day—"for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God—since you have received me with kindness. Please accept my gift, my blessing, that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have everything I want" (Gen. 33:11).

Sources

- [1] C.G. Jung, "A Review of the Complex Theory," *Collected Works*, Volume 8 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), par. 200.

- [2] Robert Alter's annotation of in *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2008).
- [3] Frederick Buechner, "The Magnificent Defeat" in *The Magnificent Defeat* (Harper One, 1985), 10ff. An electronic version of the sermon may be found here:
<https://www.frederickbuechner.com/the-magnificent-defeat>.
- [4] Buechner.