Foundational Stories #9 of 24:

"Wrestling with God"

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Genesis 32:22-31

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Jacob had a complicated life. He's got the rights to a family inheritance that he swindled from his older twin brother. He's got a divine destiny that he stole from that same brother after deceiving his father, with the help of his mother. Now he's got a brother who wants to kill him, so he fled hundreds of miles north, to the ancestral homeland. He fell in love with his cousin. He worked for her father for seven years, without pay, in order to marry her. But his uncle tricked him, and he married the wrong woman, his beloved's older sister. Then he worked for his uncle seven more years, and finally married the woman he wanted in the first place. Jacob fathered six sons and one daughter with his first wife, two sons with his first wife's maid, and two sons with his second wife's maid, then finally a son with his second wife. That's twelve children so far, and his second wife will give birth to one more son later on.

That's where we ended last week. What a family! Jacob's got a father, mother, brother, uncle, two cousins who become his wives, their two maids who become his mistresses, twelve children – that's *twenty* family members he's got relationships with, of one sort or another. And a *lot* of family drama!

But wait, there's more! Jacob's uncle Laban wants to keep Jacob as his servant, but he has nothing to bargain with anymore – except the flocks of sheep and goats that Jacob has taken care of all these years. They come to an agreement: Laban will give Jacob a portion of Laban's flocks in exchange for Jacob's continued service. But Laban breaks the arrangement and tries to keep all the animals for himself. In response, Jacob embarks upon a creative breeding program, with the result that, over the next few years, Jacob gets the strong animals and Laban gets the weak ones. So Jacob "grew exceedingly rich and had large flocks and male and female slaves and camels and donkeys." In the process, he wears out his welcome: "Jacob saw that Laban did not regard him as favorably as he did before."

Then *God* speaks to Jacob again. This is, as far as we know, only the *second* time in Jacob's long and tumultuous life that God spoke to him. The first time had been twenty years earlier, when Jacob was fleeing from his angry brother. Jacob had a most unusual dream, and God had given Jacob some significant promises: land, offspring, Jacob's family becoming a blessing to all people, God's abiding presence, and Jacob's safe return home. Now, twenty years later, Jacob hears God once again: "Return to the land of your ancestors and to your kindred, and I will be with you." It is time for Jacob to go home.

Notice that God promises to continue to be with Jacob. God has been present in Jacob's life all these long years and through all that family drama. God has never left Jacob's side. Jacob hasn't always made good choices – he's not exactly *noble* or *virtuous*, and certainly not *holy* – but God has been with

him, all the same. That is true for us as well. *God is always with us*; God is always *present*, even when our minds and our hearts are far from God. We leave God again and again. But *God* never leaves *us*.

Jacob tells his wives that it's time for him to go home. They support his decision, and begin making preparations. There's a *lot* that will need to go with them. Twelve children, an extremely large array of animals, a variety of household servants, and a whole lot of stuff. Jacob had arrived in this land with barely the shirt on his back; he will leave as a *very* wealthy man. As they are preparing to depart, Rachel, his beloved wife, grabs one more thing: Laban's household gods. Small, carved figurines of the various deities that Laban worshiped. They are not just symbols of the divine; they are more like talismans. Worshipers believed they had spiritual properties. Rachel did not ask permission to take these; she just *steals* them. Another thief, in a family full of thieves, liars, and deceivers! Jacob does not tell Laban he's leaving; he just gathers up all those people, animals, and stuff, and they quietly disappear one day while Laban is out in the field. Laban's daughters don't even tell him goodbye. When Laban realizes they have all left, he races after them. When he catches up to them, he and Jacob have some words. Some *heated* words. Laban searches through Jacob's tents for his missing gods, but he can't find them, because Rachel hid them in her camel's saddle. She lies to her father, telling him she can't climb down because it's "that time of the month" for her. The writer doesn't tell us *why* she wants the gods; maybe she stole them to spite her father for the wrongs he had done, or maybe she stole them to keep her father from using them, or because she wanted to use them herself. Laban can't find them. He and Jacob have some more words. In the end, they manage to make a covenant with one another, a sacred agreement, setting some boundaries between them, to prevent any future bad dealings with each other. They part in peace, and Laban gives a kiss and a blessing to his daughters and his grandchildren.

As Jacob leaves behind one set of family issues, he prepares to face another. *Does his brother Esau still want to kill him?* He sends some of his servants on ahead to let Esau know that he's coming. The men return with a report that Esau is coming to meet Jacob – and bringing 400 men with him. "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." Then he prays to God, like he has never prayed before: "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.'" Then he sends Esau a gift. A *substantial* gift: "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." He's trying to appease his brother. He's trying to buy peace. He sends his servants ahead of him with this generous gift. He sends his wives and children across a large stream, the River Jabbok, which flows into the Jordan River. Then … he waits.

So "Jacob was left alone" … except … he wasn't alone. Someone else was there. "A man wrestled with him until daybreak." It might have been in the *form* of a man, but it wasn't a man. Was it an angel? That's what the prophet Hosea says. (Hosea 12:4) Was it *God*? That's what Jacob thinks. It's an all-night wrestling match with the divine. In a way, it's representative of Jacob's entire life; he's been

wrestling with destiny, in one way or another, since before he was born. And Jacob has gotten *strong*. He holds his own against this shadowy, divine adversary. "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." Jacob is wounded, but he is still very much in the match. He holds onto this divine figure, the same way he was holding onto Esau's heel the day he was born, and he doesn't let go. The figure says to Jacob: "Let me go, for the day is breaking." Jacob replies: "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." Wow, demanding! Jacob knows his opponent can *bless* him. Jacob *wants* that blessing – the same way he wanted Esau's birthright, the same way he wanted his father's blessing. The figure says to him: "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed." The word "Israel" is a combination of two Hebrew root words: *sara*, which means "contend" or "strive" or "prevail", and *el*, which means "God." Jacob is one who *strives* or *contends* with God.

So Jacob is now *Israel*. His descendants will be the *Israelites*. The history of the Israelite people, as told in the Bible, is one of constant *contention* with God. Sometimes they do what God wants, but all too often, they go their own way. We *all* do that, don't we? We wander away, however intentionally or unintentionally, from the path God intends for us. We are not Israel's *physical* descendants – those are Jews and Israelis - but we are very much Israel's *spiritual* descendants. We *contend* with *God*.

As Jacob's wrestling match with the divine figure ends, the sun rises, and Jacob sees his *other* adversary: his brother Esau, coming towards him with 400 men. What chance does Jacob have, if Esau wants to kill him? He positions his wives, his mistresses, and his children where his brother can see them, and he starts walking to Esau, bowing not just once but *seven times*. He doesn't want a fight. Thankfully … Esau doesn't either. "Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept." Esau has let go of his bitterness and rage. He has found it in his heart to forgive. It's been twenty years since these two men have seen each other. They had parted as bitter enemies. They reunite as long-lost brothers. Introductions are made; Esau meets Jacob's family. Jacob says, "Please accept my gift that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me and because I have everything I want." No swindling, no deception, no trickery, no lies. Those days are over. Jacob has become a new man. A *better* man. He has striven with God and men – *and he is not the same*.

This is what God can do for us. We live our lives, we make our choices, sometimes we do what's faithful and right, sometimes we don't. All the while, God is present with us. God *lets* us make choices, however right or wrong, however good or bad. But God *wants* us to choose the right. God nudges us, sending us messages of one sort or other, sometimes very subtle, sometimes very loud. God wants us to find our true *purpose* in life, the real reason why we are *here*, which is often different from the life we try to create for ourselves, different from what we *think* our purpose is. We spend our lives in this struggle between *our* will and *God's* will, and sometimes we find ourselves in a serious wrestling match with God of one sort or other. The plans we make, that keep going awry. The decisions we make, that turn out to be wrong. The surprises that change our lives forever. The questions, and the longings, that just won't go away. We have a *purpose* in life, a *reason* why we're here. We might have to go through a whole lot of living before we figure it out. But when we finally discover what we're truly here for, why God put us on this earth, a *clarity* emerges. A *reason* for our being. A new *identity*. A new *purpose*. And with that, a *peace* and a *contentment* that we didn't have before. Finally, *finally*, we *know* who we truly are.

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