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Lesson: Genesis 32:22-31 // Matthew 14:22-33

²²The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had.

²⁴Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. ²⁵When 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. ²⁶Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." ²⁷So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." ²⁸Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." ²⁹Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. ³⁰So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." ³¹The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

When I was a teenager back in the 90s, I read and collected Marvel comic books. I was such a fan, that in my high school economics class, I made an investment. Each student was given a theoretical \$100 to invest in a couple of stocks of our choosing, and after a month we had to report how we fared in our investments. At this time, Marvel had just declared bankruptcy, so the price was cheap. The other company I chose was Apple Computers, which in the 90s was laughed-off as a has-been company that would never make a comeback. At the end of that month, I broke even. But if that had been real money, and if I had kept investing in those two... Anyway, I've always enjoyed Marvel. They try to make their characters very relatable, and they do so by making sure they have real-world challenges; take Spider-man's social difficulties in school, for example. The characters have their physical weaknesses, too. For instance, Wolverine's adamantium claws and skeleton are

formidable, but not so much when your team's primary nemesis has the moniker of "The Master of Magnetism."

The reason why I am mentioning this idea of superhuman characters who have weaknesses is because that appears to be the same case in our Genesis story. Jacob is physically wrestling with God at night. Neither of them prevail, so as the sun is about to rise, God says, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." Seemingly, the view of the people who first told this story was that someone like Jacob could physically wrestle God, and that God's weakness is sunlight. Their reasoning seems to be that no one should ever see God's face. Strange, I know. We have to remember that this story was first told at least 3 millennia ago, so their idea of divinity is bound to be different from our own. They have a very anthropomorphic view of God; God has human characteristics like a body, and God's strength is limited. Like I've said previously, just because the Bible expresses a theological view at one point in its pages doesn't mean we have to accept that view today. Even within the Bible there are examples of later viewpoints that adapt or even reject older views of God. ...And that is okay, because the Bible asks each generation to apply its own wisdom to the faith that prior generations have passed on to it.

That said, we need to know what Genesis says that led to this all-night brawl between God and Jacob. Remember that Jacob used trickery to get both the birthright and his father Isaac's blessing from his older brother Esau. The two brothers parted on bad terms, to say the least. We learned last week that Jacob traveled to a place where he worked and was given Leah for his first wife, but Jacob really wanted the younger sister Rachel as a wife. So he worked even more and eventually married her as well. Fast forward, and Jacob now has eleven children between the two wives. Jacob received instruction from God to travel to the land where his brother Esau now resides. Jacob obeyed, but because these two last parted on bad terms, Jacob sent a messenger ahead to scope out the situation. Word came back that Esau has an army of 400 men, which is a lot more than anything Jacob has. In an attempt to appease his brother, Jacob basically sends all of his livestock – at least 500 goats, sheep, camels, et cetera – ahead of him as a gift to Esau.

Now, the night before their reunion, Jacob is alone, and suddenly he is wrestling with a mysterious figure who turns out to be God. As the sun is about to rise, God needs to leave, so Jacob

is struck on the hip and it dislocates. God begins to depart... but Jacob won't let go of him! Jacob is tenacious, and he says that he will not let go until God blesses him. It is for that diligence that Jacob is rewarded. You see, another viewpoint of those who first told these early stories is that God isn't as concerned about morality as later generations have understood God. As they told these stories, Jacob's haggling with a hungry Esau one day for Esau's birthright is commendable. In their understanding, Jacob's trickery of his own father to receive the blessing intended for Esau is also commendable. Because in their view at that time, Jacob's doggedness to have a connection with the god of Isaac and Abraham is of greater importance than any lingering moral questions about his methods. To be clear: that was their view, and I'm not encouraging us to sacrifice morality.

The climax of the story has a wounded Jacob clinging on to God and refusing to let go until he gets a blessing. Jacob receives his reward when God says, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." The blessing is a new name: Israel, which means "contends with God" or "wrestles with God." I think the name carries a beautiful meaning, for it connotes a relationship that is real; a relationship that allows the human to express emotions like frustration or even anger toward God, yet the relationship is maintained. Obviously, since Jacob the name "Israel" has been used with his descendants.

What happens next is that Jacob – now Israel – rejoins his family and immediately they look up to see Esau and his 400 men. Israel divides his children among Rachel, Leah, and the two maids, then he spreads these four groups out. The hope is that at least one of the kids will survive. Israel then proceeds to hobble up to Esau to meet his fate. Shockingly, Esau is delighted to see his brother and is overjoyed to meet his extended family. Esau then asks Israel why he had sent all the livestock. Israel replies, "To find favor with you," to which Esau responds, "I have enough, brother; keep it." Israel asks Esau to accept the gift, and he finishes the thought by saying something very important; "Truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God — since you have received me with such favor." Jacob wrestled with God at night, and presumably God's face was never seen that whole time. Jacob emerges with a limp and a new name, yet he says to see Esau's face is like seeing the face of God, for Israel was received with favor, with grace, and with love. Not with anger. Not with condemnation. Not with retribution.

Every time I speak with a class of students before their affirmation of baptism, I try to clarify with them the commitment they are making. They are not committing themselves to a lifelong journey with God that will always confine their understanding of God to what their 14-year old brains currently understand. That's impossible. Instead, they are making the commitment to wrestle with God through the ups and downs of this lifelong journey. Yet, how are they equipped for this wrestling match? They are given the faith that the previous generation now passes on to them. It is the faith that says, "You may be straining as you wrestle with God, but remember that face of God will *always* look at you with favor, grace, and love. Not with anger. Not with condemnation. Not with retribution.

When Peter was sinking in the water – crying out, "Lord, save me!" – and Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, I wonder what Peter saw in Jesus' face as he said, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" I don't think Peter saw a face that was reprimanding him. Rather, I believe Peter saw a face that reminded him of God's mercy. The same face that Israel saw when looking into the overjoyed face of his brother Esau. Siblings in Christ, God looks upon you with favor, with love, and with grace. Let us be bearers of that in this world. May our faces bear God's love and care to all those who are wrestling with God at this time.

Amen.