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# “Holding on for a Blessing”

Genesis 32:22-31

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*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.*

*For the Word of God in Scripture,*

*For the Word of God around us,*

*For the Word of God within us,*

*Thanks be to God.*

*Genesis 32:21-31*

It's been at least a year since Katie has had a full night of sleep. A lot of nights she has to get up to help her mom

use the bathroom. She makes sure her blood sugar is stable and gives her another dose of pain killer. Her breathing is getting more labored. After she gets her back in bed, Katie usually sits by her for a minute, whispering a prayer for help. Katie always has a hard time going back to sleep. She tosses and turns. She thinks about the debt that's piling up and the laundry that needs to be done. She stares out the window at the shadowy tree in her backyard and wonders where her strength is going to come from tomorrow. She thinks about her brother and how she really needs to call him to check in. She feels guilty that when she gets a quiet moment in her day, she can't manage to do anything but sit. The list of things to tackle keeps getting longer. But she really, really needs to stop putting off going to see the doctor about her back. She worries about her kids in college and the decisions they're making. She leaves her phone on loud at night, just in case they call. Even when the phone doesn't ring, her body expects someone to need her. She watches the hours pass on the clock, and some nights she prays for daylight to come soon because her mind and her heart are restless. The dark somehow makes the worry louder.

Katie cries every day—sometimes from stress and failing patience, sometimes from feeling like she can't take another step. Honestly, it's an actual miracle that she keeps taking steps. She wanted her mom close so she could take care of her. But the shame and guilt weigh heavy on her because she wants a break. And she knows the break only comes when her mom dies. It feels unbearable to hold both of those things at the same time.

Sometimes, life is so crappy that running away looks

like the best option. If we could just start over...if we could change everything...if we could live somewhere new, associate with new people, somewhere people don't already know our baggage, somewhere the expectations haven't been set so high, maybe we could manage. Maybe then we would find respite or control or whatever it is we're looking for.

Jacob learned the hard way that running away doesn't solve any problems. Life is hard everywhere we go, but God is our blessing. It's been decades since Jacob fled from his family. After he manipulated his father into blessing him instead of his older twin, he couldn't stay. Esau was ready to kill him.

He left town to start fresh, somewhere where no one knows who he is or that his name is a little too on the nose. He's a heel of a man. But even the manipulators and the overreachers deserve a new start every once in awhile. No matter where he went, though, life was still going to be life.

He landed at his uncle's house. He saw Rachel and fell in love. So he worked for Laban for seven years to marry her. But on their wedding day, Laban had married off his oldest daughter instead. Jacob had to work another seven years to finally marry Rachel too.

And even though we're kinda relieved that the guy who manipulated his family to get what he wanted was eventually tricked out of what he wanted, God throws that equation off entirely. Grace and mercy don't add up the way we like karma to. And clearly the God of Abraham and Isaac, Jacob's grandfather and father, the God of Jacob and our God too, is a merciful God. They're always doing things that don't make sense to us. Like showing up for a fugitive

and promising to be with him.

And God's still with Jacob when he's working the 14 consecutive years just to marry Rachel. And God's there when Rachel struggles with infertility. God's there when Jacob has conflict with his kids. God's there as Jacob continues to struggle all through his life.

He really should start bracing for bad news every time the phone rings. We know so much about Jacob's hard life, it's almost as if that's the point of his story. But Jacob has encounters with the divine throughout his story too. He quickly gets used to enduring struggle. But he also gets used to seeing angels. His struggle is always peppered with blessing from God.

Lately, Jacob's having more and more trouble sleeping. The scene with his father and the soup is starting to repeat in his head again. It tears at his heart. He imagines the nieces and nephews he has missed snuggling and celebrating. He wonders if he and Esau look more alike now than they did when they were kids. He wishes he could have heard his mother's voice one more time.

So finally, he couldn't ignore the ache anymore. He assembles his whole life into a caravan, and they set off. When they reach the Jabbok river, it's dark, and for miles Jacob's been so distracted he's not even sure how he made it to the riverbank. He sends the caravan over the river. He gets them settled, then he comes back.

He may be a manipulator, but something is changing about him. Eventually we all learn that's it's not all about us. He's starting to know that we need each other, so the shame at what he did is eating away at him. It's his battle to fight, his cross to bear. And it would be unfair of him to

demand that his family bear it with him. They need rest. They don't need him to impose his torture on them. So he comes back across the river alone. However long it takes, it doesn't matter. He needs the space to sort out what's going on in his heart and head.

The mystery that grips him comes on full force. He wrestles with all his might. Whatever it is, whoever it is, they're not giving up, and neither is Jacob.

"Enough of running away," he keeps saying in his head. "I can be stronger than my fear."

Maybe it's his shame that holds him there, fighting for hours until daybreak. Maybe his desperate search to somehow extend forgiveness to himself. Whatever it was, this was the moment, and he wasn't willing to give up until he found it.

After endless hours of wrestling, he's exhausted. He hasn't slept. His hip is out of place because the stranger holding him accountable is really strong. It's no telling how black and blue and swollen his body is going to be in a few hours. But he hasn't come this far to give up. Out of breath, determined, he chokes as he demands a blessing.

"I'm not letting you go until you bless me," he tells them.

But if he's limping back to his family, the blessing didn't come easy. Or maybe the struggle is the blessing? It comes through shame and self-doubt, exorbitant vulnerability and heartbreak. The blessing is one of being human, unable to be comfortable in his own skin, but determined to be loved and forgiven. The blessing is that even though that's all true, maybe even because that's all true, God is with Jacob. Through the shame and self-doubt and vulnerability and

heartbreak God is with Jacob. He is loved. He is good.

This may not be the life he had dreamed, but something holy is happening in him. Jacob's choice is faithful. Because he chooses to show up for this life, listen to whatever is stirring in him, and take steps in the direction that made him feel more and more whole, more and more true. Leaning into the struggle and finding the blessing in it makes him a better partner, father, and human being.

From that point on, because of the fleeing for his life and being indebted to another person and grieving lives and loves lost, he sees people in the way God sees them. They are good. They are loved and forgiven. They hurt too.

One night, when my son Otis was about 3 months old, for whatever reason, he was up all night. Before having to get up and be a productive human at work the next day, I got two hours of sleep total that night. My head was cloudy. I wasn't quite sure what day it was. But when our nanny got there, I made it out the door, miraculously with everything I needed.

As I rushed toward the train, I called my mom. Through tears I told her I had gotten two hours of sleep and how in the world is anyone supposed to be a member of society and have an infant at the same time.

"It's a miracle I'm even dressed right now," I told her. She knew, without me having to tell her, that my life felt out of my control and I had no idea who I was anymore. She knew that the dark nights up with a baby are despairing.

"I know," she said. "But you can do it. It gets easier. You can make it to when he turns 6 months old, and I promise it gets easier.

Grace was finding out that when I was just months old,

my mom had miraculously made it to daycare with me one morning and broke down in front of the nursery worker. She said, "I can't do it." And Margot sat with her and said, "Yes you can."

Grace is realizing that even when the dark night feels really long, we're not alone. And the gift card for coffee that came in the mail a week later was grace too.

Our lives are filled with conflict, but there's grace reaching out for us. When the dream we have worked toward our whole life falls out from under our feet, suddenly our world is crashing. They told us, "We don't want you." And we don't know what to do next. We don't know who we are or where we're going. But we keep showing up for the life that's living in us. We keep asking God to be with us. Even when it's so dark that we don't believe Love is there, Love is creating a way for us.

Sometimes grace is in the mini routines we figure out with our little ones in the mornings and at night. Grace is having no choice but to get out of bed and outside with the dogs in the morning. Grace is fixing a cup of tea when you get home from work. Grace is the view from the new apartment when you are grieving all the loss and change. Grace is dad's wedding ring on your finger, even after he's been gone for 5 years, reminding you how loved you are. Grace is three days sober. Grace is church on Sunday mornings and dinner with friends on Tuesday. Grace is a deep breath in the middle of the day and a gaze up at the sky at the end of it.

When we don't let go, struggle through the fight with ourselves and our expectations and whatever else is at odds with us, and don't let go until we see the light at the end of the night, then we will know ourselves in a new way.



Our world will be bigger, fuller of possibility. We will be truer. We will have been saved from a false existence. Because the fight brought out our brightness. And our belonging is finally everywhere. Grace is reminders that we belong, no matter where we go. We take our belonging with us, and we give it away too.

Because we know what it feels like to lose, to be hurt, to have our faith fall out from under our feet, to not be able to catch our breath because of the bad news, to fall to our knees with helplessness, to wish we could just go back to sleep—because we know this, because we have lived, because we have risked our hearts for love, because we know how awful it feels sometimes to be human, then we can't help but offer comfort to anyone else going through it. We can see them in a way that feels like relief to them.

“Hi, my name is Lesley-Ann, and here's where it hurts.” And then, like a miracle, everyone around says, “Yeah, me too.”

*sermon © Lesley-Ann Hix Tommey*