

Genesis 32. 22-31

Romans 9. 1-8

Matthew 14. 13-21

I haven't encountered a dog like this in a long time, but I can recall when I was younger being nipped on the heel by a dog; or maybe it was that they just tried it out on me. And I saw what was coming. Blue healers are a celebrated Australian working dog; cajoling cantankerous cattle to go where the farmer wants them to go. But a city dog that tries to nip you on the heel; that's another thing all together. The memory of such a dog for me is of a cowardly, sneaky, dangerous dog; one that won't look you in the eye or come face to face with you.

Genesis tells us that the name Jacob means heal-sneak. Jacob is the second twin to be born; emerging after Esau and he comes out from the womb, the text tells us, clutching Esau's heel. Jacob becomes a mummy's boy and mother Rachel connives and manipulates to see that Jacob, rather than Esau – the first-born, receives the blessing of his father; the aged, blind Isaac. When Esau's fury erupts over the stolen birthright and blessing, mummy sends Jacob away to her own country, to find a wife from her brother Laban's household. But uncle Laban is as deceitful as his sister and Jacob is cheated into marrying the older Leah first.

In the fourteen years Jacob works for Laban to win two wives and in the following six years he becomes very wealthy. Then he returns to Canaan and his father's country. But he must wrestle with his demons, the betrayal of Esau whom he fled from. Or is it God, with whom he must wrestle?

Like a dog that wants to nip you on the heel, Jacob can't relate face to face; he deceives his brother into giving away his birthright. And the way he deceives his father into giving him the firstborn blessing is that he covers himself with goat skin, pretending to be someone he is not. He cannot face his father as he is; he chooses to pretend.

But out there by the Jabbok, alone, without all his accumulated success he cannot pretend; he must wrestle with all that has gone before. He comes face to face, flesh to flesh and he struggles with God. There is no avoiding in *this* moment; no sneaking of this blessing. Everything he is – his deceit, his conniving, his wealth, his family – all of them are at stake in this struggle. And he prevails. The text doesn't tell us why the man comes to Jacob, but this is a watershed moment, a moment of transformation, a moment of conversion where everything he is is invested in this life and death struggle. He is blessed and renamed and it seems freed from the legacy of deceit which he carries with him - but he is wounded. This is always the legacy of the life and death struggle that leads to wholeness; a wound of some kind. This is the pattern of dying and coming to life again; it is the dying-and-rising paschal mystery which is at the heart of the Christ-story.

My daughter has been working on a film project which has been overseen by a director she describes as a man-boy; a boy in a man's body; tending to tantrums and to histrionics, creating chaos around him. He is uncentred, precocious and precious. It feels like our world is run by, if not dominated by man-boys. The petulant and pouting Putin; the tantrum throwing Trump. Major financial and consulting firms, advising our governments on matters to do with the common-wealth of all Australians, run by directors deceiving and sneaking their way to prosperity. Man-boys in pin-stiped suits, driving flashy cars and plundering the world.

Tribal cultures understood the necessity of initiation for boys in order for them to become men; to fulfill the role that men needed to play in order for the tribe to hold together, for the tribe to be safe, for them to transcend self-centredness, to contribute to the common good and to know that they belong. In Australian aboriginal culture this initiation involved circumcision around the time of boys entering puberty; along with introduction to secret men's business. Boys are torn from their mothers' embrace and initiated into the world of men. It is a frightening and painful experience – but through it the boy grows up; suddenly, overnight. He is held in a kind of struggle by the elders, and he is wounded; and then he enters the world of men.

In our civilised, rather pleased with ourselves, sense of self, we can be inclined to consider these initiation rituals as barbaric and cruel; primitive. But we have a world full of uninitiated, marauding man-boys, free-floating, un-held by the adults in their lives, uncentred, directionless and too often dangerous. The rates of depression and suicide, the prevalence of male violence are all signs that something is terribly wrong. Our education systems privilege head-learning, rationality and numeric measures of success. But all of our so-called progress is not serving us well; our societies, our relationships, indeed, the whole creation. Aboriginal boys were initiated into honouring country, with whom they share a deep, existential bond that must be honoured and respected. And in their initiation and connection with country they are grounded.

Father Richard Rohr, has devoted much of his ministry to the place of men in our contemporary world – and the crisis that we are in. He says that we must fall, must fail, must be broken; like Jacob abandon all measures of security and success and wrestle with God; in order to be able to live. Richard writes: *normally the hero never passes through to enlightenment until he has sustained a number of wounds, disappointments, and paradoxes. ... The hero cannot really intend, choose or fully decide for enlightenment. He does not know what it is yet! All he can do is be ready for it!*

Last week in two of the parables we heard Jesus tell of two protagonists who were ready: the merchant searching for fine pearls, the man with eyes peeled, happening on a great treasure. And they give up all to gain it. There was a sense that there was no choice for these two though; as though they were presented with THE choice; and went after the treasure. Jacob gives up all; he's not sure what lies on the other side of the Jabbok, but he knows his life hangs in the balance. Heal-sneak thinks he can bargain with his estranged brother Esau by impressing him and appeasing him with his great wealth. He sends all these things ahead of himself but now, stripped of all his ego accumulations, he finds himself wrestling with God. And blessed and renamed: *for you have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed.*

Jacob wrestles overnight and undergoes transformation; yet in truth it was everything he had been from the moment of birth that came together in this moment of struggle; transformed, redeemed, released. This is the pattern of transformation that the scriptures point to – a long, usually circuitous path leading us through up and downs, successes and failures until we are brought to the edge of the water and we must choose whether we will cross over into a new identity – blessed and renamed, born of water and the spirit. The progress focussed world, the world of the getting-ahead ego expects to be able to go in a straight line and if anything or anyone stands in the way, they are ridden roughshod over.

In the pattern of Jesus, though, we are called to humility and care, even as we continue to be watchful for those invitations when we may be faced with the watershed moment. And we fall or fail, or everything seems to fall apart. We are not exempt from these experiences because we are

Christian – although there is a Christian mindset which suggests that God should exempt us from these things. And maybe we are ashamed, or confused, or lose our faith because we feel God overlooked us, or we beat ourselves up that we were not more in control. All of this is much harder for men in our society, to be sure. These experiences are faith experiences, moments of transformation which make us bigger, more whole, which strip us of our self-centred world view that we may grow into a greater wholeness.

My experience in the church is that people are often embarrassed by these occasions of falling or failing. And when I hear people talk of their lives, it is as though there are two narratives – a faith narrative and a life narrative; running on two separate tracks – and not meeting. Two different narratives; unintegrated. But grace invites us to allow these two to come together and for us to live in peace and wholeness. As Paula D’Arcy says: *God comes to us disguised as our lives*; in all the messiness and sometimes ethical ambiguity and pain – all of these things are seen with the divine eye of grace. And we are invited to bask in that divine gaze. So may all we find the peace that passes understanding as we travel this path with Christ our brother and guide.

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