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Texts: Genesis 32: 22-31
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“We Are All Beggars”

Here’s something that happened to someone I know fairly well, a minister in a small New England town. It was a Monday night in winter, and, as is his custom, he gathered up the remainder of last week’s trash in the house. He stepped out of the well lit house without giving his eyes a chance to adjust, heightening the darkness outside. He crossed the driveway, moving toward the garbage bin placed but a few steps away. He reached for the lid of the bin and raised it absently, when suddenly, from out of the darkness came a vicious snarling and hissing that sounded as if, whatever it was, it was nearly on top of him.

“HOLY JESUS GOD!” the minister shouted. He slammed the lid back down and stumbled backward. “What was that?” he hollered to no one in particular, and then he looked around to see if anyone had seen or heard his outburst. No one stirred from the well lit house behind him. He gathered his senses, and then realized what had happened. Of course. A raccoon had gone dumpster diving and had gotten stuck inside the trash bin. “What to do?” he thought, still a little stunned. That thing might be dangerous, it might have rabies, what if it attacks? He thought for a while, and then settled on a solution: hold the lid down tight, and wheel the trash bin out to the curb. The trash truck would come, the raccoon would tumble out with all the rest of the trash, and from there it could scramble out of the truck.

The next morning, the minister shared what had happened with his wife. She threw her hand over her mouth. She pointed out that the trash trucks in their town weren’t exactly open at the top, and that they weren’t really built in a way that animals could just scramble out. “Uh, I think that raccoon is gone,” she said. “Like, gone gone?” the minister asked. “Yeah, like, trash compacted gone,” she replied. “Oh,” the minister said. And then he started to feel kind of bad. Because probably the thing was just scared. And probably it wasn’t going to attack him or anyone else - it was just going to run away. What a fool he had been.

Now, I know what some of you are thinking. You’re thinking, “Just who is this minister who trash compacts raccoons?” And you may be thinking, “This guy reminds me of that weird governor from South Dakota, the one who bragged about shooting her puppy.” Dog killer, raccoon killer, they’re all God’s creatures great and small, right?

Well, let me put your uneasiness to rest. It was probably a year or so later. It was a Monday night in winter, and the same minister gathered up the last of the trash from the previous week. He stepped out of the house into the cold darkness. He walked across the driveway, and he opened the trash bin, and as soon as he did there was a terrible and fierce commotion - snarling, hissing, snapping.

“HOLY JESUS GOD!” he shouted, leaping back, startled. Once he’d recovered his wits, and once he’d checked that no one had observed this second outburst, he remembered what had happened a year earlier. And he realized that yes, another raccoon, or maybe the angry demon spirit of the earlier raccoon, had gotten stuck in the trash bin. But this time he did what he should have done before: he simply tilted the bin away from himself and let it fall to the ground, after which he retreated quickly toward the house. He waited. Nothing happened. And so he went back inside. When he returned an hour or so later, he inched toward the opening of the trash bin, and peered inside with his phone light. The raccoon was gone, and so he righted the bin, and wheeled it out to the curb, feeling pretty good about how things had worked out this time around.

So how’s he going to get a sermon out of this, you’re probably now wondering. Here, I’m going to do my best to shift emotional registers, to suggest that, in a lot of ways, the trash bin is a

little like what it is to be human. We have an interior life. And much of the time, when we open things up, it's pretty quiet in there - you can open the lid of your life, talk about what's happening inside, and then close it up again, moving about your business. But there are other times when it's clear that something has gotten stuck inside of us, something painful that, when we expose it, hisses and snarls, making us recoil in fear. Our instinct is to snap the lid back shut. A casual encounter triggers some unresolved emotion from our past, and we just stew about it. Or maybe there's some deep inner wound that has remained unhealed, so that every time we approach it, it's like stumbling upon an angry and panicked animal somewhere within us. Or maybe a long simmering resentment stirs inside of us - a slight from a friend, say, or an old betrayal, or an old shame. Sometimes it can feel like there are one, or maybe several, warring creatures inside of us, trapped and afraid. What do we do with the complicated beings that we ourselves are, with all the messy contradictory stuff that sometimes roils inside of our heads, and our hearts? Do we clamp the lid down tight, and hope that it will all go away? Or do we perhaps let it out, trusting that, whatever is in there, it's probably not as scary as we thought? Even if it is scary, it might be far less scary to let it out than to let it roil inside, for the roiling usually results in a kind of violence.

I watched a film not long ago that captured this dynamic perfectly. It was called *The Power of the Dog*, from Jane Campion. It takes place in Montana in the early 20th century, and centers around the violent hyper-masculinity of a cowboy, played by Benedict Cumberbatch. He seethes with resentment at what he perceives to be small betrayals, and he bullies those around him, demanding toughness and austerity. In private, though, a different side of him emerges. He's a sensualist, and it's clear that he has deep, and deeply repressed, yearnings for other men. He mourns the loss of a formative relationship, and he suffers in a kind of pained silence. There is, in other words, something inside of him that is trapped and scared, but the lid is fastened down so firmly that that trapped creature only emerges in hisses and snarls. If only he had been allowed to feel what he feels, a great deal of emotional suffering could have been avoided.

The biblical story that most closely approximates this dynamic is the familiar story of Jacob wrestling with the stranger at the River Jabbok. It's a story that captures the great and roiling struggles that sometimes take place inside each of us. It unfolds as though it is a dream, and indeed, I read the story as what Freud would call a dreamwork. Jacob contends with something terrible and fierce that comes to him in the middle of the night. It is a man, the text tells us, but he appears from nowhere. Whoever the man is, he is a creature of the dark, and he seems to fear the light. It is necessary, he says, that he departs before sunrise. Adding to all of this, he is associated with a river, and so is a creature of the watery deep - water is always where both chaos and blessings dwell in the Bible. We're told at the end that it is God with whom Jacob wrestles, but the highly stylized and compressed language of the story makes it clear that, whatever is happening outside of him, the primary action is taking place within Jacob, within his soul.

And what is it, precisely, that he is wrestling with? God, yes, but also with himself and with his past. The episode takes place just prior to an enormous reckoning, in which Jacob will be forced to confront his brother Esau. Esau, you will recall, had been cheated by Jacob, not once, but twice. First, Jacob schemes to cheat Esau out of his birthright as the eldest child, and then he dresses up as Esau in order to trick his father into blessing him, Jacob, not Esau. Esau is enraged, vowing revenge, and it sends Jacob into a long period of exile, one in which he became the deceived, one in which he was humiliated and tricked. What was percolating inside of Jacob during those long years? What secret shame, what hidden burden was locked up beneath the lid of Jacob's heart during that exile? What regrets, and what buried fears were trapped within his soul? What heavy grief did he carry? There at the River Jabbok, the lid of Jacob's soul is lifted, and a river spirit - part man, part beast, part God, part Esau and part Jacob himself - comes forth. It's no longer possible to shut the lid. He must deal.

The encounter leaves him permanently wounded, a limping and broken man. But it also makes him more human - humble, tender, loving. The next day he does encounter his

brother. Instead of going to war, they offer each other a tentative, and then a lasting, forgiveness. Jacob now moves at the pace of a child, the text tells us, following slowly behind a flock of sheep. He is a stricken soul for having wrestled with his demons, and with his past, and with his God. He is an arrogant and conniving trickster no more - all of that seems to have come flooding out of him, replaced by a precious and holy calm. There might have been a slaughter just beyond that fateful river. Instead, there is a lasting peace.

I don't know what they teach at schools like West Point or the Naval Academy - such places are filled with people far smarter than me. But my wish would be that everyone in such places would be forced to read and reread the story of Jacob at the River Jabbok over and over again, where he becomes wounded, thereby learning how to avoid a war. And I don't know what they teach in schools of diplomacy, but if I were allowed to suggest an addition to the curriculum, I would have them read how, prior to entering a tense conflict, Jacob was forced to contend with his demons, and to wrestle with his past, thereby avoiding the worst outcome. And I don't know what they teach, exactly, in psychiatry and psychology programs, where therapists learn how to help individuals and married couples find resolutions to their conflicts, but if I could, I would ask that a part of the learning be that they read, over and over again, the story of Jacob reckoning with his own life in order to heal his future. And I don't know what fears and anxieties people are yielding to when they try to control how the history of the United States is taught in public schools, or how gender and sexuality are treated in public places, but if I could recommend a single text to help undo those fears and anxieties, to help lift the lid on whatever is roiling inside of those who have gone on the warpath, I would have them read, over and over again, this story of Jacob having to come to terms with the unclaimed parts of his own life, thereby circumventing a tragedy. And though it sounds hopelessly naive and simplistic, if it were possible to sit all the Israeli warlords and all the Hamas warlords in a single place, I would have them read the story of Jacob at the River Jabbok over and over again, in order to contend with how they have both been not only victims - they have - but also perpetrators.

I'm no diplomat and I'm no war games strategist. I am not a therapist. I'm little more than a country preacher who sometimes gets surprised by what he finds when he lifts the lid of the human soul. But I've come to trust that whatever is buried there is far less scary than what happens when the lid remains tightly clamped.

The final words that the great Protestant Reformer Martin Luther is recorded as saying are these: "We are all beggars." I think he had in mind something very much akin to what I have been describing. We are all beggars, which is to say that we all have a mysterious stranger of the night somewhere within us, a shadow with whom we must, sometimes, wrestle. We are all beggars, which is to say that, like those trapped raccoons, we all at times have hidden scavengers within our souls, cornered, fearful, and angry. Luther's great insight was that there is a grace operating in the world that is greater than those buried elements. There is a grace that is bigger than all of our fears. There is a grace that is bigger than all of our shame. There is a grace that is bigger than all of our hurt, or malice, or anger. There is a grace big enough to hold all of those things, making them somehow less frightening, and more manageable. His insight was to trust that, in lifting the lid, in wrestling with the shadows, we do the work of allowing God to both wound us, but thereafter to heal us.

And so say that on some winter's night of your soul, you come upon a trapped and hidden animal in your life. Be not afraid. Perhaps it has something to tell you, a message from beyond that you need to reckon with. And if, perchance, you happen to encounter a real live animal trapped in your trash bin, be not like that poor, hapless New England minister.

Just let it out.