

## Red-blooded

Genesis 25:19-34

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Hello, friends. Always a pleasure to see you as we continue our tradition of sharing worship together in the lazy days of summer. It's as much a part of the season as relaxing with neighbors on the front porch. It seems like we usually get together on the most sweltering days (though I must say I'm appreciating your new ceiling fans!). But just as a cold wind can blow in July, the summer lectionary has its surprises. And so it is that in a season of rest and relaxation, we come upon the story of Jacob, patron saint of the struggling, avatar of ambition.

As Americans we have a conflicted relationship with ambition. You'd be hard-pressed *not* to argue that the country was built on it, so it may well be that all the benefits and messes we've inherited come from someone being driven to succeed, whether to dominate the world, to improve it, or even to save it. From the building of the transcontinental railroads to the search for clean energy and a carbon-neutral lifestyle, so much has been shaped by the search to be the best, often to be the first. Ambition has given us the War on Terror and the War on Poverty. It has given us a depleted biosphere and the Green Revolution, the sub-prime mortgage fiasco and Habitat for Humanity; Captain Ahab and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation; Barry Bonds, Kevin Garnett; Clinton, Clinton, McCain, and Obama.

And it has given us a mirror in Daniel Plainview.

Daniel Plainview, for those who don't follow Hollywood, is the main character in Paul Thomas Anderson's *There Will Be Blood*. He's the character Daniel Day-Lewis won an Oscar for earlier this year. Daniel Plainview is a bitter, driven, angry man. That he's even remotely sympathetic or understandable is surely a tribute to Mr. Day-Lewis's skill as an actor. But it's also a reflection of something restless deep within us. Some misinterpreted the movie by saying it was all about greed (another trait we know something about). But what motivates Daniel Plainview is not the love of money. It is *competitiveness*—his raw desire to dominate, to make sure no one else succeeds. He wants to be first, and he wants it badly. The need to be first is rooted so deeply in his being that, God help him, he can settle for no less, even at the expense of his own family. In order to be first, he cheats, he lies, he deceives. (And that's not the worst of it.) In short, anti-religious as he is, he takes a page from the Bible.

That page would be Jacob's.

Jacob the heel. Jacob the supplanter. Jacob, who will buy his brother's birthright and cheat him out of their father's blessing. Jacob, who will wrestle with an angel and be re-named Israel. Jacob, who from even before his birth is driven to succeed, to be recognized, to get the blessing, to be first.

It's a compelling story. Born of Rebekah and Isaac, twin to Esau, Jacob is born grabbing at his brother's heel, a roller-derby jockey elbowing his way to the front. The first boy through the birth canal would (normally) get a double-portion of the inheritance and, even more important, the blessing of the patriarch of the clan. It's not that the second would get nothing, but he would get so much less. And when ambition surges through your veins as red as your blood, less won't do. This

isn't an isolated episode. Jacob will struggle his whole life long—with his brother, with his uncle, with a mysterious stranger. And before the story is over, he'll see his competition with Esau pale in comparison to his own sons' conniving as Judah and his brothers collaborate to sell Joseph—Jacob's favorite son—into slavery. They will turn their deceptions back on their father, telling him that Joseph was torn apart by a lion, his life's blood staining Joseph's coat of many colors a deep and sinister red.

There will be blood in this story, and there will be sorrow.

And ultimately, there will be blessing.

Where does this all-too-human thirst for blessing come from? Where, this ambition to be first? Does it come from some hole within us, an obsessive focus on some thing we're lacking? Does it come from a fear of scarcity?

It's not just Jacob. Esau has it, too. He may not care much for his birthright, trading it away for his brother's red red stew, but Esau too will wail in the end, lamenting that their father cannot bless him equally even though Jacob has won Isaac's blessing by deceit. There are hints in this story that it's all about the vigor of vitality. Perhaps simply to live is to strive. Perhaps the need to know blessing pushes through our arteries no less than our own life's blood. For Jacob, life is always a struggle. It's a wrestling match, from his jostling with Esau in Rebekah's womb to his encounter with the angel at the Jabbok ford.

The color red stains this story from beginning to end. Esau comes out of the womb red. The stew that Jacob concocts for his brother is red—literally “red, red [stuff].” Because Esau wants the stew he is called Edom, a name which also means red. Soon come stories of the shedding of blood between the descendants of Jacob and Esau, the people of Israel and the Edomites. Blood was the stuff of life, red its color. Some have suggested that Esau, coming in famished from the hunt, thought his brother was offering him a blood porridge with which he might regain his vitality.

The story wills itself upon us. It seizes us and won't let go. It's a rough, rambunctious tale, and none of us knows quite what to do with it. The urge to domesticate it is great. Some insist it's a moral tale, showing that God can work through even the most unsavory of people. But “a moral tale” is hardly the description that leaps to my mind concerning all this deception and taking advantage of one another. Jacob is not alone in being something other than a paragon of virtue. But devious as he is, there's something about Jacob that we find appealing. So much of the Bible urges us to sweet redemption, but Jacob's life insists on a less moralistic side of our human nature—simpler, baser, more straightforward. And he gets away with it. Even more revealing, we want him to.

Can we admit to our fascination with Jacob? He's a trickster, he's creative, he doesn't play by the rules. Even before his birth, he's ambitious, grabbing and grappling to be the first to gain the light. Later, as a man, anxious over a looming reunion with the brother he's supplanted twice and perhaps haunted by guilt over his own actions, he wrestles again, this time with the angel stranger, demanding a blessing he knows no other way to obtain.

Jacob's always been a fighter, a struggler, a deceiver, and there is something about him that repels us. But he grabs us like he grabs the angel, and he won't let go. Maybe he wants our blessing, too. Or maybe it's something within ourselves that demands our blessing, insists on asserting its presence,

even and especially as we keep denying that it's part of us. It's an Id energy, repressible, but ineradicable. And it speaks to us through the assurance that God gives Rebekah at the time of Jacob's birth. Jacob will get the prize, God says. Does that mean that God knows Jacob will deceive and grapple his way to the top? Or will he receive God's blessing even if he doesn't, simply for being who he is?

At its heart, at the end of all this sound and fury, is this really a story signifying something quite ultimate? Might this whole epic tale be the story of grace?

No less than Jacob, we have our own struggles with grace. We're assured of God's acceptance—it precedes all our struggle, all our striving, this promise of God's love, and our baptism reminds us of it—yet there's something in us that believes blessing and approval must be earned. Grace bewilders us. Like Esau we eat again and again of the red red stew, bartering the birthright of God's acceptance and trading it for whatever makes us feel vital, a striving, a wrestling that, as with Jacob—who-will-be-Israel, will define who we are as if it were our very name.

Genesis, the book of beginnings, rolls some of these same motifs over and over, stones polishing in a tumbler. Brothers compete, kill, lie, deceive. Twins grapple in the womb, grabbing heels, sticking out a grasping hand, reaching to be the firstborn. The younger gets the blessing, by prediction, deceit, or the crossing over of the patriarch's hands. There is ambition, and there is strife. But from the start—in the beginning—we hear the assurance of the Creator: "It was good... And God blessed them... And it was so... And it was very good."

Like so many before us, heroes and anti-heroes alike, we strive, we worry, we push ourselves to the front. Anxiety, ambition, and competitiveness goad us on, God help us. But we are assured from our baptismal moment that God blesses each one, male and female. And it was so, and it was good, and it was very good.

Jacob, Daniel Plainview, you, me. We all struggle, ache, and yearn for something, whether to be first or to re-create wholeness or gain a state of blessing. The book at the beginning of our sacred story assures us from the start of a harmony, a shalom and salaam that precedes all the rest. Augustine might have said it best when he said our hearts are restless until we find our rest in God. There is an arc to our story that speaks of eternal return.

Some, the Daniel Plainviews, spin off track and never do find that godly rest. And that is a human tragedy of truly epic proportions. Others nestle into their rest in God long before the shadows fall and they breach the veil of darkness. A few, saints and poets mostly, seem to live in moments of blessed assurance. But most of us, like Jacob, wrestle repeatedly with our twin, our double, our angel, our shadow side.

May our faith assure us of what we cannot always see—that God will be there at the end as God was at the beginning, granting us a place of grace from which we can look back and say, "It was all for good after all."