

Nothing Left of You, But You
The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 2, 2026
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In 1845 Sir John Franklin gathered a crew of 135 men to find a passage across the Canadian Arctic to the Pacific Ocean. They set sail from England in two three-masted ships, each of which carried a 1,200 volume library, a hand-organ that played 50 tunes, china place settings, cut-glass wine goblets, and sterling silver flatware, engraved with the officers' initials and family crests. Rather than gear designed for arctic exploration, however, they packed the uniforms of Her Majesty's Navy. Each ship also carried an auxiliary steam engine, and, for this two-to-three year voyage, a twelve-day supply of coal. There just wasn't room for more coal, you see.

No one survived.

Of course from our vantage the expedition was a ridiculous tragedy. Search parties found that even the desperate crew members who struck out across the ice were laden with sterling flatware and chocolate and tea. One carried a letter clip and a piece from a backgammon set. All deadweight. Elegant, useless deadweight of the doomed.

I wonder if the story of the Franklin expedition is close to the polar opposite—if you will—of the story of Jacob at the river Jabbok. Sir John Franklin tried to take his precious and familiar things along with him and came to ruin. Jacob sent everything he cared about across the river ahead of himself and came to life.

Jacob had also set off on a dangerous journey. But danger awaited Jacob at home, not off in the remoter parts of the earth. He'd been living in exile ever since he swindled his brother Esau out of his birthright. As we pick the story up today, he's approaching their very fraught reunion. Scared understandably to death.

Like Sir John Franklin, Jacob brought along his best. He traveled with flocks, herds, and camels we're told. He brought them as a peace offering, one that might appease his brother's rage and save his own life. He sent all these gifts ahead earlier as a kind of living buffer. If Esau's people start making trouble, Jacob will see it happening from a safer distance first. And then, the night before he is to meet Esau we read, "Jacob took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone."

No monogrammed silver. No china or fine crystal. Not even any family was left. Jacob let go of everything. And God came near.

It's not quite right to make this a parable about the attachment to worldly possessions. It's Jacob's aloneness that sets the story's tone. He sent across everything. Everything that comforted him. Everything that told him who he was, perhaps. This was an expedition to a pole. A trip to the utter end of Jacob's self.

Jacob and Esau were not just brothers, but twins, you may remember. At their birth Jacob emerged gripping Esau's heel. He came into the world grasping for what he wanted. It's astonishing what seems to be baked into a child's being from birth.

Not to bury the lede here, but Friday we saw the 20-week ultrasounds of our first grandchild. She was so active the technician had a hard time getting a good shot. But once he did, he said she had nice long fingers and should probably to play an instrument. This information may or may not have sent her father and grandfather onto the internet to research children's guitars for the rest of the evening, what with the hands and the dance moves of a rock and roll prodigy. Did you know a guitar company called Loog makes a three string electric model for toddlers? No need to remember that. I'll make sure the red one's on their baby registry.

Okay, it's possible that we occasionally project things onto our children that get stirred into the mix of who they become as well. Jacob and Esau were the products of a famously dysfunctional family. It also seems true that there are aspects of who we are that get knit into our bones from the beginning. Don't you agree? Call it the nature we're given to nurture, perhaps.

These old stories strike me as very wise about such things. The Bible doesn't bless everything Jacob did with his tendency to wrestle and grasp. Not at all. It didn't dress him up in the creased and medaled uniform of a perfectly upright patriarch either.

It's in Genesis that we read that while the birthright eluded Jacob by only seconds and inches when he and Esau were born, Jacob grabbed hold of it later in his tricky trade for a bowl of lentil stew. Maybe now, all these years later, he's come to realize there are consequences for our choices. He once took something that he wanted from his brother. But he lost that brother in the process. Maybe Jacob beds down for the night at the Jabbok wondering what it will cost him to get Esau back.

We're not told why he decides to spend the night alone. But for a night at least there is no one for Jacob to manipulate. No one to take hold of. Until God arrives.

And so Jacob wrestles. It seems that when Jacob lets go of everything else that he has gathered along the way in life—his family, his herds, his wealth—when he sent it all across the stream he was left with himself. The same self that struggled within his mother's womb. The same self that took hold of life like it was Esau's heel. God met Jacob on Jacob's terms. Wrestling. Struggling. Fighting to the end. And it is this Jacob that God blesses. It is not Jacob's hoped for self. Not Jacob's ideal self. It is the self that Jacob has been since before he was born. God blesses Jacob's scrapping, struggling, grasping self, and uses that very self to bless the rest of the world.

It's pretty natural that we resist coming to the end of our selves. We may fear letting go, even for a night, of the things that tell us who we are, because we're afraid our deepest self isn't who God really wants, or isn't who the rest of the world really wants. We keep putting up the opinions and the houses and the relationships that define the self we wish we were or hope to be. This isn't all bad. Jacob spent only one night of his long life alone at that river.

But from time to time maybe faith requires letting go of all that. Letting go of everything that tells us who we are and letting God have God's way with what's left.

Christian tradition includes some attitudes and practices that have fallen out of favor, often for good reason. But harsh sounding concepts like contrition, and renunciation, and denial in the spiritual life did not arise from the idea that if we suffer more we're more holy, even if they deteriorated into something close to that. Religious disciplines were meant to be ways of doing what Jacob may have been doing whether he knew it or not. They are ways of being alone, and, perhaps, forms of holy struggle by which we gain access to ourselves by letting go of everything else for a time.

Now don't worry, I'm not recommending hair shirts for everyone. Although, can you imagine one emblazoned with the Calvary logo and "God wants you to suffer. No exceptions."? Maybe not. We Christians have gotten this work especially wrong when we believed it's the suffering that God wants. Jacob's story suggests something very different. It suggests that God wants us to get over our fear that the self we cover up is inadequate, a fear that sometimes looks like the unflappable confidence of someone who seems to get whatever they want. Maybe God wants us to get over that fear, step out of the uniform we think makes us look like the proper captain of our ship, so that God can bless the person we actually are.

Church can be the least conducive place for honesty about ourselves. We can assume that what God wants and what other Christians want is some holier or wiser or just more put-together life than ours. But what we celebrate at this altar each week is the thoroughly spent life of Jesus, the body and the blood of a life that, even at the terrible extreme of human experience, could still be blessed and used by God for the world's healing. The body, stripped

of everything, that still blesses. Still heals. We receive the life of Jesus, trusting that something like this can be true of our lives as well.

Annie Dillard said that “the Franklin expedition stood on its dignity.” Which is to say it sank under the burden of its dignity. Eventually Jacob returned to his family. He returned to his goods and his home and his more dignified life. Jacob returned to his brother and, astonishingly, to his brother’s forgiveness. But the blessing God intended to let go in the world through his life was accessed alone one night at a river. Jacob was unencumbered by his dignity that night. He spent everything he had, every bit of his cunning, every ounce of his strength, grasping, wrestling, and finally just hanging on and begging for a blessing. Which is exactly what he got.

The image of blessedness we’re left with may not be the abundance of cattle and herds. It may not even be the family that he crossed the river in the morning to meet. The enduring image we’re meant to carry may be the solitary figure of Jacob’s spent and wounded self, limping towards the dawn, stumbling off to receive his life back, finally carrying the hard won knowledge of the God-given blessedness that remains when there’s nothing left of you, but you.