

# The Meeting of Heaven and Earth

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Genesis 32

Acts 4:8-12

In the New Testament narratives for this part of the ecclesial calendar, we're somewhere between the resurrection and the ascension now—somewhere between heaven and earth. The disciples are, like us, filled with confusion and boldness. Some report that the risen Jesus says "Don't touch me"; others report that he says "Touch me." Still others report that he walked with them for a long time and they didn't know who he was. They were with him constantly for three and a half years, but couldn't recognize him? Not even his voice?

We moderns have lots of trouble with these accounts. Some of us are particularly troubled by the claim of returning from the dead. Really? Did RNA replication really begin again? Did Krebs cycle resume the production of ATP again?

I think many of those questions, while interesting, have become something of a diversion. If we look at the overall accounts of the biblical narratives and other contemporaneous texts, we'll find that what we moderns see as firm boundaries between fact and value, between mind and matter, and even between life and death, weren't seen that way at all in ancient times. They may be even less well-defined for us than we like to think. For example, Jesus was not the only person in the biblical narratives to have been raised from the dead, so there's something more going than just being "raised from the dead" per se. But the narratives do seem to have in mind some kind of extraordinary interplay between heaven and earth.

So what does it mean for us today if we were to talk about the meeting of heaven and earth? When we talk about the heavens these days, we're talking about celestial bodies. We're talking about the Hubble Space Telescope, the Eagle Nebula, and black holes. We don't talk much about evil spirits any more; we talk about things like epilepsy, Tourette's syndrome, or even just unfortunate coincidence.

So what remains for us of transcendence, the way the ancients believed the realm of the heavens transcended the realm of the earth. Well, with all our successes in describing parts of the world in mechanical terms, there are still parts that remain unexplainable in terms of molecules mechanically knocking around. Let's look at Herb Reed down here, for example. None of us have any trouble whatsoever with the notion that Herb has a mind, and a very, very good one at that. But what is it exactly that Herb has when we say he has a mind? We can see Herb, we can touch Herb, we can hear Herb's voice, but none of those things is Herb's mind. So how do we know that he has one? Do we have minds, too? We think we do and so we are inclined to infer that Herb has one in the way that we do. But we have no direct empirical evidence of our minds any more than we have of Herb's. It just makes a lot of sense to us to talk about mind, even though we can't demonstrate its existence directly. We might say the same about what we call the "Self." We all think we have them, but what on earth are we talking about when we talk about my "self"?

There is by the way some fierce controversy going on among scientists and philosophers about whether there is such a thing as a mind. Some deny it completely, which leads others to say in response "You guys must have lost your minds!"

But the point I want to get at here is that transcendence is still available to us. Despite our marvelous mechanical descriptions of certain

parts of the world, there remain parts that are central to our lives that cannot in principle be described in purely mechanical terms. A description of the neurochemical processes occurring in our brains will never be mistaken for Bach's St. Matthew's Passion because everything that is important to the St. Matthew's Passion is what is left out by descriptions of mechanical neurochemical processes. This lack doesn't mean that our mechanical explanations are therefore false; what it does mean is that they can not be the end of the story. They are not exhaustive. There is more to our lives than molecules knocking around. Our lives have meaning to us, and meaning by its very definition transcends "molecules knocking around." And no philosophical materialist has the slightest clue about how to get from "molecules knocking around" to "meaning." I'd argue that it can't in principle be done, but that's for a philosophy class, not here.

So what do these stories of death and resurrection "mean" for us? How can we make sense of them? There is no doubt that the disciples were experiencing some extraordinary transformation and regeneration: as though the heavens were opening and touching the earth. This is the language they use when they describe their experience of transcendence. And if we look at the biblical narratives, we find that they are full of stories of the kind of transformation and regeneration that is brought about when we humans experience transcendence: the sense that life is more than just "molecules knocking around." Let me tell you a very old story.

The name "Jacob" comes from a Hebrew root that means "heel." In the account of Genesis, Chapter 25, Isaac's wife Rebekah became pregnant and delivered herself of twin boys, the hairy elder who was named Esau and the younger who clutched his brother's heel as the twins made their way into the world. He was named Jacob, for catching someone's heel trips him, so the name Jacob also means "he who trips up" or "he who supplants."

The story of Jacob is a very rich one, for it shows us a constant struggle between two seemingly irreconcilable forces, namely Jacob and Esau. Who among us has not felt the tension between wanting to stay at home and be mother's favorite, as was Jacob, and wanting to strike out in the world and, mastering it, be the father's favorite, as was Esau? But among the riches of the stories of Jacob and Esau is one particular story that has to do with what can happen when we are at our wit's end. We call that story loosely "Jacob wrestles with the angel."

Jacob first began to live up to his trickster name when he tripped up his brother Esau by tricking him out of his birthright. Jacob finessed the hungry Esau into trading away the rights accruing to him as the first-born son for a pot of stew. All children know that the first-born is favored, but also that they, the second-, third-, and fourth-born need a father and mother's blessing every bit as much as the eldest child, who gets it merely by the happy accident of being born first. Jacob needed that blessing so badly that he was willing to cheat Esau and his blind old father to get it. And get it he did. After all, the omens and portents had told Jacob that he was a nation and that Esau would serve him, so getting the birthright—by hook or by crook—seemed the expedient way to help make sure the prophecies got fulfilled.

The deception was discovered. With Jacob having cheated his brother and flat-out lied to his father, the family situation, as might be expected, was tense—Jacob packed his bags, took his stolen blessing, and went off to live with his Uncle Laban until things calmed down. "Until things calmed down" turned into fourteen years, during which Jacob married two of Laban's daughters and practiced some enlightened animal husbandry on his uncle's flocks of sheep and cattle. At the end of the fourteen years, Jacob had wives, children, and better flocks than his Uncle Laban. Laban's sons started to get angry with Jacob. They grumbled to their father that Jacob had come and

skimmed the cream off everything that Laban had. Laban agreed with his jealous sons. Jacob, an alert fellow, soon saw which way the wind was blowing and packed up his wives and children and belongings and left. He also took care to take along his new flocks bred from Laban's stock and the religious icons from Laban's family.

With the angry Laban and sons pursuing, Jacob headed home. He hadn't forgotten, however, that some fourteen years earlier he was obliged to leave his home under what might quaintly be called difficult circumstances, so he decided to dispatch some messengers to see what sort of reception he could expect from his defrauded brother Esau. The messengers returned and told Jacob: "Esau is coming to meet you with 400 men." So Jacob was caught: the angry Laban and his troops were behind him and the defrauded Esau with 400 of his men was before him. Jacob quickly moved to conclude an uneasy and temporary truce with Laban and then turned his attention to Esau. Because of his terror of Esau's revenge, he divided his camp into two groups, so that at least half of his people and goods would survive.

And then we read Jacob's great cry to his protector Yahweh that is recorded in Genesis, Chapter 32. He felt he was going to die. How could this be happening? Wasn't he well on the way to becoming a nation, as had been promised? How could his descendants outnumber the sands of the sea with threats of immediate death on both sides of his camps? It didn't fit. His story was crumbling.

There was no immediate answer from Yahweh to Jacob's cry, so he divided his already subdivided group again in yet another attempt to deceive Esau, sent the flocks and the wives to bed, left all of his possessions with them and retired across a creek for the night.

Genesis, Chapter 32, verse 24: "And Jacob was left alone. And there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day."

I have found no more concise or succinct definition of what we moderns call anxiety than this verse. Jacob's life was falling to pieces. He was alone. It was night. And he fought. He could not see what or with whom he was fighting; his opponent was unseen and unnamed. He only knew that it was dark, he was alone, he was afraid, and he was fighting. Neither his wealth nor his family could help him in his struggle. It was his alone. Yes, we moderns know about this kind of struggle, don't we?

Verse 25: "And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was out of joint as he wrestled with him."

Dislocation of the hip is an exceedingly painful injury: the ball of the femur is wrenched out of its socket in the pelvis. If the joint is not reset properly, permanent lameness results. The anonymous wrestler saw that he was not winning, so he wrenched Jacob's hip out of joint. By any definition, Jacob is now severely disabled. He was also still alone, still afraid, and still wrestling.

The story touches us here because when our stories about ourselves and our destinies no longer make sense, we become anxious, we are disabled, sometimes profoundly so. We can no longer deal with life as nimbly as we once did. We with Jacob know that the darkness we wrestle is powerful enough to injure us severely.

Verse 26: "And he said 'Let me go, for the day breaketh.' And Jacob said, 'I will not let thee go except thou bless me.'"

Dispelling darkness with light is a recurrent biblical theme and its appearance here points up the spiritual nature of the struggle. But look at Jacob's answer: "I will not let thee go except thou bless me." Jacob knew well that if the darkness simply left with the coming of day, he would still be

alone, exhausted, and now lame. He would know nothing more than he knew the day before and might have to fight again the following night. So Jacob did a surprising and wonderful thing: he held on to the darkness. Not only did he hold on to the darkness, he demanded a blessing from it as a condition of release.

In order to gain a blessing from any struggle with darkness, we must not let it escape, or try to drive it from us. We must hold on to it and force it to bless us, or we too will be left alone, injured, exhausted and afraid.

Verse 27: "And he said unto him, 'What is thy name?' And Jacob said, 'Jacob.'"

When the darkness asked Jacob's name, it was asking "Who are you? What is your story?" When Jacob identified himself with his name, he was saying "I am he who deceives, he who trips up, he who supplants." Jacob is here acknowledging his own history of deception and treachery.

Here is the core of the problem: Jacob's story to himself was that he would be the father of nations, a great man, and that his brother Esau would serve him; yet all of his family knew that he was a crook and a cheat. The two stories fit together as poorly then as they do now. Jacob as a crook and cheat was not yet ready to bear the weight of the blessing he had obtained from his father. When Jacob identified himself before the darkness, he claimed his own darkness: he was Jacob, the beneficiary of a stolen blessing, the conniver, the patriarch-to-be. He was all of those things, where he had previously thought he was only one: a patriarch-to-be.

So must we identify ourselves before the darkness, claiming even those parts that make up our own darkness if we wish to come into our full inheritance.

Verse 28: "And he said, 'Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but

Israel, for as a prince has thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed."

Here is the first blessing from darkness embraced and consciously confronted: Jacob received the spiritual power to carry on the struggle to live out his blessing by becoming the father of nations. The name change is no idle coincidence. Changing someone's name is of great spiritual importance, as women who marry will attest. Jacob's new name symbolizes his spiritual transformation.

Verse 29: "And Jacob asked him and said, 'Tell me I pray thee, thy name' And he said, 'Wherefore is it that thou dost ask after my name?' And he blessed him there."

This is the second step in wresting a blessing from the darkness: first we must claim who we are; now we must discover who the darkness is. There is no darkness more fearful than the darkness that has no name. To say, "I am frightened" is to state that we are afraid of something we do not know. Yet once we ask the darkness its name, we begin to establish a relationship with it and never again will it hold the same power over us--even if we do not get all the answers we seek. This breaking of the darkness's power over him is the second blessing Jacob receives. Merely asking the question "Who are you?" is enough to begin. But we cannot reach this step until we have claimed our own darkness.

Verse 30: "And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel for 'I have seen God face to face and my life is preserved.'"

The fearsome darkness has turned out to be Yahweh himself, and Jacob had wrested two great blessings from him. Had Jacob run from the darkness, he would not have received the blessings he needed to get on with his life. But he did not get those blessings without paying a great price: he had to fight hand-to-hand for his very life and he would never walk normally again. Jacob had experienced the transformative and regenerative power of

being touched at the deepest core of his being by transcendence: the meeting of heaven and earth.

Those of us who are following the adventures of Harry Potter are familiar with Dumbledore's beloved bird named Fawkes. Fawkes is a phoenix, a bird of remarkable transformative and regenerative powers. At the end of its life, the phoenix would build a nest, climb on, and spontaneously self-combust. Such were its powers of transformation and regeneration that, after both bird and nest were entirely consumed, the phoenix would be reborn, re-emerging from the pile of ashes. Small wonder that some of the early church fathers saw in the phoenix a kind of precursor to Christ, the crucified and resurrected Lord. Later symbolists came to see Christ himself as the supreme manifestation of the transformation and regeneration of the meeting of heaven and earth: Christ the Phoenix, the touchstone that can change our spiritual baseness into spiritual gold.

That's why we're here. That's why we feed the hungry. That's why we work for justice. Because we've been touched by the Phoenix. We've experienced transcendence somewhere, and somehow, and our lives can no longer be the same. Amen