

Jacob and Jekyll: Navigating Identity and Fear

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Date: 20 October 2024

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[0 : 00] All right, so in the year of our Lord, 2002, I made a mistake that I will not ever forget. It's a mistake that now I can look back on with a little bit of humor, but at the time I did not think it was funny, like at all.

I was on this university sponsored trip to London with some of my fellow history majors. We were there to do some firsthand study of the history of kind of British imperialism, but we were also given as like, I don't know, 21-year-olds some downtime in the city to just explore.

And me and a good friend of mine decided that we would go to Madame Tussauds. I don't know if I'm saying that right, but we had never been. We wanted to check this out. And we had all this fun seeing all these like wax representations of celebrities and other real people.

And then we saw this other sign in the exhibit that we hadn't noticed before. And it was a sign pointing the way to an exhibit about the criminal history of London.

I love history. I was like, okay, I'm in. I'm in for this. Now, that Jack the Ripper was a part of this exhibit was something that should have given me a little bit of pause.

[1 : 16] That it was in the basement of the museum also should have like made me basically turn around immediately. Because I do not like being scared.

I think last week Pastor Anthony did like a poll of who likes horror movies and all of that. I am squarely in the no thank you category of all of that.

I don't like the feeling in my body. I don't like my blood pressure rising. So when my friend and I got into this elevator and this, you know, sort of ghoulishly dressed man turned to us and said, welcome to hell.

I knew that I had made this mistake, like a pretty big mistake, but we were in the elevator at that point. And we got down into the basement of the museum and we realized that this was a live exhibit.

And as we made our way through these like narrow passageways, like these like serial killers and criminal masterminds from London that they were representing were like chasing us through the halls.

[2 : 27] And I just remember one of my friends, like one of my good college friends, you know, we were running. I was ahead of her. I was ahead of her, y'all.

Okay. She was behind me. I just never remember her turning back and being, and turning to the guy who was chasing her and saying, you better get back, boy. And then she actually hit him, y'all.

She hit him in this museum. And now we did get out of that hole. We did get out of it without being sued. But it's a mistake I won't make again.

Because I don't like being scared. But then, a decade later, I found myself accidentally in a horror movie with the woman that I was dating at the time, Bukola, had invited me to a movie.

And she told me that it was a post-apocalyptic movie, so I pictured like a Mad Max, like end of the world, or, you know, some kind of catastrophes happened. But the movie was World War Z.

[3 : 32] And so it was about zombies. And we ran sitting in this movie theater, and I was sitting beside the woman who had become my wife, and I was covering my eyes because I was so creeped out, while she was laughing at some of the most gruesome and gory parts of the movie.

It was like it was a comedy. And I was like, okay, we, yes, Lord, do it. Do it, won't he do it? I was just, and again, I realized, wow, I do not like being scared.

But I am really interested in the monsters of our culture, at least emotionally and spiritually. I'm interested in what our cultural monsters have to say about us as a society.

I'm interested in how they reveal our anxieties, how they uncover what most haunts us. Sometimes they might reveal simply our fear of death.

Sometimes our fear of being out of control. Sometimes our fear of being overtaken by the mob, like zombies, or overtaken by technology.

[4 : 49] Sometimes they express a fear about the way that we have, as humans, manipulated nature. But for Christians, I think that paying attention to our culture's monsters can help us move and be more honest about the temptations to anxiety and fear that we experience, that operate often beyond our consciousness.

Since one of the Bible's most pervasive commands is do not be afraid. It is important for us, if we want to grow up in Christ, to realize what exactly we are afraid of.

Last week, Pastor Anthony started off this series, Shadow Boxing, by talking about zombies and what they might represent for us, what we can learn as people of faith.

And then this week, I actually want to drill down into kind of a small thing that he touched on. But as we move through this series over the next several weeks, my challenge to you is to reflect on a couple of basic questions.

These are things you can take home and think about in your prayer time. What is it that haunts you? Spend some time journaling about that question, considering it as you walk by houses in your neighborhood or stores downtown that, you know, are all decorated for Halloween.

[6 : 24] What is it that haunts you? Or put it another way, what are your deepest fears? And in what ways does your love relationship with Jesus absorb each of those fears?

This week, I want to explore a monster that is almost the exact opposite of a monstrous zombie horde. The monster that I want to explore is it's solitary.

It makes its mission to stay out of sight. It has to be disguised to thrive. It's subtle. And it's sinister.

And while it does steal life, I think as effectively as a zombie horde, it does it slowly over time. And usually with the unconscious cooperation of the host.

The monster that I want to talk about is the monster within. Now, probably the most famous illustration of the monster within is found in the classic novel by Robert Louis Stevenson, The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

[7 : 42] And you don't have to have read the novel, don't worry, to know the basic premise. When I was in the novel, I was in the novel, that this respectable man of means, Dr. Henry Jekyll, creates a potion whereby he can separate himself from his deepest, darkest desires.

A potion that allows him to remain seeming respectable in the world, but also allows him to do whatever he wants.

When he drinks the potion, he becomes Mr. Edward Hyde, a person who pursues his desires. And this Mr. Hyde eventually commits a murder.

See, Dr. Jekyll believes that he has discovered a truth that humans are not one self, but rather two selves. His goal is to extract the second self, but in pursuit of that goal, he loses the ability to control his transformation, which leads to disaster and to his downfall.

Jekyll and Hyde is only the most famous case of the monster within motif. Around the same time, in the late 1800s, Oscar Wilde came out with another novel called The Picture of Dorian Gray, which explores very similar ideas.

[9 : 04] According to literary scholar Leo Braude, both of these scholars are part of a move toward explicitly reimagining the problem of the monster, not as some separate other, but as the dark side of the self.

I think it's also important that he writes of the emergence of this motif in the late 1800s, saying that the double self, to a certain extent, and note this, echo cultural changes in the outside world.

In the new, more heterogeneous, modern, urban world, where people of very different types and backgrounds rub shoulders in the chaotic city, the gap between social self and inner self becomes acute.

And I think that we are very much still grappling with that in our own time, this distance between our social self and our inner self, between the masks that we wear and the realities of who we really are, warts and all.

And that's why a movie like Jim Carrey's The Mask could come out a century after Jekyll and Hyde and still become a box office success. We're still aware of this two-ness.

[10 : 27] And I think that awareness has actually intensified. But while these characters represent a kind of like bestial self within that threatens our downfall, the irony for us is that many of our masks actually allow us to thrive.

We are rewarded for wearing them. And Christian mystics throughout history have identified the particular combination of masks that we choose to wear.

And they've often called it something like the false self. So I want to turn today to a quirky story in Genesis 27. So if you have a Bible or a Bible app, you can take it out.

We're going to go to Genesis 27. You can also look at it on the screen. This is Genesis 27, 1 through 20. Genesis 27, 1 through 20.

When Isaac was old and his eyes were dim, so that he could not see, he called his elder son Esau and said to him, My son.

[11 : 49] And he answered, Here I am. He said, See, I am old. I do not know the day of my death. Now then, take your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field and hunt game for me.

Then prepare for me savory food such as I like and bring it to me to eat, so that I may bless you before I die. Now, Rebekah was listening when Isaac spoke to his son Esau.

So when Esau went to the field to hunt for game for his father, Rebekah said to her son Jacob, I heard your father say to your brother Esau, Bring me game and prepare for me savory food to eat that I may bless you before the Lord before I die.

Now, therefore, my son, obey my word as I command you. Go to the flock and get me two choice kids so that I may prepare from them savory food for your father, so that he may bless you before he dies.

But Rebekah, but Jacob said to his mother Rebekah, Look, my brother Esau is a hairy man and I am a man of smooth skin. Perhaps my father will fill me and I shall seem to be mocking him and bring a curse on myself and not a blessing.

[13 : 02] His mother said to him, Let your curse be on me, my son. Only obey my word and go get them for me. So he went and got them and brought them to his mother and his mother prepared savory food such as his father loved.

Then Rebekah took the best garments of her elder son Esau which were with her in the house and put them on her youngest son Jacob. And she put the skins of the kids on his hands and on the smooth part of his neck.

Then she handed the savory food and the bread that she had prepared to her son Jacob. So he went to his father and said, My father! And he said, Here I am. Who are you, my son?

Jacob said to his father, I am Esau, your firstborn. I have done as you told me. Now sit up and eat my game so that you may bless me. But Isaac said to his son, How is it that you have found it so quickly, my son?

And he answered, Because the Lord your God granted me success. And the rest of the story unfolds and Isaac indeed does give the blessing to Jacob instead of Esau.

[14 : 13] So there's a lot happening in this story. But beyond all that we could say about it, I want us to name clearly that this story is like so many of our stories.

It's about a family that seems to be what we would call in modern terms dysfunctional. Between the lines of the plot, we notice a severe lack of communication.

Isaac and Rebecca, father and mother, they never talk to each other in the story. Jacob and Esau, brother and brother, they never talk to each other in the story.

And there are lots of family members that seem to just be kind of passing each other without any real connection. The story of Jacob in the Bible contains a lot more than just this portion, this one section of scripture that we're talking about today.

And if you read the chapters before and after it, you'll get more of a sense of kind of dysfunction in this family. Even more, a sense that this story is like so many of ours.

[15 : 19] It is a very, very human story. But this story is also important because of the thing, one of the things that I think that it is fundamentally about, which is the desire to wear someone else's clothes.

The desire to cover up our nakedness, as in Genesis with fig leaves. The tendency to be ashamed of the vulnerabilities inherent in who we really are.

I think to get the full flavor of the story, I want to point out two things that happened right before it. Proceeded by this story, or preceded before this story, you get a name and a promise that I think are important.

So earlier in the story, in Genesis 25, Isaac prays that his wife will be able to bear a child. She does, she becomes pregnant, but she becomes pregnant with two children instead of one.

And the narrator says the children struggle together within her. Rebecca then asks God about what she senses is happening in her own body, and she receives a revelation from God about the future.

[16 : 33] And the Lord said to her, two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided. The one shall be stronger than the other. The elder shall serve the younger. God gives Rebecca this insight that her older son is going to be the one to carry forward the family name.

The older son instead of, or the younger, sorry, the younger son is going to be the one to carry forward the family name. And the younger son is the one that's going to be able to carry forward kind of the capital P promise given to Abraham.

The older son will not have these things which would have been the cultural norm. And the story gives us the sense that, and this is kind of why I love this story, that it gives us the sense that both Rebecca and Jacob are people who know how to be shrewd in a world where they don't have much power.

There's a sense that Rebecca doesn't tell Isaac and that she alone has special insights into the purposes of God. The other thing to know is about Jacob's name.

This happens earlier as well. He is named Jacob, which means supplanter or grabber, or my favorite translation, overreacher.

[17 : 52] You get a taste of that side of him in another story where two chapters earlier when Jacob carries out this transaction with his brother Esau. Esau is extremely hungry. He comes in from the field and he is willing to exchange a pot of stew for his rights as the firstborn.

Esau gives all of that. It's like Jacob is ready. He's shrewd. There's something about his place in this family that has made him shrewd. There's something about Rebecca's place as well as a woman with little power and a society of men that has also made her shrewd.

Both of them have this sense of how to manipulate the system to get what they want. So when Isaac prepares to pass on this deathbed blessing, Rebecca's ready and Jacob is willing to be drawn into the plan.

Now, here is what is interesting if you look at the text of the story. It is not completely clear that what Jacob and Rebecca have in mind is to actually trick Isaac.

We know that Rebecca has this revelation that Jacob will be the kind of rule and there's a sense that she could be sending him in to get the blessing instead of Esau and that she could just expect.

[19 : 08] I mean, think about this, y'all. I mean, it's not that great of a plan to be like, your son, who you've known all of your life, you're going to be like, I don't even know him. You put a little goat skin on him and I'm confused about who he is.

So there's this sense that like, that is not the point for her, that she is not necessarily trying to trick Isaac. There's actually this really fascinating rabbinic teaching which suggests that Rebecca gives Jacob the close of Esau simply as an attempt to get him to feel like the older son, to get him to feel like he is enough and that he is worthy of the blessing that he is already supposed to have.

Maybe she doesn't expect Isaac to mistake their sons but Jacob is the one in this moment who panics because Isaac is like, who are you?

And he's like, I'm Esau, I'm Esau. He chooses the mask in order to get what he wants. And the crazy thing is, is that he does get what he wants.

It works. He secures the promise God gave to his father, his grandfather Abraham. But because of the masks, if you read the rest of the Jacob story, Jacob is condemned for most of his life to be a fugitive and to be running for people for years and years.

[20 : 34] At first glance, it might seem easy to judge Jacob's actions. He does, after all, seem like a trickster, basically, and not really a hero. But before you judge, consider a simple question.

When have you been tempted to wear somebody else's clothes? Or maybe what might be more the case, when have you cobbled together the pieces of other people's personalities, callings, dreams, strengths, to try to outfit yourself with an identity that you felt was pleasing to God or pleasing to others?

Especially if you're BIPOC or disabled or queer or a woman or inhabit any area of marginalization. When have you mistaken the mask that you have had to wear to get ahead, just to be seen as level with everybody else?

When have you mistaken that for your soft self? Your real self, the self that God created you to be? See, I think that this story has so much to say about the monster of the false self, the false self we take on to just survive.

According to Christian psychologist David Benner, the false self is our plan. for coping with life and achieving happiness. It's our best guess about what we need in order to feel good about ourself.

[22 : 10] It is our strategy for meeting our basic needs for love and survival and power and control. At the core of the false self is a desire to preserve an image of ourself and our way of relating to the world.

The problem is not that we come up with a survival strategy. the problem is that we confuse the survival strategy for ourselves. We believe that what we do or the prestige we acquire or the things that we have make us who we are.

Now, growing up as a Christian, I was never introduced to the idea of the false self. I was very well taught that it was important to be crucified with Christ.

But I thought that that basically meant that Toneta just had to disappear more and more and more. And it wasn't until I heard a podcast some, like, many years later that gave me a better sense of what this might mean.

Bukola and I were, Bukola, you're in a lot of these stories today. Sorry. Bukola and I were on a road trip and I suggested that we listen to an episode of a podcast that was one of my favorites at the time, The Liturgist Podcast.

[23 : 30] I know that dates me. I don't even know if it exists anymore. And the episode that we chose was about the Enneagram, which is something I didn't know anything about. It's basically the system for trying to help people think about, like, what are the masks that you wear?

And I'll never forget listening to the car and talking about, like, oh, there's this type of mask, this personality, the type four, the romantic, the person who's artistic and they want to be exceptional.

They kind of, it seems like they're a little diva. That was kind of the undercurrent. And the end of this podcast describing this, they said that this type, this person who wears this kind of mask, they tend to be sad and grumpy and they often die young.

And I'll never forget that Mucola, her eyes just lit up and she was like, that is you! Yes, this is you! It is you! And I was so annoyed and she was completely right.

I hope I don't die young, y'all. That's... So we all have these masks and we all struggle not to become our masks. We all struggle to differentiate our false selves and our true selves.

[24 : 42] But to grow in maturity in Christ, we have to confront that monster within, the false self. And we have to become, as Dag Hammerskull puts it, we have to become aware of the talent entrusted to each of us, which is our I, our true self.

Now, I'm just going to put this up. You can glance at it. This is some of the differences between the false self and the true self. I think this list is really, really helpful. to understanding this idea, this idea of what we're talking about when we talk about crucifying.

Think about, you know, false self-identity is our idealized self. True self-identity is who we are and who we are becoming in Christ. False self maintained by effort and control, maintained, true self maintained by grace.

Jacob's life illustrates this battle to come out from the false self into the true self. and in one of the key moments of the story, he's given a new name, much as God longs to give to all of us.

God calls him out from being Jacob, the supplanter, the grabber, the overreacher, to become Israel, which basically means one who persists with God and who God persists with.

[26 : 03] It's one who does not create the gift or steal the gift, but instead receives the gift and follows the road and through every bump and turn and continues to journey with God.

The biblical record makes clear that Jacob struggles his entire life to come out from his false self, to receive his God-given name, and his story is anything but neat.

But the good news is that the promise does come through Jacob in spite of himself and fully by the grace of God. Even as he battles his monsters, God is at work through him for the good of the world and I am convinced that that is true for every single person in this room, no matter how messy the journey.

Story makes clear that marginalized people don't have the same ability as people in power to take off their masks. And I have to give this caveat, y'all.

There's a brilliant book called *The Enneagram for Black Liberation* and this is what the writer Chi-Chi Ogorum says. It is extremely privileged to define the healthy life as one without armor.

[27 : 27] Defining it in such a way caters best to those who do not face direct harm by laying down their armor. It is harmful to make unarmored vulnerability the end goal without addressing the systemic inequities that make armoring necessary for groups of people.

Power and vulnerability work hand in hand. With an increase in power, there tends to be an increase in a person's capacity to conceal their vulnerabilities.

So let me be clear before I end this sermon. We don't all have the same work to do when it comes to unmasking. It will look different depending on how much privilege you have.

Yet in Christian spirituality, losing the self in order to find the self is absolutely essential. We all have to refuse the lie that Jacob believes in the first part of his life.

We have to let go of the belief that if we wear the right mask, we will be blessed. See, the real monster behind the monster of the false self is our anxiety about God's blessing.

[28 : 42] It's anxiety that runs all through these narratives. And you see it in us. You see it in our world all around us. This anxiety about the blessing. Now, as I said earlier, y'all, I do not like being scared.

But I am really intrigued by Halloween and the fact that there's such a strong invitation to confront what haunts us. And I absolutely love that Halloween falls during the autumn of the year, which is a time of, at least in our hemisphere, a time of natural death in the physical world.

It is often during this time of year that I pull out one of my favorite poems by Lucille Clifton, *The Lesson of the Falling Leaves*. And it simply reads like this. The leaves believe such letting go is love.

Such love is faith. Such faith is grace. Such grace is God. I agree with the leaves. So this autumn, what false selves do you need to lose in order to find your true self in Christ?

What letting go can you begin in love and in faith and in grace all held within the beauty of God?

[30 : 11] Amen.