

New St. James Presbyterian Church
Sunday, August 2, 2020
Rev. Mark McLennan

“IN THIS CORNER....”

Scriptures: Genesis 32:22–31 Psalm 17:1–7
 Romans 9:1–5 Matthew 14: 13–21
+++++

There are two great preaching passages in the Lectionary today:

- The feeding of the thousands with 5 loaves and two fish
- Jacob the wrestler

I have chosen to go back to the Jacob story for a couple of reasons:

- I haven't used the passage very often in sermons.
- It reminds me of my brief time as a professional wrestler.

Actually, what happened was this:

One of my best friends, Ian Victor, and I were having a drink after school at Henri Richard's tavern near McGill.

In those seminary days, I often wore bib overalls to class, and he was dressed in a similar fashion, and he was as big as I was.

We got talking with two other patrons and we shortly had them convinced that we were professional wrestlers!

We were trying to decide on a name – either the *Pastors of Disaster* or the *Preachers of Pain*.

Now it is just a fond memory of student days and the fun we had then.

Over the last few weeks, we have looked at a couple of episodes in this Jacob story... and it continues.

These stories from Jacob's journey are a remarkable mix of details and gaps.

Details:

In the earlier part of chapter 32, we learn that Esau - the betrayed and duped brother, the brother who threatened to kill his twin - is coming, not just with a large group but with 400 men.

We get a careful accounting of the animals Jacob is going to give Esau and learn that after dividing his entire entourage into two groups he then subdivides the lead group into three herds (though more may have followed as well).

He spent the night in camp but then got up in the middle of the night and moved everyone to the other side of the river to be safer,
which may say something about how threatened he truly felt .

But then the **gaps**.

While there are many, let me highlight a few.

After that middle of the night relocation, Jacob goes off to sleep by himself.
Why?

Even a novice traveler knows it's foolish to go off and sleep on one's own.

Was this an effort to protect his family out of his fear of Esau?

Was he perhaps hoping for another dream like one a few chapters back with the ladder?

He was certainly hoping for a little good news!

Was this a spiritual or existential pause before the confrontation with Esau, a chance to prepare himself?
Was this just a random choice? Why go off by himself?

And of course, there is **the man**.

Who was he? **Where** did he come from? **Why** did he come to fight?

Jacob had been congenial with plenty of angels up to now - why this?

And if the man is God, why did he have to severely injure Jacob to end the fight?

His hip pain, the torn thigh muscle, is no joke.

Was this just to explain the dietary prohibition against hip meat?

Or was the disabling so much more?

And if so, why is it never mentioned again after this passage?

Shouldn't we hear something about the limping patriarch?

Or was this the shift from these messy, complicated individuals, chosen by God, to the messy, complicated people and nation of God's chosen ones?

Perhaps most profoundly, when Jacob receives his new name, he is declared to be **Israel**:

he who wrestled with God and won;

he who wrestled with God and prevailed;

he who wrestled with God and, even though finds himself with a disability, endures, perseveres, thrives.

Except that, that's not really what his name means explicitly, that he won or prevailed;

- his name only means that he wrestled with God.

And that's the name of the people, of the nation: **those who wrestle with God**.

People of God - we know something about that, don't we?

Who among us has not wrestled with God, especially in this painful season?

For some, the wrestling in this season has been physical, literally gasping for breath.

For others, it has been vocational, striving to serve yet another patient, call yet another family, push through yet another day, with no sense of when it might end.

Or maybe wrestling with whether there is good work to do, how the next bill will get paid.

For so many, we are wrestling with how we will live safely in light of these new realities.

What will school be like, theater, sports, dining out, dancing with friends, singing with community, shopping, going to a doctor or a dentist.

How about workplaces?

And how can we do these things in ways that are more inclusive?

More appreciative of the diversity of who God who has made us to be?

More attentive of those most vulnerable among us - those marginalized for centuries?

For some, the wrestling has been with truth

- wondering what to believe, astonished at what others will believe,

- struggling to grab hold of what is actual fact and what is hyperbole or conspiracy

Others wonder when so many seemed to have collectively lost their minds,

giving over the objectivity of science to the creativity of the latest persuasive social media post,

refusing to let go of a passionately held idea, until relationships with friends and family are disjointed, perhaps irreparably.

In our country, this crisis has given prominence to a myriad of social concerns around race, equality, and justice for those who have been marginalized over decades, if not centuries.

And still for others, this wrestling strikes to the very heart of our relationship with God.

We wrestle like the psalmist:

how long, O Lord? How long?

And perhaps even more painfully,

Why? Why this?

Why now?

Why, God? Why?

Ask anyone who has participated in competitive wrestling and they can tell you it is a sport of body, mind, and spirit.

This is not the kind of wrestling that involves costumes and diving from ropes or smashing people with chairs.

These are simply two bodies grappling with each other, each trying to pin the other, in a match that usually lasts only six minutes.

Compare that to Jacob's wrestling match which was at least half the night, hours of wrestling, matching the man whom he believes was God, move for move.

And this is all in anticipation of what he fears will be a confrontation with his estranged brother Esau the next day.

Make no doubt, the heel-grabber is not a quitter.

Jacob is going to hang in there for the blessing, because he knows something about blessings.

And because God behaves just like God, the blessing is so much more than what Jacob had in mind.

The Rev. Dr. Trace Haythorn

Over the last few months, I have spoken with so many clergy colleagues - pastors, chaplains, spiritual directors, professors - all of whom are exhausted.

They have wrestled through this dark night.

The rules of the fight seem to be entirely the purview of the virus, the latest alert in the media.

They have wrestled with the constructs of racism and white privilege, wondering what can be done, what should be done, and just how much a soul can take.

They are heartbroken, for the ways that are used to doing their work that seemed to have vaporized right before their eyes.

Staring through windows or screens, longing to simply hold the hands of people they have been called to serve.

Years of developing best practices for spiritual care, for worship and music, for mission and outreach, gone.

Just gone.

With no sense of when it might return if at all.

=====

I wonder if Jacob knew that with the dawn his fight would come to an end, one way or another.

What is the dawn of our new day?

Dare we hang on and demand a blessing before we let this go?

And who will we be on the other side of this?

What becomes of our world?

How will we sing in that foreign land?

Some commentators have tried to make Jacob's wrestling and the resulting injury to his hip a kind of comeuppance,

that the injury is a punishment for his sinful life, which would seem to imply that we, too, as a globe are being punished by God through this dreadful time.

But I think the general consensus is that this is more profoundly a story of blessing.

No mention is made of Jacob's sins; nor does he repent.

No, true to form, he fights all night.

And in the morning, even as his muscle is torn, his hip put out of joint, he demands his opponent's blessing.

And while the text does not mention his limp after this passage, it is in this body that has been wrestled into a new shape that Jacob becomes Israel, the father of a people.

Perhaps this is where we are as well.

God has not sent us a virus to punish us for our sins.

God has not opened a portal of protests across the world as retribution.

God is ready to offer a blessing, one that will transform who we have been, what we have feared, our deepest sense of who we are as a people, so that we might be formed for that which is to come.

We don't know what that is, but God invites us to fight on:

to wrestle with every fiber of our being,
trusting that there is indeed a blessing on the other side of this,
believing that around the world we are being reformed, compelled to limp into our new reality

- one that just might lead to reconciliation,
to new forms of community,
to becoming yet again the people God has longed for us to be.

IN THE NAME OF THE CREATOR, CHRIST OUR SAVIOUR AND THE HOLY SPIRIT....AMEN

Call to Worship

(inspired by Isaiah 55: 1-3)

All you who are thirsty, come drink from the waters of life!
All you who are weary, come bathe, be refreshed in God's river!
All you who long for peace, come rest in the clear, silent pools of God's love!

Opening Prayer

God of our hearts...here we are!
We've come with thirsty hearts, praying that your Word will satisfy us.
We come with aching hearts, praying for good news to comfort us.
We come with overflowing hearts, praying for a chance to share your love.
You, who know our hearts and hear our prayers, be with us now in this time of worship.
Gracious and merciful God, as we gather to worship,
we are aware that we have fallen short of the life you desire for us.
So, we confess:
Through Christ you have shown us the way of compassion, generosity, and forgiveness, yet we neglect the suffering of others.
We blame and judge in the very moments you call us to act with kindness and mercy.
We cling to what we own rather than share our blessings with others.
Free us from greed and from grievances.
Open our hearts so that we may embody the teachings of your Son, our Saviour. AMEN

Words of Assurance

(based on Psalm 145:8, 14, 18-19)

Our God is full of mercy and grace, slow to anger, and rich in love.
When we fall, God is there to help us up again.

When we find ourselves burdened by past events and circumstances,
God comes alongside to support and encourage us.

God is always close at hand, ready to listen when we call out.
God hears our prayers, and answers them.

So be at peace. God has heard your prayer.

Prayer of Intercession

(based on Matthew 14:13-21 and Psalm 145:15-16)

Loving God, You are our Creator and Sustainer.
When You open Your hand, You satisfy the hunger and thirst of every living thing.
And so, we look to You whenever we are in need, trusting in Your love and Your abundant goodness.

As You once fed the hungry crowds with five loaves and two small fish, we ask that You would again fill those who are empty this day.
Pour out Your Spirit on all who hunger and thirst.

We pray for those who are physically hungry—whose stomachs are empty.

We think especially of the people in Africa, the Middle East, and across the world who are facing critical food shortages; who are suffering the effects of malnutrition and starvation; and watching helplessly as loved ones die.

We pray also for people in our own country and community who do not have a secure food supply or a place to live.

Lord, in Your mercy, open Your hand. Pour out Your Spirit, so that they may be filled.

We pray for those who are empty emotionally—who are lonely and long for companionship and love, who are caught in the grip of depression, or overwhelmed with grief.

Lord, in Your mercy, open Your hand. Pour out Your Spirit, so that they may be filled.

We pray for those who are spiritually empty—who are troubled, but don't know where to turn; who long for purpose and meaning, but don't know where to look;

who need You, but do not yet know You.

Lord, in Your mercy, open Your hand. Pour out Your Spirit, so that they may be filled.

God, we praise You for Your abundant gifts in our lives.

Pour out Your Spirit on us as well.

Fill us with Your compassion and love, so that we would willingly share some of our abundance with those who have need.

Lord, in Your mercy, open Your hand. Pour out Your Spirit, so that we may be filled.

We offer this prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, who came so that all of humanity might come to know the abundant life that comes from You.

That same Jesus gave us these words to pray together when we worship:

The Lord's Prayer

*Our Father in Heaven, Hallowed be your name, Your kingdom come,
Your will be done, On earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread.*

Forgive us our sins As we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial And deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,

Now and forever. Amen.

Stewardship Thought

-John D. Rockefeller, Sr. American oil industry business magnate and philanthropist

I never would have been able to tithe the first million dollars I ever made if I had not tithed my first salary, which was \$1.50 per week.

Commission & Benediction

Go now from this service of worship to the service of God's people near and far, refreshed by the living water that Jesus offers to you.

Listen for the parched voices of the least of these; search out the dry places and the arid souls, and become for them a spring of living water.

And as you go,

may the blessings of the God of life,

the Christ of love,

and the Spirit of grace

be upon you this day and forevermore. Amen