

Sermon, August 6, 2023

Genesis 32:22-31

“Wrestling with Angels “

This morning , we encountered a most unusual story, and one that is open to many different interpretations. Its placement within the Genesis narrative also raises questions. In the Bible, particularly in the New Testament , we find places where a story begins, but is then interrupted by another story and then returns to the original story. This is called an ‘inclusio’ and suggests that the story in the middle is somehow involved in the interpretation of the original story.

In this case the story of Jacob’s wrestling match is sandwiched between two narratives concerning Jacob’s relationship with his twin brother, Esau. If you remember the story Jacob had tricked his father, Isaac, into believing that he was Esau and received their father’s dying blessing which rightly belonged to Esau, because he was the firstborn of the two. Naturally, Esau was furious, and the two brothers separated for years. Then just before the wrestling match we find Jacob terrified when he hears that Esau is coming to see him, along with an army of 400 men - and he sends gifts to Esau in an effort to placate him. But then after the wrestling match, Jacob, now named Israel, is more courageous as he steps out to greet Esau. It would seem that Jacob’s strange encounter had brought about a change in him.

Now, I am going to interpret today’s story in two ways - first, as an allegory having to do with the relationship between God and the people of Israel, and second, on the relationship between ourselves and God.

The story begins with Jacob sending his two wives, two maids, and eleven children across the Jabbok, leaving himself all alone. But then he is not really alone, because we are then told that he wrestled with a ‘man’ all night long. But is it really a man? If we look down the history of art, we often find images of Jacob wrestling with a winged creature, suggesting he is fighting with an angel, but then later, Jacob says that he has seen God face to face. Is it truly Yahweh himself that Jacob had struggled with?

This is followed up with an exchange where the divine being asks Jacob to let go because the day is breaking. One commentator, I hope jokingly , asks if this is because Jacob’s opponent is a vampire, or just tired. But I think it really symbolizes the fact that a new day - meaning a new future - is about to become a reality. Jacob then says that he will not let go unless he is given a blessing. His opponent then asks him what his name is, and when he says Jacob, he is told that he now shall be called Israel.

What we can take from this is the story of a people who have long struggled and wrestled with God throughout their history . The history of such struggle continues with the story of the exodus through to the modern days of the Holocaust and beyond. Such a history often resonates with the question, “Why?!” Where exactly is God in the midst of all this struggle? Is this why Jacob asks for a blessing , perhaps the same as asking if there is anything good to come out of this struggle.

We Christians may not be accustomed to, or comfortable with, the tradition of arguing with God, at least not as much as within Judaic culture. But we can see it reflected throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, especially in the Psalms. But through all the struggles and heartaches we see the Jews as a resilient people still looking to God in the midst of it all.

Now, as I said, this reading also has things to say about our own spiritual journeys. First, notice that Jacob separates himself from the rest of his family and is left alone to wrestle with the divine figure. Jesus very often did the same. He would set out on a boat, or descend partway up a mountain, or on the night of his arrest step away on his own in the Garden of Gethsemane. In the Sermon on the Mount, he also said to those present, “whenever you pray go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret and your Father who sees in secret will reward you”. Praying together as we do here every Sunday, of course, is important, but there are times when we need to be alone with God to truly open our hearts and minds, to express our deepest feelings and yearnings, as well as to listen for God’s voice in the depths of silence. In such times we can also wrestle with God as we struggle with the challenges we encounter in this life, with our relationships with others, with whatever doubts or disbeliefs we may have, even to search for the meaning of life itself. It is an appropriate time to ask questions such as ““Why?” - “Why is life often such a rocky road? Why is there much suffering and pain? And where are you in the midst of it all?” All appropriate questions to set before the Lord in prayer, and not expect to be struck with lightning bolts from above.

Notice , however, that Yahweh does touch Jacob putting his hip out of joint, which suggests that the journey of faith is not without pain, not without self-sacrifice, sometimes for the greater good. After all, Jesus did say that to follow him we must pick up our cross, but, as with Jacob, there is ultimate blessing as our eyes are opened to the light of the Eternal , New Life, and a deeper relationship with our God, symbolized by the rising of the sun at the end of Jacob’s night long struggle. Amen.

Let us pray: God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, author of life, and divine source of light, we gather today in your Holy Presence, grateful for so much, especially for the gift of your Son Jesus through whom the depth of your love is revealed. Help us to live up to such blessings. Sometimes it is not easy, and often we are filled with questions as we face all that life sets before us. Yet, even in those times when we struggle with our faith, we know in our hearts that you do not abandon us, and through your Word show us pathways that are full of light and reveal to us the means to find hope. Help us each day to be more open to the infilling of your Spirit so that we may see possibility despite whatever obstacles may appear to be in our way. Remind us that you are a God of miracles, and who gives to us the faith to move mountains.