

“Israel”

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Gen. 32:22-31

Matt. 14:13-33

“Jacob was left alone;

and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.”

Gen. 32:24

Let us pray... O God,

In our struggles, don't let go of us. Bless us.

Amen

This is one of the most mysterious passages in the Bible
because it doesn't quite say what we are led to believe.

Jacob is on his way home with his family –

two wives, two maidservants, eleven children and a flock of
striped, spotted, and black sheep and goats.

And Jacob who is the black sheep of his family

is making his way home to confront his brother Esau

whom he had swindled out of the inheritance almost 30 before.

He gets them all across the river, but stays behind – and then...

“Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.”

Gen. 32:24

We don't know for sure, but the text suggests that

Jacob was wrestling with God – or an angel representing God.

Or something more sinister like a demon that feared the light of day;

Or that Jacob was wrestling with himself about

whether or not to go back home –

Still, it might've been a chance encounter with an unknown man.

As Christians, we might even conclude that it was Jesus himself –

the tip off being how the stranger used humor and humility

to dope-slap this trickster and still give him a pat on the back

to send him on his way.

But we learn from this story where the name, 'Israel', comes from –

when Jacob's opponent says,

'...you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.'

So, 'Israel' means "Those who struggle with God" –

which is pretty much all of us at one time or another.

And that is actually a good thing –

we believe in a God who is willing to meet us at the level of

our most difficult personal issues, relationships, health, finance –

whatever that may be.

God wrestles with us to get us to face up to ourselves.

Willard, p.2

The Gospel lesson about Jesus presents another mystery to us –
and it suggests a return to the desert of temptation for Jesus.

The death of John the Baptist was the turning point
in Jesus' life story.

Up to that point he had been a teacher, healer, and wonderworker,
but with the news that John had been murdered,
Jesus retreats into the wilderness without a word.

What is implied is that he was deeply troubled
for this would trigger the events leading him to Jerusalem
and death on a cross.

The three original temptations are revisited,
but he responds this time with spectacular actions instead of words,
to mock evil with his creative imagination.

Instead of turning stone into bread, he turns bread into more bread;
Instead of leaping off a tall building, he walks on a stormy sea'
Instead of selling out to power, he empowers his followers.

He empowers his disciples to feed the multitudes,
be calm in the midst of a crisis. and walk on water just like him.

There was no devil anywhere –
though there was an 'opposing wind', which could also mean
an opposing spirit, but Jesus was demonstrating his power
in a flagrant disregard of evil spirits.

A stranger in the gloom appears on the waters and the disciples were terrified.
But it was the Son of God who calls out to them,
'Have courage. I am the one who is coming to you. Don't be afraid.'

In the news, we often hear about some deception –
where someone in a trustworthy role or official uniform
masks ulterior motives for destruction.

But in both of these stories, something good comes disguised
as a dangerous stranger.

There are plenty of dangerous strangers loose in the world,
but there are far more too many conflicts where well-intentioned people
find themselves set against each other.

Our Lord Jesus was no stranger to conflict –
in fact, or rather in point of faith, I am inclined to believe
conflict helped him become who he is and
that through testing, what was in him was brought forth
like gold is revealed as the dross is burned away,

Willard, p.3

This is his true greatness –

to have been one of us who struggled as we struggle;
and who struggled against us and prevailed –
the wrestling match with Jacob notwithstanding,
which was a close tie anyway.

The characters of the Bible stories serve as a mirror and as a window;

They are a mirror to help us see ourselves
when we are alternately ‘the good’, ‘the bad’, or ‘the ugly’.

They are a window to the Kingdom of what can be –
yet often we are looking ‘through a glass darkly’,
though someday ‘face to face’ as it says in I Corinthians 13.

We have a God who has a face – and on that day of decision for Jacob,
he believed he came face to face with God and was allowed to survive
such an encounter.

And then this vision serves as a parable for what happens next –

Having crossed the river himself,
Jacob leads his women, maidservants, children
and flocks to confront Esau at last.

And his brother Esau has come out to meet Jacob with 400 men
and at first it seems like Jacob is going to use
his women and children as human shields,
but he steps out ahead of them all.

As it says in Genesis 33:4-11...

⁴ But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him,
and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.

⁵ When Esau looked up and saw the women and children, he said,
‘Who are these with you?’

Jacob said,

‘The children whom God has graciously given your servant.’

⁶ Then the maids drew near, they and their children, and bowed down;

⁷ Leah likewise and her children drew near and bowed down;
and finally Joseph and Rachel drew near, and they bowed down.

⁸ Esau said,

‘What do you mean by all this company that I met?’

Jacob answered,

‘To find favour with my lord.’

⁹ But Esau said,

‘I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself.’

Willard, p.4

¹⁰Jacob said,

‘No, please; if I find favour with you,
then accept my present from my hand;
for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God—
since you have received me with such favour.

¹¹Please accept my gift that is brought to you,
because God has dealt graciously with me,
and because I have everything I want.’

So he urged him, and [Esau] took it.

Religious author Dennis T. Olson writes,

"As Jacob had seen the face of God
in the struggle and reconciliation with the wrestler,
so Jacob sees the face of God
in the face of his reconciled enemy/brother
who had sought to kill him.

In both cases Jacob encounters the beloved enemy,
one divine and one human,
and emerges from the struggle with greater blessings
and a more abundant life."

<http://www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/july-31-2011-eighteenth-sund.html>

and *The Lectionary Commentary*

This is like it says in I Cor. 13:12...

“For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face:
now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.”
And when that happens, we know that we are home – home to ourselves,
blessed with an ‘abundant life’ that also means an authentic life.

There will always be trouble and our society is in the midst of trouble now –
a clash between well-meaning people, even two different belief systems
that see each other as the enemy.

Perhaps many of you are fearful for what is ahead,
but remember that even clever Jacob –
who struggled with God and his brother, was finally blessed.

Remember that God can foresee what we cannot
and when we remember to pray – to listen, we make ourselves open
to hopeful possibilities we have not anticipated yet.

Amen

*Our Jewish Testament lesson today is from Genesis 32:22-31
and describes a rare and mysterious event about Jacob
on his journey home to confront his brother Esau...*

22 The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids,
and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok.

23 He took them and sent them across the stream,
and likewise everything that he had.

24 Jacob was left alone;
and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.

25 When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob,
he struck him on the hip socket;
and Jacob's hip was put out of joint
as he wrestled with him.

26 Then he said,
'Let me go, for the day is breaking.'

But Jacob said,
'I will not let you go, unless you bless me.'

27 So he said to him,
'What is your name?'

And he said,
'Jacob.'

28 Then the man said,
'You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel,
for you have striven with God and with humans,
and have prevailed.'

29 Then Jacob asked him,
'Please tell me your name.'

But he said,
'Why is it that you ask my name?'

And there he blessed him.

30 So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying,
'For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.'

31 The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel,
limping because of his hip.

Matt. 14:13-21

¹³ Now when Jesus heard [about the death of John],
he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself.
But when the crowds heard it,
they followed him on foot from the towns.

¹⁴ When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd;
and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.

¹⁵ When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said,
‘This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late;
send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages
and buy food for themselves.’

¹⁶ Jesus said to them,
‘They need not go away; you give them something to eat.’

¹⁷ They replied,
‘We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.’

¹⁸ And he said,
‘Bring them here to me.’

¹⁹ Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass.
Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven,
and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples,
and the disciples gave them to the crowds.

²⁰ And all ate and were filled;
and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces,
twelve baskets full.

²¹ And those who ate were about five thousand men,
besides women and children.

²³ Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat
and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds.

²³ And after he had dismissed the crowds,
he went up the mountain by himself to pray.

When evening came, he was there alone,
²⁴ but by this time the boat, battered by the waves,
was far from the land, for the wind was against them.

²⁵ And early in the morning he came walking towards them on the lake.

²⁶ But when the disciples saw him walking on the lake,
they were terrified, saying,

‘It is a ghost!’ And they cried out in fear.

²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said,
‘Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.’

28 Peter answered him,

‘Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.’

29 He said,

‘Come.’

So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water,
and came towards Jesus.

30 But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened,
and beginning to sink, he cried out,

‘Lord, save me!’

31 Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him,

‘You of little faith, why did you doubt?’

32 When they got into the boat, the wind ceased.

33 And those in the boat worshipped him, saying,

‘Truly you are the Son of God.’