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Ardmore, Pennsylvania
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Proper 24, Year C
Genesis 32:22-31
Psalm 121
2 Timothy 3:14-4:5
Luke 18:1-8

Wrestling with God Today

There are a variety of different images of what the religious life can look like. I remember a few years ago reading a novel by the Russian novelist Dostoevsky. In it, one character is describing the inspiring piety of another character, an older woman. “She is so religious,” he says. “that she is very careful not to step on any cracks when she is walking.” I had to read the sentence twice but, sure enough, these Russian Orthodox folks were identifying not stepping on cracks as an act of religious devotion. It isn’t, by the way; that’s just superstition. But the two can get confused.

Dostoevsky also gives us the other end of the spectrum, though, in the character of Zosima in *The Brothers Dostoevsky*. Zosima is a humble monk, pious, gentle, the moral center of the novel. This is more like the religious life that is worth our time.

In between these two are a wide range of religious lives. The Zosima-type people are those we look up to, but the everyday experiences of most people don’t reach that level of piety. It’s the same way in the Bible: there are any number of different depictions of the religious life, but they are marked by a significant realism; in the Bible, there are very few Zosimas, and even the most faithful people (King David comes to mind, as well as the disciples) are depicted with their flaws and all.

But there is one image in particular that serves as a kind of prototypical example of a religious life that I would like to talk about this morning. That is a story about Jacob, son of Isaac and grandson of Abraham. We heard it as our first reading this morning, from the book of Genesis. It is an ancient story, but it is as relevant to the modern life of faith and how we live it as any contemporary example. Make no mistake: it is about our lives today.

A bit of background: Jacob is a tricky figure, a deceiver, and he has been that way his entire life. We hear that even in the womb he was wrestling with his brother Esau, trying to be born first; he came out holding onto his brother’s heel. Later, Jacob tricks Esau in a way, in order to obtain the birthright that was due to his older brother. Later, he tricks his father Isaac, in order to receive the blessing of the firstborn that should have gone to Esau. Esau as understandably angry, and Jacob had to flee from him. Later there is tension between Esau and his eventual father-in-law, Laban.

On the night that is narrated in today’s reading, Jacob and Esau are about to meet again for the first time in about twenty years. Jacob is understandably frightened about what Esau might do to him. Before they meet, as they are approaching each other, Jacob, who has become quite rich, sends gift after gift, and flattering message after flattering message, to Esau, to try to assuage his anger. It seems that, after a lifetime of deceit and trickery, Jacob may be about to receive his just deserts; his deeds are about to catch up with him.

On the night before they meet, he leaves his two camps, full of livestock and presumably helpers, and stays alone. This is where our reading starts. While he is there alone, panicked and frightened, night falls; imagine how dark it must have been in the wilderness, without any artificial

lights, after the fires have been banked for the night. In the darkness, alone, the Bible says simply, “a man wrestled with him until daybreak.”

Who is this man in the story? What does he want? We aren’t told. But Jacob has an idea who he is: later he will say, “I have seen God face-to-face.” They wrestle all night, until the day is about to dawn. The man tells Jacob to let him go. Jacob says no, not until the man blesses him. First, the man asks Jacob his name. Jacob, he says. No, from now on you will be called Israel, because you have wrestled with God and men. And, in this way, Israel comes into being for the first time. The name of the people with whom God has a special relationship; the name that endures to this very day, and it comes about because he contended with God.

If you want to know what the religious life looks like in the Bible, one prototypical example—the example that stands at the beginning of Israel—is contending with God. Wrestling with God. Engaging with God in a struggle. This isn’t the sum total of relationships with God; there are plenty of others. But this is one that stands at the beginning of a particular strand of the tradition.

It seems to me that this is important for us, today. Few of us are the Zosimas of the world. More of us have spiritual difficulties of one kind or another: our faith is lukewarm, or skeptical, or not all we would have it be. Or, the Church teaches one thing, but it seems so antiquated, so old and out-of-touch. Or, we have had some experiences in our lives that make faith hard to have. Sometimes this is tragedy of one kind or another that we have experienced, or sicknesses (our own or that of people we love) that it seems impossible a just God would allow. The particularities of our situation are going to differ; to misquote another Russian novelist, every happy Christian is the same, but every unhappy Christian is unhappy in his or her own way. What they have in common, though, is a sense of separation from God, a lack of the pious, gentle faith of Zosima.

What I think the story of Jacob tells us, and especially its position in the story of the patriarchs, is that this struggle with faith—indeed, this struggle with God—is faith itself. It isn’t something that keeps us from faith, or makes us of questionable faithfulness. It is what faith looks like: engagement with God, even wrestling with God.

There are people like Zosima who seem to exist on another spiritual plane altogether. They are heroes. But for the rest of us, faithful Christian living may look like us, alone, late at night, struggling with God in the dark. Struggling to figure out how the pieces fit together. How these stories from long ago and far away have anything to do with contemporary life. Struggling to believe that the good news, the promise that God makes, is a promise that can be kept.

If this describes something like your relationship with faith, please take heart. Please know that the dark nights of the soul—another way we could describe Jacob’s episode—are not steps away from faith, but faithful life itself. To continue to engage, to continue to wrestle with God, is faithfulness. It is a holy struggle. As long as the engagement continues, the relationship—even a painful or confusing relationship—continues, then this itself is part of one’s own life of faith, not some diversion away from it.

We know that this is a holy struggle because we see how the man in the dark wrestled with Jacob. If indeed it is God’s messenger, with God’s commission, if he wanted to destroy Jacob, God could have enabled it. Defeating Jacob wasn’t the point. Wrestling with Jacob was what was good.

Not for nothing, it’s worth noticing that this happens when Jacob is alone. At different stages of life, time alone can be more or less difficult to come by. But trying to spend time with God, when you’re alone, is a worthwhile thing to do. There’s no telling who you might meet. Stick with it. Stay in the fight.

But there is another side to this as well that I wouldn’t want to neglect, and you can see it in the parable that Jesus tells, in today’s reading from the Gospel of Luke. The parable is about a persistent widow, trying to petition the judge for justice. But the judge is a corrupt judge, “who

neither feared God nor had respect for people,” so he ignored the widow at first. But she was persistent. Finally, just to get her to go away, this unjust judge administered justice, so that she won’t “wear [him] out” by her incessant nagging. If even the unjust judge can be annoyed into administering justice, Jesus says, how much more will God our Father give to those who petition him? If even the unjust one can do right, imagine how much more a just God will do.

Luke tells us that this parable is about the importance of persistence in prayer. Indeed, this is an admonition to remain engaged, even struggling, with God in prayer, even when it seems like nothing will come of it, because how much more will God do than the unjust judge.

But there’s another way to look at it as well. Looked at another way, it is not religious folks who are the widow beseeching the judge/God. Instead, God is the one who is persistent, who comes, again and again, to the unjust ones (us) in order to bring us into relationship with him. The first movement, in other words, comes from God, not from us. God is the widow who seeks us again and again, trying to bring us closer to him. God is always out ahead of us.

If we look at it that way, then all of these struggles we have, religious ones and otherwise, can be ways that God is bringing us into his life. They are not diversions from that life, but the journey to it. Like the persistent widow, he is waiting for us to realize our need for him and the joy that comes from being with him. And he won’t stop. He doesn’t give up.

I think that is reflected in the Jacob story as well. Because notice that Jacob doesn’t go to the wrestling match under his own initiative. Jacob goes off to be alone. And there, alone, the wrestling angel comes to him. “Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.” It isn’t Jacob who sets out to resolve the turbulence in his life. God goes to him, just as he comes to us.

And, it’s worth saying, not to no purpose. Because, for all of Jacob’s fear, something had happened in Esau’s struggles also. Who knows how long Esau had held a grudge? Who knows what dark nights of the soul he had had over those two decades, angry at the injustice that had, truly, been perpetrated against him? Who knows how many angels he had wrestled? We don’t know. What we do know is that, when the two brothers finally meet, with Jacob quaking with fear, Esau—the Esau that Jacob had been deceiving since the day of their birth and even before—threw his arms around Jacob, wept into his neck, and called him his brother. It is the first example of this kind of absolution, this kind of forgiveness, in the Bible. It is, truly, nothing less than a miracle. Jacob expected a repeat of Cain and Abel, and he would have deserved it. He expected to finally get his just deserts, to finally pay for his crimes. And Esau put his arms around him and called him brother.

The story of Jacob is really old, probably about 3,000 years old. But it is as applicable and relevant today as it has ever been. I don’t just mean “today” in general terms; like, relevant to the modern or postmodern world, or relevant to our society in general. I mean it is applicable and relevant to our very lives today, on this very day, this morning, right now. When you came to Mass this morning, you were engaging with God. As you pray during this service, some of you may be giving unmitigated thanks and being joyful; some of you may be struggling with your faith.

But today, this very day, God is coming to you and knocking on the door of your heart. He comes to you in his Eucharistic body. Like the persistent widow, he wants to come in. He wants to be in relationship with you. He wants you to find your place in his life. He comes to you in the dark. Today.