

The Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost, 17 October 2010

Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR

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For each Sunday of this long season after Pentecost we are offered a choice for the Old Testament lesson. Recently it has often been a choice between a reading from Jeremiah and something else. Much as I love Jeremiah, about whom Deacon Mimi has preached eloquently recently, I could not resist this well-known story from Genesis, of Jacob wrestling with the angel. Whether one sees this as a man representing God, or an angel of God, or somehow a bodily form of God does not really matter. Jacob wrestles with the divine, which is not surprising given his history.

Jacob had struggled with his twin brother Esau beginning in Rebecca's womb. They fought throughout their childhood and then Jacob tricked his father out of the birthright that belonged to Esau making his brother so furious that Jacob had to flee for his life. Sent by his mother back to her home and her brother Laban to establish a life for himself, Jacob was in turn tricked by Laban into taking Leah for his wife after seven years of hard work, and then having to work another seven years to earn Rachael, the wife of his heart. Throughout his years with Laban's family, Jacob's life was filled with struggle.

Having determined to leave his father-in-law's land, to return to his own people and establish himself and his family, Jacob knows he must struggle with Esau again. He sends his wife and concubines and numerous children and servants on ahead – which has always sounded rather cowardly to me. If Esau's anger is so great, perhaps he will not be softened by this family sight and the gifts they bring, but regard it as an ideal opportunity to get vengeance on his brother. Regardless, Jacob sends everyone on ahead and settles himself to pray and think, to mentally arm himself for the encounter with his wronged brother.

Alone and worried, Jacob has an unexpected encounter. He would probably not have been surprised to be attacked by a leopard or a jackal, or even a bandit. The angel of God was a definite surprise. Yet Jacob responds in his typical way – struggle, wrestling. After a long and arduous struggle, he demands a blessing – which, surprisingly, he receives. This blessing takes the form of a new name – a kind of nickname: Israel – “struggles with God.” And this name becomes the name of the whole people descended from him: Israel, those who struggle with God and humans.

Inherent in this story is an understanding that life is complicated, filled with struggles, not easily breezed through.

Jacob was astonished that he survived. He realized that this great struggle, unlike the one with Laban who was pursuing him or the one with Esau who might be waiting in ambush, this struggle was with God, with the very source of life. He was astonished that he had a direct encounter with God and lived to go on to more life, more struggles.

Jacob's original name means 'leg puller' or 'deceiver' and it is indeed apt, since he intentionally deceived his blind and dying father, tricked his brother, and traded tricks with his uncle. That the deceiver is the one who struggles with God and receives the divine blessing that is passed down even to us today shows us once again the surprising character of God's choices.

The story is not meant to tell us that we should all be tricksters, dishonest in our dealings with everyone. It is not commending Jacob's character. Rather it is showing an honest portrait of a thoroughly flawed person, who is nonetheless able to establish a positive relationship with God.

Israel is not the worthiest or the holiest or the most faithful. Israel is the one who struggles, who shows the world that life is a struggle, that life with God involves struggle – struggle in the form of questions and confusion and sometimes anger. This is not simple submission or obedience. This is a relationship to which people are invited to bring their whole selves, including all their failings. This is a relationship in which it is acceptable to ask for blessings, to seek understanding and explanation and help.

Just as Jacob is a surprising example of God's choosing for special relationship, the Unjust Judge is a surprising choice for Jesus to use to teach us about God. The Genesis narrative is not meant to encourage us to evil doing. Nor is the parable designed to have us behave like the Importunate Widow or to make us think of God as similar to the Unjust Judge. The latter grants justice to the Importunate Widow for the sake of his own comfort.

Some people seem to think God is like that and that therefore we should browbeat God into giving us what we want or need. Jesus is in no way suggesting this. He says that God will always grant justice because God is just. We need to trust that, to rest in our relationship, confident in God's love and mercy. Our importuning is not for its effect on God, but for its effect on us. We are the ones that need the 'prayer without ceasing' for the growth of our souls and our relationship with God. The parable is, as it says, about our 'need to pray always and not lose heart'. Jesus is acknowledging that justice can be a long time coming, that God's response may not always be apparent to us, but that we need to hang on any way.

This parable is another acknowledgement that life is a struggle, not simple and easy. I frequently hear people say that "Old age is not for sissies" but in reality no age is. Every stage of our lives involves struggle and challenge of one sort or another.

Many of us now are challenged by unemployment and other financial difficulties. Some people have discord in their families. Many of us have illnesses or injuries to contend with. Sometimes we have a crisis of faith, an inability to feel God's loving presence with us. There are many struggles and challenges in life, always.

I find the contrast between the names Islam and Israel fascinating. Islam: peace through submission to God; Israel: struggle with God. These are two very different ways to picture the human relationship with the divine, and are indeed accurate indications of the heart of the respective faiths.

In the Christian tradition we find both approaches. There are and always have been Christians who understand their relationship with God as one of peace gained by absolute submission, as well as those who experience life as a journey filled with struggles and questions. Both approaches are at home in our tradition. I am very grateful that we offer a home to those who struggle, that our faith tells us that we can even be angry with God – that we have psalms right in the Bible and the Prayer Book showing us how to shake our fists at God. That we offer a home to those who are always asking why? and when? and how? as well as those who are able to live in a peaceful acceptance of whatever comes their way.

Individuals of great purity and extraordinary gifts, like Henry Martyn, today's saint of the week, can inspire us by the very beauty of their character and their exceptional talents. Their stories fill us with wonder and joy at God's benevolence. It is no surprise that God should choose them to be his missionaries in the wide world.

It is surprising that sneaky deceivers like Jacob should be chosen – and his story can inspire us in a different way, letting us know that we too are chosen for great things, for a close relationship with God, for surprising tasks, despite all our own character flaws, despite our struggles and anger and discouragement. Jacob can encourage us to follow Jesus' advice to 'not lose heart' because justice is long in coming, because life seems unreasonably hard, because we feel ourselves unlovely and inadequate. He encourages us to keep up the struggle, and to expect blessings. Amen.