

Twenty-first Sunday After Pentecost  
October 21, 2007

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*Scriptures: Genesis 32:22-31, Psalm 121, 2Timothy 3:14-4:5, Luke 18:1-8*

Our Old Testament lesson today, the story of Jacob at the Jabok river is one that has inspired artists over the centuries. This story of the wrestling match between scheming, conniving Jacob and someone has just enough details to get our imaginations going. But not enough details to answer some of the more interesting questions. This we know. Jacob, who was returning to meet the brother he had cheated so long ago wrestled all night with “a man”. He went away from that encounter with a new name, and a limp.

But there is a lot we don't know. Who exactly was it that he wrestled with for one. How, exactly, did they wrestle?. Physically, psychological, spiritually? Maybe Jacob mostly wrestled with himself, his guilty conscience. The blessing implies it might have been an angel. His new name, Israel, which means God-wrestler, implies that he wrestled with God all night.

In some ways, at some point in our lives, I believe we all are Israel, we all wrestle with God. Our lives are all different, so the exact nature of the what and why of our wrestling may differ, but we all wrestle with God. We struggle to understand, to come to terms with what happens in the world, in our own lives, and in the lives of those we love.

I'm not sure if it is ironic or serendipitous that two of the three other texts for today are the sorts of texts that bring up one of the most common wrestling matches we humans have with God. Psalm 121 includes the words, “The Lord will preserve you from all evil.” And the Gospel includes the sentences, “And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them.” That's when my “Yeah, but...” kicks in.

Yeah, but what about all those who even now cry for justice, and no help comes? What about all those who suffer and the injustice is never stopped? What about all those who are not preserved from evil? That list is long: everything from the innocent child abused, or killed, suffering unspeakably often at the hands of those who are supposed to love and protect them, all the way up to whole peoples who are made refugees and who suffer disease, disaster, war, only because they happen to be caught in the crossfire of powers that act like they don't even exist. God, why is there such evil in the world?

Even the newest, youngest theologians, (that would be your typical Confirmation class) has this question. I have never had a class where we don't get to this questions almost from the git-go. Even as young as they are, they know this is one of the ways we struggle, wrestle with God.

The fancy-dancy name for this kind of wrestling with God is the theodicy question. Basically it works this way. There are three things we say that can't all be true. 1) God is good. 2) God is all-powerful and 3) Evil exists. The wrestling starts when a believer asks, “OK, if God is good, and if God can do anything, why doesn't God do something to stop all the evil from happening?”

A whole lot of theology professors have made their livelihoods trying to answer that question. And their answers differ. One camp says, essentially, “Evil really isn’t evil, it is just God in the process of doing something good, and this is the only way to get there.” Another camp says, “God really isn’t all-powerful, at least not in the way we think of power. God sets things in motion and leaves us with a lot of work to do.” And the third, and least common, camp says, “God isn’t necessarily good, at least not in the way we think of good. God just is.”

That’s all pretty theoretical, but it all boils down to this – there really isn’t a good answer. And if we insist on getting one, we might just end up wrestling with God until the day we see God face to face.

Or, like Jacob, maybe dawn will come. And we will stop wrestling and we will let God change us. Maybe, like Jacob, after a long night of the soul, we will walk away, not strutting cockily, but humbly, limping, irrevocably shaped by our wrestling match with God, shaped by the events of our lives and our struggle to come to terms with them, to rise above them, to live a life open to God’s blessings in spite of them.

Looking back at the Gospel for just a moment, it might be helpful to know that most biblical scholars believe that this Gospel was written after the terrible events of the Destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Many were slaughtered, cruelty reigned, and blood ran in the streets. The message Luke was sending to the Christians of his day was, no matter what, people need to pray, people need to not lose heart. It is easy to be faithful in the good times. But faith really matters in the hard times.

Faith here is like the faith of the insistent woman that one day, eventually, the judge would give her justice. So too, our faith is that eventually God’s goodness will prevail. Evil is evil, and suffering, in its many, many, many forms is suffering. But God’s goodness prevails. Maybe not on our timetable, but Love wins. God’s love wins.

When Jesus died on the cross, it looked like evil won, and death was the end. But therein lies the power of the resurrection – the clear and certain message that evil doesn’t win. Death is not the end. Love wins. Self-giving love eventually always wins. And life, new life, is always possible.

That is the light that brings forth the dawn. That promise, that love wins, is what lets us give up the struggle and trust that somehow, someday, God’s goodness will prevail. There is a lot of darkness out there. But this Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it.

Amen.