

Genesis 32:22-31
Psalm 21
2 Timothy 3:14-4:5
Luke 18:1-8

A. Katherine Grieb
St. Paul's, Bailey's Crossroads
22nd post Pentecost C
October 16, 2016

To the glory of God, Amen.

I hope you will not mind if I begin with a personal word of thanks to your Priest in Charge, Elizabeth Tomlinson, and to your Adult Education class that is studying Romans for the invitation to worship with you today and to preside and preach as well as talk about Romans. I've seen your St. Paul's Church sign and have been curious about you, but never been here, so I am delighted to be here with you this morning and to hear about the wonderful things you are doing to the glory of God and the building up of the Church here in this place. I bring you warm greetings from Virginia Theological Seminary---you are always welcome to come visit us---and you should know that Virginia Theological Seminary is very proud to have trained your Priest in Charge. Not only was she a strong student, but it was clear that she was a natural leader and a sensitive pastor, so we are very proud to claim her as one of ours.

The writer of 2 Timothy (probably not Paul, but someone who knew him and wanted to honor him) gives advice to the young pastor Timothy, to "continue in what you have learned and firmly believed" namely the scriptures, "the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation." At the time that 2 Timothy was written, the "sacred writings" were the scriptures of what we now call the Older Testament or First Testament. There were just beginning to be Christian writings and they were later gathered into what we call the New or Newer Testament. For us, the "sacred writings" are both testaments of the Bible and we Anglicans read four lessons every Sunday, two from the Older Testament and two from the Newer Testament, because we agree with 2 Timothy that the "sacred writings" are able to instruct us for salvation.

That does not imply that they are easy to read and understand. Initially they can be quite puzzling, and sometimes, even after a lot of study and thought and conversation with others, they are still quite puzzling. In fact, it is the stories that make us work the hardest to understand them that we tend to remember and return to again and again. One of those stories is the very strange encounter of Jacob at the Jabbok.

Jacob, who had cheated his brother Esau out of both his birthright and his blessing; Jacob, who had left in the middle of the night after that, because Esau wanted to kill him; Jacob, now, many years later, who has just gotten word that his brother Esau, after all this time, was coming towards him with a great company; Jacob, who was terrified for his own life and for the lives of his two wives, his two maids and his eleven children, not to mention all the wealth he had accumulated; Jacob who felt guilty as hell (because he was) and was prepared to offer all his possessions to Esau if necessary; Jacob, who had no idea if that would be enough to appease Esau; Jacob, who was a worried man the night before he is to meet his long lost brother.

Jacob comes to the Jabbok, the Jabbok river and crosses it at a shallow place. He sends all his entourage ahead of him, everything that he had. He is alone by the river Jabbok. That much is clear. And what exactly happens after that? That is not clear at all.

How are we to read this strange story? Sometimes I think the way it is written is deliberately to remind us of a dream sequence. It happens at night after all. In a dream, I can be following someone and when we get to the end of the corridor the person I was following turns around and has changed into someone else. Something like that happens in this story: we are told that a man wrestles with Jacob all night long, but at the end of the story Jacob names the place Peniel, saying, "I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." Some people have placed this story next to ancient narratives about river gods that would not let you cross the river without testing you somehow or demanding payment. Others have suggested that Jacob wrestling all night long with a man should be read as a homoerotic encounter. Still others have wanted to read it christologically: Jacob wrestled with Jesus Christ, who is both God and was a man. And there are other interpretations as well. Are you beginning to see that this story is not as straightforward as it looks at first?

And then there is the business about Jacob's hip. What happened there? "When the man saw that he did not prevail" (he was not winning the wrestling match) he struck Jacob on his hip socket and it was put out of joint. That sounds like a human wrestler, but then, when the man wants to leave, when he says, "Let me go, for the day is breaking," Jacob asks him for a blessing. It gets weirder. The man asks Jacob his name and when he says, "It's Jacob" the man announces, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, because you have *striven with God*—that's what Israel means—and with humans (plural) and have prevailed." Was it one man that Jacob wrestled with? Was it a series of men, perhaps divine messengers, and he out-wrestled all of them? Or is the man talking about other parts of Jacob's story? How does he know Jacob's story? Who is this man? Well that's what Jacob wants to know. You know my name, may I know yours? Something about the way Jacob asks him "Please tell me your name," when the man had said to him "What is your name?" suggests that this person is more than human. Jacob doesn't get a name. "Why is it that you ask my name?" and then the stranger blesses him. Jacob names the place "Peniel" or "*face of God*" – because he has seen God face to face—and he goes on his way as the sun rises, limping, because of his wounded hip.

OK, so is that all perfectly clear? Yeah, clear as mud. But we can notice a few things from our own experiences of God. First we seem to be especially open to hearing God's voice or feeling God's presence in liminal/threshold situations, like traveling, or going through some ordeal like sickness or a brush with death or a near accident or at a time when relationships are not good, with family members or with friends or at work, and often when we are caught off guard, out of our normal routine, whatever that is. Second, encounters with God are not reserved for saintly people; sometimes the fact that we have really messed things up in our lives makes us able to hear God in a way that we might not be able to when things are going really well for us. Third, an encounter with God changes things, changes us, changes our understanding and our perspective, even if it does not alter the situation: Jacob still has to face Esau; he's still terrified of that. And, finally, encounters with God are not always easy to analyze or to describe exactly what happened, which may be why the story sounds the way it does. But it is different after that.

Something extraordinary, extra-ordinary, out of the ordinary, has happened and we know it, even if we don't know exactly what happened.

When this strange story is paired with today's Gospel, a whole new level of meaning is added. Jesus tells his disciples a parable "about their need to pray and not to lose heart." Thank you, Luke, for telling us up front what the story is about. It is about encountering God in prayer. Jesus tells a funny story about an unjust judge: he isn't afraid of God and he doesn't respect people. He thinks he can do what he likes. He knows he is supposed to help this widow but he doesn't care. She keeps coming with her petition; he keeps ignoring her. But then we get what is called "an inside view" – we get to hear what the character is saying to himself, what is not spoken out loud—and here I'm going to give you a better translation of the Greek. The unjust judge doesn't say that the widow is going to "wear him out" by continuing coming but that she is going to "hit him under the eye," that is, give him a black eye. It's a metaphor taken from the world of boxing. We're supposed to imagine a boxing ring: in this corner is a giant powerful person who neither fears God nor respects people; in this other corner is a bantamweight, a tiny old frail woman, but she keeps going in there and hitting and going in again and hitting again, and eventually she gives him a black eye and he's humiliated. He sees this coming, so he changes his mind and grants her petition after all.

Now if the *unjust* judge eventually caves and grants a petition even though he doesn't want to be bothered, says Jesus, how much more will the *Just* Judge (God) grant justice to those whom he cares for, those whose cries come to him day and night, those who pray and ask God for help. Jesus asks a rhetorical question: will God make them wait, like the unjust judge made the widow wait? No, of course not. God is not an unjust judge but a just judge. Jesus is saying that God will act speedily to put things right.

And you would think that the parable would end there, but it doesn't: Jesus poses a question to his disciples, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" This can be read more than one way: When God's Christ returns in glory to judge the living and the dead, will he find faithful people? Or "Whenever God in Christ comes to us—possibly like he came to Jacob at the Jabbok—are we ready to wrestle as long as it takes to get our blessing? Are we willing to pray without ceasing? Do we have the courage to keep asking for what we need and hope for, the way the poor widow did? This parable, you remember Luke told us, is about our need to pray and not to lose heart.

So the question is left hanging in the air: we don't get closure here. Instead, we are invited to a place of discernment about our own struggles with God in prayer: do we give up too easily? What would happen if, instead of walking away, we hung in there like Jacob, like the widow? And you know what? There is only one way to find out what would happen.