

Meeting Christ at Jabbok and Galilee

Matthew 14:13-21 with Genesis 32:22-31 & Romans 9:1-5

Sunday, August 2, 2020—Aledo UMC

Gospel Lesson, Matthew 14:13-21

¹³ When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴ When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick.

¹⁵ As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a remote place, and it’s already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food.”

¹⁶ Jesus replied, “They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat.”

¹⁷ “We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish,” they answered.

¹⁸ “Bring them here to me,” he said. ¹⁹ And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. ²⁰ They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. ²¹ The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Sermon by Pastor Dave, “Meeting Christ at Jabbok and Galilee”

This is the first sermon in a series entitled, “The Struggles of a Yoked Life”

It’s one of the most familiar stories of God’s compassionate provision. Crowds of seekers and would-be followers of Christ search for Christ and find him in a solitary place beside the Sea of Galilee. Jesus has compassion on them and heals them of their many infirmities. But no one leaves. They stay and watch as others keep coming to him that he might lay his hands on them and bless them and deliver them from whatever it is that is troubling them.

The day wears on, as all days do, until the disciples finally press in on Jesus and remind him that they were out in the country and it was getting late. “Dismiss the people so they can go to the villages and get some supper,” they said.

But Jesus replied, “There is no need to dismiss them. You give them supper.”

“But all we have are five loaves of bread and two fish,” they explained.

Jesus said, “Bring them here.” You know the story; you’ve just heard the story in the Gospel lesson and in Kathleen’s Children’s Moment. Jesus once again met their needs. Not only did he heal them, but he also fed them bread and fish with twelve basketfuls leftover.

But it doesn’t always work out that way, does it? Sometimes the prayers of faithful believers are lifted before God, and nothing happens.

Sometimes believers run out of bread and go hungry. Sometimes faithful servants of God succumb to disease and die. That happened here, didn’t it? You offered prayers of faith for a beloved pastor, but those prayers went unanswered. Sure, there were some small victories, but last October 5, Rev. Mark Harris passed from this life. He was only 58 years old.

Sometimes we meet Christ at Galilee where he answers all our prayers and meets all our needs. But that's not always the case.

Last week I mentioned that one of the temptations preachers face in our consumeristic, materialistic, and individualistic society is the temptation to preach an "easy gospel." I talked about that in the context of Christ's invitation in Matthew 11:28, "Come unto me all you who are weary and heavily burdened, and I will give you rest." We are tempted to preach that all Jesus just wants to do is make us comfortable; he's got an easy, care-free life for us, with no struggles. *If you give your life to Jesus, you'll get a better car, a better job, and whiter teeth because Jesus wants you to succeed and be victorious over every obstacle in your life.*

I think that kind of preaching does a great disservice to people, because living for Jesus is not easy. And not everyone will live victoriously in this life—at least not in the way victory is touted by some preachers. Let's face it: Living for Jesus requires discipline, and we don't like discipline. We might even face persecution and all manner of struggles. Sometimes we might even find ourselves wrestling with God.

In today's lesson from Genesis 32, that's exactly where we find Jacob—on the banks of the Jabbok River, caught up in a wrestling match with God. Most biblical scholars call this a *theophany*, which is an Old Testament appearance of Jesus. And so we find Jacob literally wrestling with the Son of God and he lives to tell about it.

Have you ever wrestled with God? Most likely, you have, though not as literally as Jacob in this passage. But this wrestling match did not occur in a vacuum; it was set in a larger context which helps us understand why Jacob wrestled with God on the banks of the Jabbok.

Earlier in his life, Jacob had famously cheated his twin brother Esau out of his birthright and later out of their father's blessing. As a result, Jacob ran away and became estranged from his twin brother.

Now in chapter 32, Jacob prepared to reconcile with his twin. Clearly, though, he was afraid of what might actually happen. So there beside the River Jabbok, and on the eve of restoring his broken relationship with Esau, Jacob wrestled with God. In the process, Jacob elicited a blessing from Christ and was given a new identity, but he also had his hip wrenched, causing him to limp, quite possibly for the rest of his life.

After Jacob's wrestling match with God, he meets Esau and Esau makes it clear that he harbors no ill will against Jacob; but Jacob ditches him anyway. Jacob wanted to sooth his own conscience, but he didn't really want to fix his broken relationship with his only brother. Jacob's broken relationship with Esau brought him into a wrestling match with God.

Sometimes we meet Christ by Galilee and our prayers are answered and our needs are met. But sometimes, you meet Christ by the River Jabbok and we wrestle with God and walk away hurt and limping. I know it sounds counterintuitive, but to know Christ is to know struggles. Connecting with Christ doesn't mean you automatically get to "pass Go and collect \$200."

Our New Testament Lesson from Romans 9 is a short lesson, but it reveals Paul's struggles with the relationship between the Jewish faith and the growing Gentile reality of the

church. In his wrestling, Paul remains convinced that God's covenant with Israel was permanent and that God's faithfulness to that covenant was a measure of how God will be faithful in Christ to the church.

And that sounds good in theory, but how does it sound in history? Was God faithful to Israel through the Holocaust? We know that a significant number of Jews who were murdered during the Holocaust were not practicing Jews. However, many, many were. And they sought God's protection, but found none. How they must have struggled in their faith before suffering and dying for the simple "crime" of being born Jewish!¹

Please do not shrug off the horrors of the Holocaust by saying, "Well, they were Jews; they weren't Christians. If they had accepted the invitation of Christ to "come unto him," they would've found "rest."

To that, I would remind you that in our own nation, there were many thousands of Christians who spent their entire life in bondage, longing to be free, clinging to the story of the Exodus, when God delivered Israel from the cruel bondage of slavery in Egypt. Yet for these enslaved persons for nearly 250 years, from 1619 until Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, God's blessings as understood in terms of material freedom was nowhere to be found. The word "struggle" does not begin to describe their experience. Yes, they experienced God's grace through the forgiveness of their sins, but they remained in bondage.

What are the lessons we are to learn from today's Bible readings? First, we learn that as believers, we live in the tension between answered prayer and unanswered prayer. We live in the tension between Galilee and Jabbok.

But there's an interesting line at the beginning of the Galilee story: It says in verse 13, "When Jesus heard what had happened..."

So what happened? If you look back just a couple of verses, you'll find the horrific story of the beheading of John the Baptist. And recall that John had baptized Jesus. In fact, John and Jesus were cousins, so Jesus "slipped away by boat to a solitary place to be by himself" and grieve. Jesus, of all people, knew that John had just entered into eternal life, but he still grieved. Jesus knows what it is to struggle on the banks of the Jabbok.

For that matter, Jesus was with Jacob in that struggle on the banks of the Jabbok. What that tells us is that being yoked to Christ doesn't mean that all our problems, all of struggles magically disappear; but what it does mean is that we never struggle alone.

I will never wrestle alone.

Jesus is with me in all my struggles.

Jesus is with me in all my struggles.

Thanks be to God.

¹ Paul Scott Wilson, editor, *The Abingdon Theological Companion to the Lectionary, Preaching Year A*, Abingdon, 2013, pg. 216f.