

## **Feeling the Fear** **Genesis 32:22-31 / Matthew 14:13-21**

### **Wrestling with God?**

Whether we like it or not, the religious landscape and spiritual trends around us are always shifting. Thirty or so years ago, everyone went to church on Sunday mornings but not anymore. Nowadays, more people think of themselves as spiritual but not religious. When I was a seminary student in Korea, the prosperity gospel had gained some popularity in churches. If you don't know about the prosperity gospel, the prosperity gospel is a belief system within certain Christian circles. It emphasizes the idea that God rewards faith, highlights positive thinking, financial giving with financial success, material wealth, and physical well-being. These prosperity gospel preachers often used the story of Jacob's Jabbok River to demonstrate the importance of persistence in prayer. They teach that, "like Jacob, we should persistently wrestle with God in prayer to obtain God's blessing until we receive an answer. Never give up your pursuit of God's blessing." Sounds great! So many brave men and women daring to fearlessly enter into a wrestling match with God to get what they want.

### **Jacob's Jabbok River**

But was Jacob eager to wrestle with the divine being to get a blessing? Was Jacob really brave enough to knowingly wrestle with God on that night? Not really. According to today's reading, Jacob didn't begin this wrestling match. In verse 24, we can see that "Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak." It sounds like this man, whoever he was, initiated the wrestling match, not Jacob.

We don't exactly know who this man was. Jacob seemed to think that he had indeed met God. The Prophet Hosea thought this man was God's angel. Some believe he was a demon or a Canaanite numen. Some believe this shadowy opponent was actually Esau. Interesting!! Whomever this figure was, the biblical narrative does not want us to know too much and this lack of clarity offers the rich expository possibility of this text.

Remember, Jacob ran away from home because he stole Esau's birthright and blessing and Esau was angry and tried to kill him. He headed off to some cousins and he did well there, so now he is heading back to his home with wives, children, servants and wealth. But his past followed him, and he feared his brother's bloody revenge. Many nights, Jacob may have woken up with nightmares of his brother coming after him. On his way home, he had just heard that his brother Esau was coming to meet him. That sounds good, but he was coming with four hundred men. Jacob was terrified! Of course, God assured him to "return to your country and to your kindred, and I will do you good." But God's promise wasn't enough to calm his fears. So, what did he do? He was a successful businessman equipped with cunning tactics. So, he sent off a bribe - I mean a gift to his brother, not one time but three times! He then divided his family and flocks into two groups as a strategic move to protect his family and possessions just in case Esau attacked them. However, that was not enough to quiet his fear. So, he didn't go with his family. He sent his family before him and he was left alone on the other side of river. God assured him of protection but God's assurance couldn't help him. He was still driven by fear.

Let us use our imagination here. After sending his family and possessions across the river, Jacob was left alone on the other side. What might Jacob try to do there before the man appeared and wrestled with him? Maybe he sat on the riverbank and prayed. Maybe he prepared for the worst and tried to find an escape route. Or perhaps, despite all those deliberate strategic

moves taken for his own safety, he still felt overwhelming fear, compelling him to consider running away. Maybe he ultimately chose to flee in the opposite direction, abandoning everything. At that moment, a man appeared from the darkness and held him. He wrestled with Jacob until daybreak. What is the meaning of this enigmatic story of Jacob wrestling with a man at night?

Renowned Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, offers an insightful interpretation of this story. He contends that the man is the angel of the Lord whom God sent to prevent Jacob from running away from his destiny and mission. Sacks points out there are similar types of narrative scenes in the Hebrew Bible. The stories of Jonah and Moses are examples. God gave great missions to Jonah and Moses and both of them were reluctant to obey God's command. As we all know, Jonah decided to flee in the opposite direction. Moses continued to find good excuses to abandon his mission and possibly tried to run away on his way to Egypt. That's why God was angry and tried to kill him. What did they really fear? Sacks argues, "They were afraid, essentially, of their mission. Moses kept telling God at the burning bush: Who am I? They won't believe in me. I am not a man of words. Jonah was reluctant to deliver a message from God to Israel's enemies. And Jacob said to God, "I am unworthy of all the kindness and faith that You have shown me" (Gen. 32:11). Their fear comes from a feeling of personal inadequacy and unworthiness. Who am I to lead the Israelites? Who am I to deliver the word of God? Who am I to deserve God's grace? Have you ever felt this kind of inadequacy when God has called you?

### **Be not afraid of greatness!**

We often feel that we are inadequate for doing some remarkable works for God and the world. We are o.k. with doing small things. What do you feel about sharing ABC bags of care? Good. We can do it. We may not be able to end the hunger in our community but at least, we can quench some thirst and fill their empty stomachs at least once in a while. But can we stop the hunger of children in Warwick, RI? If God somehow appeared in a burning tree in our church yard and said, "I have heard the cry of children from hunger. Now go, I am sending you to deliver them from hunger." What would be your response? When Jesus asked his disciples to give food to four thousand + people, they said, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." meaning "it's impossible for us to feed these people!"

I bet our response would be similar to that of the disciples, Moses and Jacob. "Well... God, with all due respect, we can feed a few people periodically, but not sure we can really end hunger. It's a bigger issue than we can handle. We don't have enough; we couldn't possibly meet this need. Who am I to possibly end hunger in the world?" If you feel this way, I am with you, my friend. We know how immense is the responsibility and how small we feel in relation to God's great mission. Feeling the fear of inadequacy for a great task before we undertake it is completely normal. Even the great men and women of faith did. To feel fear is fine. To give way to it is not.

Marianne Williamson indicates an interesting point about our fear. She wrote: "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God... We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

We are children of God. We are the image of God. Diane is brilliant. Carl is talented. Joan is fabulous. Grace is gorgeous. David is hilarious. Yohan is... good enough! We are the light of the world and we can do many great things because we are powerful beyond measure! Be not afraid of greatness! Only those who are not afraid of the greatness in us can attempt to change the world.

[ppt] I read a news article about a seven-year-old girl, Madison O'Neil, from Warwick who made it her own personal mission to make sure no one in her neighborhood is hungry. So, she made "Madison's little free pantry." Her grand-pa and dad helped her build her own little pantry and she put it up outside of her home. This seven-year-old girl has embarked on a great mission to stop hunger in her neighborhood. Isn't it amazing a seven-year-old girl would think of this great mission and actual find her own way to carry it out? There is greatness in every person - you and I and we can do the same. Be not afraid of the greatness God puts in you and let your own light shine. Don't be afraid of your age. Moses began his ministry at 80 and he worked until 120. So, the only person who is closer to his retirement age in our congregation is David Vacchina who will celebrate his 100 birthday on 11th! So, if you are younger than David, shine the great light that is in you! The Good News is that God has faith in us, even if, at times, we lack faith in ourselves. Just like God held Jacob throughout night, God will hold you close! Amen.