

Proper 24, Year C; Oct. 21, 2007
Advent Lutheran Church, Morgan Hill, CA
Pastor Anita R. Warner
Text: Genesis 32:22-31

WRESTLING WITH GOD

The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok.²³ He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had.²⁴ Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.²⁵ When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.²⁶ Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."²⁷ So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob."²⁸ Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed."²⁹ Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him.³⁰ So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."³¹ The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip. (Genesis 32:22-31, NRSV)

If you asked my parents which of their four children gave them the most trouble in church, they wouldn't hesitate to tell you that it was their second-born, Anita. When I was two, I didn't cry or talk during the sermon: I wrestled. I wrestled with Mom. I wrestled with Dad. Mom said that she and Dad had nice cashmere coats, not a small item for them, and I wore out her nice coat with my Sunday morning wrestling. And each Sunday, as soon as I was in the car to go home, I fell asleep.

My parents haven't restrained me for many years. But since then, I've wrestled with many more sermons, those I've heard and those I've preached! I've also discovered that prayer can involve sitting quietly, and prayer can equally involve movement. In our worship service, we do both, being still and moving in our prayer. Every procession, every time we stand, puts movement behind our words and prayers. These are not random movements, but placed to put our bodies and selves into the words and prayers we say. Those who like me have a harder time sitting still during the worship service can serve as ushers or sound and light team members, serving the assembly with their movements during worship.

Do you move when you pray?

Some people have a daily prayer time when they walk. Many have been experiencing praying while moving in the multimedia labyrinth set up this

week at our church. Our prayer is meant to be embodied! Moving and being moved while you pray *is* what you could call Passionate Spirituality.

We encounter a famous instance of wrestling with God when Jacob stood at the ford of the river Jabbok. A lot of personal history stood behind him. He ran away from home years ago because his brother Esau had been angry enough with him to kill him. Why was he so angry? Because Jacob had cheated his twin, not once, but twice. He had taken his elder brother's birthright and his blessing. Esau was the first-born twin, and Jacob followed. When he was born, he was holding onto the heel of his older brother, the brother he would cheat of his rights and blessing when they both grew older. Jacob had been well-named, it seems: his name meant "heel-grabber."

The last time he had seen his brother Esau, Esau had vowed to kill Jacob, that heel-grabber. Jacob had fled to his uncle Laban's home. Undoubtedly, Jacob had been refined over the years by working hard for 20 years in exile, being married first to Leah then also to Rachel (part of the custom of his tribe at that time), and being cheated by his own uncle, Laban. Now Jacob had family to worry about, and not just his own ambitions. Now he was concerned not primarily to supplant his brother, but to protect his loved ones from harm. And Jacob heard that his brother Esau was now coming to meet him, along with four hundred men. It appeared they would meet again. Their reunion could go well or badly, but, with four hundred men coming along with Esau, it was not looking good.

Jacob slept alone on one side of the river, and while he was sleeping there, God showed up. Jacob's night was spent in sweaty, painful, exhausting grappling with God. Here Jacob was, finally trying to do the right thing as he approached the reunion with his brother, and what he finds is not the comforting presence of God helping him, but God hiding his identity and struggling with him all night. God was the opponent! God indeed looked just like Esau in that all-night struggle. It seemed very much that Jacob's opponent, in this case, God, was trying to kill him.

Has prayer ever been like that for you? Is it hard for you to face change? Are you ever fearful of the past haunting you? Does change in your life and your character ever come with painful struggle and sleepless nights?

Jacob wrestling with the angel of God is the existential struggle of aloneness, struggle and effort in the face of God. Or it is the personal struggle in finally confronting ourselves: not just what we have done, but

who we are. The heel-grabber spent the night in the shadow, grabbing the heel this time of none other than God, and seeing if he would still live.

Confronting ourselves, including our shadow selves, is a painful, but necessary part of our spiritual growth. “Pain is one of the sure signs that contemplation is happening,” states Parker Palmer, a contemporary spiritual writer. While contemplation may lead eventually to bliss, he writes, “first it gives us the pain of knowing that some of our dearest convictions are shallow, inadequate, wrong. Contemplation first deprives us of familiar comforts. Then it replaces them with an inner emptiness in which new truth, often alien and unsettling truth, can emerge.”

Who among us has not tossed and turned, and even after a long hard night still tenaciously held on to a dream or a prayer near daybreak, not wanting to let go until resolution is certain, until peace has been given?

When Jesus’ disciples said they wanted to be with him, near the face of God, he responded: “You do not know what you are asking... Are you able to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” (Mark 10:38). Jesus prayed often. And, as he knelt in Gethsemane – or, according to some, threw his whole self on the ground, facing all the shadows of the world, this prayer was filled with struggle:

“He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him.⁴⁰ When he reached the place, he said to them, “Pray that you may not come into the time of trial.”⁴¹ Then he withdrew from them about a stone’s throw, knelt down, and prayed,⁴² “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.”⁴³ Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength.⁴⁴ In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.⁴⁵ When he got up from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief,⁴⁶ and he said to them, “Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial.” (Luke 22:39-46, NRSV).

Christ prayed and struggled throughout his passion and death – and then rose to new life. His resurrected body still showed his wounds.

We can be wounded, not only from the pain and struggle of life, but even from struggle with God! Jacob limped away from the struggle, his hip put out of joint by his divine opponent. And yet he also held on and demanded a blessing.

Scarred as he was, Jacob was given a hope. He walked away from the struggle transformed, with a bad hip and a new name. He was not to be called heel-grabber anymore, but Israel: which means, one who struggles with God and humans and has prevailed. His new identity would be not the one who supplants or cheats, but the one through whom God would be revealed to all people!

The next day he met Esau. Jacob had already sent groups of animals ahead of him for presents to Esau. But when Esau approached, he ran to meet Jacob, threw his arms around him, and kissed his neck. And Jacob said to him: “Truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God.”

There is a divine aim that is given to us, continually calling us, pulling us sometimes willingly, other times reluctantly, into an unknown future. The Bible reassures us that we can trust this aim, this divine calling in our lives. As the existentialist theologian Soren Kierkegaard wrote, “Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.” In the face of God, there will emerge from our struggle in the night God a transformed hope, a reconciled future, a resurrection life. We too will be marked from the wrestling and prayer and will no longer carry the name of our defects and shame, but the name of Christ.

In the meantime, remember that prayer takes many forms – and our prayer involves wrestling, too. And movement. Faith is the kind of engagement with God that does not give up on God and does not allow God to give up on us. Do you have that kind of faith? Will you take up that kind of faith? Jesus asked, “When the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

Let us pray. We thank you, O God, that you have brought us to this place in our lives. We look back and recognize your blessing, though we have not deserved it. As we look ahead, there are daunting days we face. Do not let us go; hold onto us, give us the name of Christ to cover our shame, and bless us. Amen.