

Wrestling with God

Both the Old Testament lesson and the Gospel reading show us people struggling, wrestling, with God. Let's start with the Jacob story. I find it significant that our Genesis lesson says explicitly that Jacob was alone. Then it says a man wrestled with him. Yet he was alone. This is like so much of our wrestling with God. We are alone, and yet we are not alone. In prayer, we appear to be talking to ourselves, yet we are engaging in a conversation. We speak; we listen. We are alone, but there is God, present.

The Genesis narrator says Jacob wrestled with a MAN, but Jacob says he has wrestled with GOD. This is much like us when we read the Bible: we engage, we wrestle with, human authors who wrote from human perspectives, but when we read the text listening, listening for God, waiting and hoping with an open heart, we can be addressed. We are reading a thoroughly human document, yet often we hear a divine voice. So, which is it? Are we wrestling with a man, a human author, or does God grip us, in, with and under the text, like a sacrament.? It is both.

Then there is an even more strange part of the story. Genesis says the man (or God) didn't win the wrestling match with Jacob. It was a tie. So the man (or God) played dirty and fouled Jacob, because, it says, he didn't want to be around when the sun came up. I don't think it was because he was a vampire or that he might have turned into a pumpkin. It is the Old Testament's way of emphasizing God's awesomeness, of saying that God is not ever wholly known to us. It is like the hymn that says, "Immortal, invisible, god only wise. In light inaccessible, hid from our eyes."

But Jacob says, "I will not let you go." He wouldn't let God go. Would we - DO we? Do we persist in wrestling with God? Or do we easily give up? Jacob fought for God's blessing, God's word of Shalom. And in Genesis, Jacob is not a very nice person. He cheats. He lies. He steals. God doesn't owe him anything. But then, God's blessing isn't dependent on whether we are nice people. God's grace is not contingent on our good deeds or nice personalities. If it were, it wouldn't be grace. God doesn't owe us or Jacob anything, and yet God blesses us, graces us with forgiveness, mercy, and love. So, do we fight through until we obtain God's blessing?

As a result of his encounter with God, Jacob's name, his identity, is changed. His former name, Ya'acov, meant grasper, or one-upper. His new name is Is-ra-el, the man who strives with God. This is his new identity, and he does seem genuinely changed, humbled, in all the rest of the Genesis stories that include him. Have we been changed by our encounters with God over the years?

But God remains mysterious: he won't tell Jacob his name. To know the name of the god was to have some measure of control over that god. But the God of the Bible won't be confined to a box with a bow, under our control. like a genie in a bottle, or a cosmic vending machine, performing for us on command, though that may be what we think we want. God, the true God, remains wild, free, undomesticated. He doesn't play by our rules.

By wrestling with God, Jacob receives a divine blessing, and he marks the event and the place with a name - Peniel - meaning the face of God. Jacob believes that he has come face to face with God, a close encounter of the supernatural kind. Do we think

such encounters are even possible? Do we maybe we get what we expect?

After this, Jacob/Israel, lives a long life, but with a limp. He was changed in more than one way by his encounter with God. It cost him something. Jesus said, "Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever, wrestling with God, loses his life will find it."

This week I found a poem from the Sufi poet Hafiz about wrestling with God. It's fun. [Read pp.187-88, from *The Gift*, by Hafiz. Trams. Daniel Ladinsky. Penguin, 1999]

In the Gospel lesson from Luke, Jesus knows we lose heart when we wrestle with God. We pray and lose heart. We stop praying, stop wrestling. So, he tells a story about a similar situation.

In his story God is represented by a judge who doesn't fear God. How ironic, like Jane Fonda playing the role of Nancy Reagan in the movie "The Butler." And the judge doesn't LIKE people, so I don't suppose he was elected, probably one of those appointed judges. But then nobody elected God either, and yet, unlike this judge, God so loved the world. Sweet irony here!

We the pray-ers in the story are represented by a poor, powerless, nagging widow who wants something. She is persistent, that is, she "continues firmly or obstinately in a course of action in spite of difficulty or opposition. She is tenacious, persevering, determined, resolute, purposeful, dogged, single-minded, tireless, indefatigable, patient, unflagging, untiring, insistent, importunate, relentless, stubborn, intransigent, obstinate, and obdurate." (I'll bet I am not the only one who uses an online thesaurus for his homework.)

The text says she kept on coming to him, kept on wrestling with him. She wants justice, or what she thinks of as justice. No evidence is presented. She just wants to win. She wants what she wants, Neither is her opponent or the opponent's case described. but she faces opposition, and so keeps on knockin' on heaven's door, the judge's door.

She gets nowhere. It doesn't matter. She keeps coming, and, like Jacob, she won't let him go! (We don't think lawyers were involved. No billable hours.)

But the judge is getting annoyed with her. He reasons, "Though I don't care what God thinks about this person or her case, and though I don't like her or anyone else for that matter, yet because she keeps bothering me, troubling, annoying, interrupting, causing me inconvenience, disturbing, pestering, badgering, harassing, plaguing, nagging, hounding, harrying, annoying, upsetting, irritating, hassling, bugging, getting in my hair, getting on my case, getting under my skin, and ragging on me, I will bless her, grant her justice." But only so that she won't keep coming and wearing me out.

Jesus says we should listen to the unjust judge who eventually grants the blessing of justice, and learn from this story that, if an unkind and unjust judge can get it right, will not God, the Father of Jesus, the God of Jacob, certainly grant justice to his beloved ones who are oppressed and who continually cry out to him for help?" He will, though sometimes it may seem long.

And Jesus ends his story with a question - will we hang in there long enough, wrestle doggedly enough, keep on praying persistently enough, or will we lose heart, lose faith, and thus lose God's Shalom Blessing? Remember last week? "Your faith has saved you?" So, as they say, keep the faith.

Both Jacob and the widow want a blessing for themselves, and so they persist

against apparently insuperable difficulties. And, yes, we do get to pray about our needs. Jesus tells us to - to pray for daily bread, for forgiveness and a forgiving heart, and for deliverance from trial and evil.

But we also are called to wrestle in prayer on behalf of others - the people on our prayer list each Sunday - the people on our own hearts and minds - the poor and hungry and unemployed of our region and nation - those oppressed by war and suffering in the world.

The problems can seem so large, and we and our little prayers so small, but, never mind that: Wrestle with God, pertinaciously pester in prayer, because no matter how long it takes, perhaps until the sun comes up on God's New Day, the Son of Man will come, and he will find us and all his faithful people praying. And there will be faith on the earth, for **we** will pray and not lose heart.

In the name of God of Jacob and Jesus. Amen.