

## **For a Blessing**

Gen 32: 22-31

Lk 18: 1-8

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### *Lk 18: 1-8*

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. <sup>2</sup>He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. <sup>3</sup>In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ <sup>4</sup>For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, <sup>5</sup>yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’” <sup>6</sup>And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. <sup>7</sup>And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? <sup>8</sup>I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

### *Gen 32: 22-31*

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. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. 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. Then he said, “Let me go, for the day is breaking.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” So he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” 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.” 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. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.” The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

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“There is blessing hidden in every trial in life, but you have to be willing to open your heart to see them.”

This anonymous yet wise quote has come to mind a few times over the past few weeks in certain conversations, in reading countless news stories, and in praying about so many painful and violent situations around the world.

Jesus’ words certainly ring true, that we need to pray always and not lose heart, that perseverance is an essential element of prayer. Yet to be so persistent, to be the widow who long suffered awaiting and demanding justice before being successful, can be much easier in theory than by action.

There is so much in our world that is complicated and convoluted, so much that is fraught with layers of politics, infighting and generations old mistrust that we cannot fully comprehend the issues, or really even know how or what to pray for. What blessings could possibly be hidden in so many despairing situations every single day? How can our hearts be open when the news feeds make us want to curl up under the blankets and stay there?

“There is blessing hidden in every trial in life, but you have to be willing to open your heart to see them.”

These words resonate as Jacob persisted and prevailed in his wrestling with a man, wrestling with God.

Jacob, son of Isaac, grandson of Abraham, wrestled with God, was blessed by God, and then renamed by God. He became the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham, “. . .I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.”

The story of Jacob, a three-generation journey of a promise, is one of intrigue and deception, of theft and lies, of victims and victimizer, of favoritism and crafty cunning long before it becomes a night of wrestling with God, a night of persistence and perseverance that could only be completed with another blessing. “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.”

But to really appreciate this complex weaving of human emotions and unethical behaviors is to see humanity as God sees humanity, to see how God offers blessings, to see that blessings can be hidden in the trials of life and seen by open hearts. God sees us, calls us, leads us, to where and who we are called to be despite—or even because of—our limits, our weaknesses, our faults and shortcomings.

And, in full disclosure, this is something that I wrestle with, seeing, or even believing that there could be a blessing hidden in *every* trial that is a part of life. For me there is comfort in Paul’s words, “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.” And there is reassurance in the wisdom of Mr. Rogers, ““Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.” Yes, the helpers are indeed a blessing, yet I want the blessing to be prevention rather than response, so my deepest wrestling comes from seeking a more immediate divine justice. I try to balance the unmerited, unlimited blessings of life with the fact that there is so much more than any one of us could ever understand when there is tragedy, despair, violence and blessings seem to be muted or even absent. Yet faith holds me in the spiritual hope that there is blessing beyond my vision, beyond the horizon, keeping me mindful that blessing is not always about happiness and acceptance but is also the invoking of divine care. Prayers call upon God to bless whatever situation with the blessing of divine care.

Stepping back to the time of Jacob’s grandparents Abraham and Sarah, we see a faithful couple chosen by God to be the parents of a new nation, the ancestors of a multitude of nations, who then ultimately had that faith tested as Abraham was called by God to sacrifice his son Isaac. The test was stopped just as the knife was poised over the boy, and Isaac grew up to be the father of twin sons Esau and Jacob.

The committed faith of his father and grandfather not only did *not* carry over to Jacob, but his actions stole the birthright that belonged to Esau, the firstborn elder twin. Jacob, in an elaborate ruse, hijacked Isaac’s blessing to become the Patriarch of the 12 tribes of Israel. “Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers and may your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you and blessed be everyone who blesses you!”

Now many years have passed since that deception and God called Jacob to return to his homeland which will mean encountering Esau. The brothers have not seen each since Esau’s birthright was stolen, so Jacob of course fears the wrath of his brother. When he is suddenly

attacked at night, when he is alone, vulnerable and defenseless in the middle of nowhere, he naturally expects that his assailant is Esau, or a man that his brother has sent to seek revenge. All night they wrestled and over those long, dark, painful hours, Jacob came to realize that this was God's own self, and Jacob discovered that incredibly he was up to this divine challenge.

We have all had those dark nights of the soul, those lonely, vulnerable and seemingly defenseless nights that we wrestle with God. Jacob had his hip displaced when he wrestled, we have our hearts and souls laid bare and broken. We are persistent as we pray, as we cry, as we persevere like the widow, "Grant me justice against my opponent." Whatever our opponent is we plead with God for hope, for resolution, for comfort, for healing, for understanding, for peace, for a decision, for acceptance, for relief.

As dawn was breaking, Jacob was exhausted but still wrestling, still persevering, and realized that he could only accept the end of this struggle by being blessed by God. God's blessing of divine commitment to Jacob, to Israel, was more than he could have ever imagined.

When a new day dawns as you have wrestled with God, what blessings have you sought? What blessings have you received?

Jacob limped away from Peniel and limped every day for the rest of his life. The limp was not a sign of weakness but rather a sign of his success, a sign that he wrestled with God, persevered and prevailed. How have you limped after you have wrestled with God? How have you been reshaped in faithfulness for the deep challenges as you struggled and prevailed?

Amen.

while God's response is always immediate that justice be done, the actual realization of God's response is not necessarily immediate because justice has to be done justly, and with the willing cooperation of all concerned."