

Sermon – October 16, 2022

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Genesis 32:22-31

I'd wager most people who pray are familiar with the feeling of a "one-sided prayer." When we lift something up in prayer and we don't feel like anything's hearing us. It seems like our words are just drifting away, lost in space. And all those times we pray and we don't *get* an answer. That thing we long for so much we asked *God* for it... doesn't happen.

That time between prayer and answer... or those times between crisis and resolution... the time between pain and peace in our lives is often called "the dark night of the soul." It's an in-between time—a time when we feel lost, between what is and what will be. We don't *know* what will be, but we have *hopes*, don't we?

The simplistic understanding of prayer is very "demand and supply," right? It's easy to think of the act of *pray-ing* as a... trip to God's customer service desk—or a call on the toll-free help-line—because that's so often how all of us—myself included—most frequently *use* prayer. There's something we need that we alone can't provide, so we come before God and ask God to see it done, if it is God's will.

Now I don't want you to confuse *simplistic* with *wrong*. There's nothing wrong and everything *right* with coming to God in our helplessness, with hopeful prayers of need and want. There is no reason to feel guilt or judgment for asking God for something. It's part of a healthy life of faith, and it's something God actually *wants* us to do. But something we learn from our Scripture reading today is that the *ask* should not be the end of the story. Jacob *wrestling* with God stands as a lesson for all of us that there is nothing passive about true prayer. Jacob's "dark night of the soul" at the river Jabbok shows all of us that our *own* dark nights of the soul—that time between heartfelt prayer and knowing the *peace* of God's answer—that time of *waiting*... Waiting on the Lord requires a little wrestling.

The well-known 20<sup>th</sup> Century poet T. S. Eliot touched on the old theme of the dark night of the soul in his poem *Four Quartets*. In it he reminds us of how *universal* an experience it is to walk into those dark times of uncertainty, those in-between times where we're unsure of what our lives will look like when the sun rises... or even *when* or *if* the sun will rise for us at all. And his words serve to show us that the darkness is *not* empty... and that the silence is not stillness alone, but transformation.

"O dark dark dark. They all go into the dark,  
The vacant interstellar spaces, the vacant into the vacant,  
The captains, merchant bankers, eminent men of letters,  
The generous patrons of art, the statesmen and the rulers,  
Distinguished civil servants, chairmen of many committees,  
Industrial lords and petty contractors, all go into the dark...

“I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you  
 Which shall be the darkness of God. As, in a theatre,  
 The lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed  
 With a hollow rumble of wings, with a movement of darkness on darkness,  
 And we know that the hills and the trees, the distant panorama  
 And the bold imposing facade are all being rolled away...

“But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.  
 Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:  
 So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.”

I was struck by that image of darkness as a changing of scenes in the middle of a play. When we are in our own dark nights—that time between our *need* and our experience of God’s mercy—it feels like nothing’s happening. That we’re alone, forsaken, lost, and helpless. You’ve had days like that, right? Weeks? Maybe even years? But in a play, when the lights go dark, there are countless stagehands dressed all in black, running back and forth across the stage, carrying props and replacing sets. Actors are changing costumes, techies are setting up for the next cue... and the script supervisor is turning over the next page. If a crew does its job well, even the people in the front row might not know what’s really going on, until the lights come up and the *transformation* is revealed.

There’s nothing *empty* about the time between prayer and answer to prayer. Waiting on the Lord—praying *to* the Lord—is not a passive experience. Just as a play needs its stagehand to hustle between scene changes, *prayer* needs us—you *and* God both—to wrestle with it.

In our reading today, Jacob—grandson of Abraham and a forefather of the Jewish people—spent an entire night in a *literal* wrestling match until daybreak, seeking a blessing from God.

Now, obviously, if you fight God you’re never gonna kick God’s butt. The omnipotent creator and sovereign of all reality is a little out of our weight-class. What Jacob did that was admirable, was that he hung in there. He pushed, and he struggled, and even when he was injured—in immense pain—he didn’t let go until he felt God’s blessing.

An important part of the Christian faith is the belief that in God we have someone who actually cares about our pains and our needs. In God we have someone who is more than willing to hear our troubles and work *with* us to work *through* them.

But we all know from experience that God isn’t a fairy godmother. We can pray all we want for a cure for cancer or that winning lottery ticket... and as I’m sure we’ve all

experienced, those wishes aren't *always* granted the way we want them to be. For some reason, that's just not the way God works. Wish I could tell you why.

But many of us here *have* experienced answered prayer. We know what it feels like when something we have *longed* for finally comes to pass—a gift, a blessing.

Unfortunately there isn't a hard-and-fast way to figure out which prayers get answered which ways and why. There's no scientific method to explain prayer, or the workings of God for that matter.

All we have is Jacob, on a treacherous journey with his family, wrestling with God for hours on end, desperately seeking a blessing to protect him and his loved ones on their way. Sweat pouring down him from the exertion, his lungs burning, his joints giving way and the pain making it hard even to walk, Jacob continued to wrestle with God. And through his struggle, through his refusal to ever give up, Jacob found his blessing.

You've heard about how butterflies work, right? Moths too. They hatch from an egg as a larva—a caterpillar, for instance. It crawls around, eating everything it can, and when it's finally *ready* for a spectacular *change* in its life, it builds a chrysalis around itself where it lies *dormant* for a long time, until one day the chrysalis breaks open and a beautiful winged creature bursts forth that looks absolutely nothing like the larva it was to begin with.

Well you know what *actually* happens inside the chrysalis that whole time? It isn't just sitting there.

All that time the caterpillar is “waiting” to transform into an adult, some really weird stuff is happening. The caterpillar basically *digests* itself, and sealed inside that chrysalis it turns into really what you'd call “caterpillar soup.” This solid, living being, spends its own dark night of the soul *melting* itself down into an unrecognizable goo, before cell-by-cell *rearranging* and *reforming* into a wholly new and beautiful creature.

But this isn't *really* the birth of a new creature. It's still the same caterpillar it's always been... just transformed into new life by forces it doesn't understand. Studies have shown that butterflies can actually *remember* their lives from *before* turning into *soup*, which is *amazing* to me.

These butterflies—looking back on their lives as a caterpillar—had to *wait* to be transformed. It wasn't something that happened overnight, and it wasn't something that came *easy*. But that's the *opportunity* we have while we're “waiting” for God to *do* God's work in our lives. Our dark night of the soul doesn't *have* to be empty, helpless, impotent longing. When we ask God to make a change in our lives, God is asking us right back to take *part* in God's answer. To wrestle with God and the fabric of the universe until we finally experience our *own* blessing, just as Jacob did.

It's a whole other sermon to say that God's time is not our time, and it's a whole other platitude to say "God works in mysterious ways" and that our prayers aren't always answered the way we thought they would be. I think you already know that anyway.

What I'm saying, and what our Scripture lesson is telling us today, is that prayer isn't just a wish we send up hoping that it might get answered, and it isn't just something we ask for and wait for it to come to pass. Jacob gives us the example that prayer is more about *striving* for something. That a healthy prayer life and a healthy relationship with God involves its fair share of *struggle*.

In prayer, we're called to wrestle with God. We shouldn't feel ashamed of asking God for something we need, or bringing our pains and sorrows before something who has bigger issues on their plate. Prayer isn't just mailing in a request and hoping God gets around to it.

Jacob shows us that sometimes we have to grab on tight, to grunt and scream and *rage* against the God that put us here and not give up until we have an answer, a blessing, *something* that will satisfy our need.

Prayer—prayer that has an impact on our lives—is not easy. It takes persistence. It takes endurance. It takes swallowing our pride and coming back again and again trying to find a different answer. But as weak as we are, as hobbled and pained as the world can make us, we always have what it takes to wrestle with God. We just have to find it, grasp it, hold on tight, and never let go.

Thanks be to God. Amen.