

Sunday Worship
A Service for Your Use at Home
St Paul United Church of Christ
5312 Old Blue Rock Road
Cincinnati, Ohio 45247
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Because of the pandemic caused by the corona virus, our congregation, along with many others, has decided that we must forego gathered worship services at this time. Each Sunday until we gather again, we will provide worship materials that members and friends can use in our homes in the knowledge that we are not alone, but are celebrating these holy days with our friends and neighbors in the faith. As you use this worship service, I hope you will pause and remember the tune to a familiar hymn as you read the words, and pray as partners in the fellowship of Christ.

If you have access to a computer or cell phone, you may want to open the video recording of the Scripture and Sermon provided by the pastor on both our church website and the message sent to all who are on our email list.

Today is the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost. Welcome to our worship. Today we will be exploring a well-known tale about the Biblical patriarch Jacob on an evening when his dreams were filled with anxiety and, in the night, he found himself wrestling with an unknown adversary and, at the end of it, received the blessing of God.

As we begin our worship today, read the words and hum the tune, if you remember it, to the hymn "Have Thine own Way, Lord":

Have thine own way, Lord! Have thine own way!
Thou art the potter, I am the clay.
Mold me and make me after thy will,
While I am waiting, yielded and still.

Have thine own way, Lord! Have thine own way!
Wounded and weary, help me, I pray!
Power – all power – surely is thine!
Touch me and heal me, Savior divine!
Have thine own way, Lord! Have thine own way!
Hold o'er my being absolute sway!

*Fill with thy Spirit till all shall see
Christ only, always, living in me.*

I used to be troubled by the psalms, because, as prayers, they sometimes seem to contain unworthy human sentiments (anger, selfishness, boastfulness, revenge, etc.). Our Psalm for today is one example of this. It causes us to wonder if it is ever all right to tell God we have been perfectly good and ask God to see our goodness and protect us from the evils around us. Then one day I realized that the Book of Psalms is not a book of perfect prayers written by God but is a book of prayers that reflect the human condition – sometimes boastful, sometimes arrogant, sometimes humble and spoken in honest need. We may think the psalmist in this passage thinks too much of himself, and we may question the way he challenges God to test his faithfulness, but on a day when you feel unfairly treated, you might turn to these words in order to remember that someone else has felt this way too, and turned, however ineptly, to God for help. Listen for God’s word to you in Psalm 17, verses 1-7:

Hear a just cause, O Lord, attend to my cry; give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit.

From you let my vindication come; let your eyes see the right.

If you try my heart, if you visit me by night, if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me; my mouth does not transgress.

As for what others do, by the word of your lips I have avoided the ways of the violent. My steps have held fast to your paths; my feet have not slipped.

I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God; incline your ear to me, hear my words. Wondrously show your steadfast love, O savior of those who seek refuge from their adversaries at your right hand.

Our lesson today from the Hebrew Scripture is taken from the Book of Genesis, chapter 32, verses 24-31. Jacob, the patriarch of the 12 tribes of Israel, has spent many years in exile, in fear of his brother Esau, whose birthright he stole. In his exile, he has acquired two wives and two concubines, had eleven children, and now owns substantial assets and herds of animals. On the way back to the land of his birth, he hears that Esau is coming to meet him, accompanied by a large army. He is afraid. He sends his wives and his herds ahead of him across the ford of the Jabbok River, and he remains alone in his thoughts for the night. Then something strange and wonderful takes place:

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.

The Sermon:

(Note: For those who want to see and hear a video of the complete sermon delivered by the Pastor, you may do so by going to the church website or opening the message that you will receive if you have given us your email address.)

The story of Jacob wrestling with a stranger who may have been an angel or an inner demon or even God, as the conclusion of the story suggests, is a famous and popular one that has inspired artists, philosophers and poets throughout the centuries. Here’s a poem called “A Little East of Jordan,” written by Emily Dickinson, one of America’s best known poets of the 19th Century. In it she seems to marvel over the contrast between the Spirit’s power and submissiveness for the sake of this troubled man.

*A little East of Jordan,
Evangelists record,
A Gymnast and an Angel
Did wrestle long and hard –

Till morning touching mountain –
And Jacob, waxing strong,
The Angel begged permission
To Breakfast – to return –

Not so, said cunning Jacob!
“I will not let thee go
Except thou bless me” – Stranger!
The which acceded to –

Light swung the silver fleeces
“Peniel” Hills beyond,*

*And the bewildered Gymnast
Found he had worsted God!*

I'd like to invite you today to enter into the story of Jacob's wrestling match by remembering a time in your own life when you found yourself wrestling internally with some uncomfortable or frightening mental state. Perhaps you were fearful of some event that was taking place a few days hence, or perhaps it was an event you had already experienced, and you were unsatisfied with your own behavior in it, or maybe it was something that happened long ago that was still unresolved in you, and the memory of it just kept recycling in your mind. Perhaps Jacob's case was not so different from yours: he was fearful of being punished by his brother, and the fear was compounded by the fact that he was genuinely guilty and felt ashamed of what he had done. He wanted forgiveness, but in truth he had not been able to forgive himself.

I don't know whether this story was the account of a physical wrestling match or of a nightmarish dream, but if it was the latter, I think I know how Jacob was feeling. I've been there. Haven't you?

The story seems to say that Jacob had to go through that evening of wrestling in order to let some things go and prepare to move ahead in his life. Two things we know about the past. The first is that we need to acknowledge and account for it; and the second is that it needs to be done. We have to let it tell its truth, then do whatever we can to bring satisfaction to that memory, and then move on to a future that embodies what we've learned and makes things right, even though they are not the same as they were before.

The story appears to imply that God is the wrestler (or appears in a wrestler's form) tussling us into the transformation that is needed at such a time. We don't usually know that up front, of course, as Jacob also did not know, since God is always anonymous in the encounter, a mysterious presence who does not tell us his name; but we see it afterwards: the hard wrestling that we needed to do but didn't want to do became the empowering agent that gave us new life and hope.

It's like that time when you hurt somebody, perhaps by accident, and you knew you ought to go and apologize and you'd feel better if you did, but you didn't want to do it, so you spent a few sleepless nights in misery over it, until you finally worked it out. You decided to meet with him, and you did, and afterward you felt better, even though you were walking with a mental limp when it was over, which was a sign of your newfound humility.

Oh, the kindness of God, who is willing to wrestle with us through such terrifying times!

In hindsight, we know about this story that Esau, Jacob's brother, was coming to meet him, but had no vengeance on his mind. The years perhaps had mellowed him, and he had done well enough in his life that he was able to remember brother Jacob and give thanks for their reunion without a need for recriminations. But all of this Jacob didn't know when he wrestled the angel that night before his meeting with his brother. So that night he wrestled until dawn with his guilt, his shame, his self-doubt and his fear.

And in that nighttime wrestling match, the Angel got in his licks. He gave him a limp by pulling leg from its hip socket, but Jacob would not let him go until the Angel blessed him with a future better than his past and a name that signified his future.

This story reminds me how important and healing it is when we learn to pray for the angel of our better selves to humble us about our past, and give us courage to take up the future, whatever the legacy of our past may be, with a name and a purpose given to us by God so that we can set our selfish goals aside and accomplish what we can for our world by the strength of God's grace. This is the transformation.

Let us join in prayer.

God, we realize that through much of our lives we have been wrestling with you, trying to define you, trying to explain your ways, trying to bend you to our will. Have your own way, God. Bless us and allow us to let you go. You are the

mystery that underlies everything that is, and all we need to know is what will please the world that has come forth from you. So may we put aside our selfish dreams and look at ways we can contribute to the community of reconciliation among all people, and at ways we can live so that the earth's great beauty is allowed to flourish with the gift of life.

Today we lift up the forests, the oceans, the air all creatures breathe, and the lakes and rivers that irrigate the land. May we be good stewards of these gifts. We also pray for the creatures of this planet, and recognize that we are one species of them, and that we creatures belong to one another in the shared miracle of life.

In troubled times, we lift up those who are suffering from disease, and those who live in fear of what this strange pandemic season has brought. Teach us to bring the healing that comes from mutual caring and acts of compassion wherever we see our brothers and sisters in need.

Where our society suffers from ethnic, religious, racial, economic and even religious conflict, teach us to listen especially to those most different from ourselves, so that we can find a way to understanding and move closer to the day of peace.

Let us pray in the words of our Lord Jesus:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God our Heavenly Parent, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen