

CMCL – August 6, 2017
Texts -- Genesis 32:22-31; Matthew 14:13-21
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At every step, the limp. Forcing again a memory of last night. What had happened? Jacob had decided to cross back over the Jabbok River – alone, for time to reflect, to plan for the next day. Contingency plans. It was a crisis moment. In the previous crisis with Esau, Jacob had been fleeing from him and had a vision at Beth-El of God’s presence. God had spoken. Maybe again?

This time, Jacob had gotten more than he bargained for – he, the consummate bargainer and schemer. No words – just wrestling. Then, his thigh put out of joint.

Jacob was no weakling. People thought because he liked to be indoors more than in the field, that he was a sissy, an indoor softie. But hadn’t he singlehandedly rolled away the huge stone that blocked the well in Haran? He’d shown those shepherds a thing or two. And impressed Rachel, too!

So Jacob had held on tight to his assailant, gritting his teeth against the pain, no matter the struggle. Then something strange had happened. His assailant spoke, almost pleading. “Let me go. The day is breaking.”

What could Jacob do? Why was he holding on? What did he want? What DID he want? Revenge on his assailant? To understand the reason for the attack? To be reconciled with Esau? To have more flocks and herds of animals? Yes, he had wanted a lot of those things.

But, really, what he had wanted most was to know, what was this all about? What was the point of his struggle – not the wrestling, but the real struggle, the struggle to outdo his brother Esau, to survive Esau’s wrath, to make it big and be a success? What was it for? What did he really want from this encounter with the mysterious assailant?

He had finally managed to blurt out, “I will not let go of you unless you bless me!” But why had he asked that? Years before at Beth-El, as he fled from Esau, when he had the dream of heaven opened with angels ascending and descending, hadn’t he already gotten a blessing? Hadn’t God said, “All the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and your offspring”?

But that was for the future. What about now? How was this to happen, anyway? “I will not let go of you unless you bless me!” Then his assailant had responded: “You shall no longer be called Jacob – the one who replaces or supplants. You shall be called Israel – God strives.” And that was when he had understood: Not Jacob striving anymore to make sure God’s promises were fulfilled, but GOD striving. **Not Jacob but God.** GOD carrying out promises, GOD bringing them to pass. No more need for Jacob to scheme and plot. No more living a conditional, contingent life, relying on his wits, trusting in his ability to outsmart and deceive.

A dislocated hip – a physical reminder that strong, smart Jacob did not need to earn God’s favor by bargaining or conniving. A dislocated hip – a visible, painful sign that imperfect, struggling Jacob was beloved of God. God loved him. God loved Israel.

Fast forward hundreds of years. See a conniving puppet king, another one who supplanted, another intruder – Herod Antipas. He weighs the political calculus of dealing with John the Baptist. John ought to die for having insulted the king and his queen, accusing them of immorality. But Herod is afraid to kill him, because John is popular. His death may provoke riots, which will make Herod look bad in front of the real authorities, the Roman governor and the Emperor.

Then Herod throws himself a birthday party, a feast. He makes a foolish oath and through it ends up authorizing the execution of John the Baptist. A self-serving feast, celebrated by a conditional, scheming puppet-king, and the outcome is death.

Not long afterward, there is another feast -- on a deserted hillside. The outcome of that feast is life, not death. There seems to be no food for this feast, but there is abundant love -- from God through Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus has repudiated the death-dealing kingdom of Herod, left his territory, and retreated to the hills, trying like Jacob to get away and think things through.

But he, too, is assailed. The people follow him from the towns into the hills, many of them limping physically or spiritually. They are like sheep without a shepherd, or more accurately, like sheep with bad shepherds, such as Herod, who do not care for the flocks. They know they need God’s grace, and they come seeking it in Jesus. “We will not let go until you bless us!” They are not disappointed. Unlike Jacob before his wrestling match, Jesus KNOWS what it’s all about. He knows the real reasons for the struggle. Most of all, he knows who he is – beloved of God. “And he cured their sick.”

But then the disciples – bargainers and schemers to a man – come to Jesus with a problem, and a solution. “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages (back into Herod’s domain) and buy food for themselves (under Herod’s economic system). Jesus will have none of it. The Empire of God has no place for the Herodian system of oppression and death.

“They need not go away. YOU give them something to eat.” And the disciple’s reply is familiar to us because it is one that you and I have used on occasion to excuse ourselves from doing what we know is right. “WE have NOTHING here!” (“Well, nothing but five loaves and two fish.”)

Jesus says, “Bring them here to me.”

Bring your paltry pitiful gifts, the things that can’t possibly have any value because they are so little compared to the need.

Bring your fear-ridden conscience that still IS a conscience in spite of your fear.

Bring your never-enough resources because they ARE enough in the Empire of God.

Bring what appears so weak in comparison to the principalities and powers of the earth.

Bring your challenges against the Herodian systems of oppression and death. Bring them and give them to Jesus, and see what he does.

Jesus takes the loaves and fish. He blesses them. He makes no bargains with God, no deals. He doesn't even promise a tithe in case of success. No Prosperity Gospel here. Jesus blesses the gifts that are offered, and then he, who is the Broken One, the Wounded One, yes, the Limping One breaks the gifts and hands them over to the disciples so that we, too – amazingly! — can take part in this blessing and this ministry.

And in Jesus, the descendant of Jacob, the descendant of Israel, the one who well knows that he is totally and completely dependent upon God, the one who well knows that he is totally and completely loved by God, in this Jesus all the families of the earth are forever blessed.