

“Finding Something Good and Sacred in Our Time Alone”

Genesis 32:22-31

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It is a familiar passage of scripture that begins with Jacob sending his family ahead of him across the ford of the Jabbok, and then the text says, “Jacob was left alone.” It goes on to say that a man wrestled with him until daybreak, and we remember the basic details about what happened that night. But in this extended time of isolation, completely unprecedented for us, these earlier words grab us like never before — Jacob was left *alone*. Alone.

We have spent a lot of time alone lately, some of it just with immediate family or our closest friends or co-workers, but much of it alone. We understand that isolation and distancing are necessary — indeed, acts of love in this time — but this much time alone, especially for those of us who have not experienced it before, is not easy. It is oppressive, it is suffocating.

Some struggle more than others. Some of us actually like a good bit of time alone, so it doesn’t feel like punishment. No reality is experienced in the same way by all. When the team wasn’t doing what was asked of us, my high school football coach liked to punish us by making us run laps around the field. The big guys really hated that. As a future distance runner, I would fly around the field and come back with a smile on my face, much to the irritation of my coach.

Not everyone experiences isolation in the same way. In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus seeks out some time alone until the crowds find him. But this long period of isolation has been challenging for all of us for different reasons. We like people and enjoy doing things with others, going to restaurants and movie theaters, ballgames and concerts. We miss being with one another here at the church for worship and fellowship, for study and various forms of service. We miss little things like smiles and hugs. We miss each other. But this is not the only reason we find isolation difficult.

When we are left alone like Jacob, we are... alone... alone with our thoughts and feelings, our demons and angels, our hopes and fears. It's not like they aren't always there, but most of the time we have so many distractions — some chosen, some not — that we can turn our focus away from anything we find difficult to confront. When we are alone, for such an extended period, we are forced to face things we would rather avoid, face our darker side, see ourselves as we are as opposed to who we like to think we are, ponder the nagging questions in our head.

What do we really believe about God, the meaning of life and whether there is anything more? What do we want most out of life? Have we accomplished anything that matters, anything that will endure, anything anyone will remember? How do we really feel about people who are different from us because of the color of their skin, what they believe, what their politics are? Why do we become so angry about certain things — why not in the superficial sense but why deep down?

It is difficult being alone with our thoughts, our questions, our doubts, but perhaps we can find value in a time like this. We all want to return to a normal rhythm of life as soon as possible, but until it is safe to do so, rather than running away from our thoughts, what might happen if we were to face our questions and doubts directly? We might learn something about ourselves and God. We might find a more peaceful and centered way of living. We might find something good and sacred in this time alone.

This is what Jacob does. Like Jesus, he chooses to be alone, he takes on the hard work of soul-searching, and like most of us, he has a lot of searching to do. Jacob, as we recall, has deceived his brother Esau and pretty much everyone else in his family many times. He has tricked Esau out of his birthright and stolen his blessing. His wrongdoings are not trivial. He has been away for twenty years and now he is going see his brother again. So, to state the matter bluntly, he is scared out of his wits! He sends his family away, for their safety as much as anything else, and seeks out a quiet place to wring his hands and search his soul.

“A man” appears, scripture says, and wrestles with him through the night until daybreak. A man... but who is this *man*? There are many theories. Is he an angel or a demon, some holy figure or just a human being? Could he have been sent by Esau to harm Jacob or perhaps be Esau himself? It has been a long time since the brothers have seen each other and it is dark. Could this figure simply be a part of Jacob’s own self? He is struggling with his identity, as much as anything else. And does it matter? Could this man be some combination of these realities, a man yet also a representative of God? Jacob’s struggle with himself, like ours, is inextricably linked to his struggle with God.

Whatever the identity of his adversary/companion for the night, Jacob struggles with him. He does not run away. In fact, at one point, he holds on to the figure and refuses to let go until he receives a blessing. The figure asks what his name is. It is, of course, Jacob, which means “he supplants,” though in the Hebrew, it is almost identical to the word which means “to wrestle.” So, there is a play on words here.

But Jacob is given a new name — Israel — which means “the one who strives with God.” Perhaps this tells us that God is involved in the struggle of this night. Jacob seems to think so. He names the place Peniel which means “the face of God.” “For I have seen God face to face,” he says, “and yet my life is preserved.”

Interestingly, the next day, when he sees his brother, and rather than harming him, Esau embraces him in tears of forgiveness, Jacob tells Esau that seeing his face is like seeing the face of God. Twice in the space of a few hours Jacob has seen the face of God. He has found something good and sacred in his time alone.

Part of what he has found is a better self-understanding. He has acknowledged his fears, his guilt, his need for forgiveness, and as a result, he is able to reconcile with his brother. It is one of the most moving encounters in all of scripture, an experience many of us have sought our entire lives without success — to reconcile with an estranged family member. Jacob cannot undo the past, but he can shape a different future, as symbolized by his new name.

But Jacob has also found a deeper understanding of God. He has seen God’s face twice — in the struggle of the night and in the face of a

brother who forgives him — and what he learns through both experiences is that God is found in the messiness of life. Old Testament professor Phyllis Tribble argues that the best translation of the verb “to wrestle” in this text is “to make God dirty.” We might prefer to say God chooses to get dirty — in the act of creation in Genesis 2, shaping a human being from the earth and breathing life into this human being; wrestling with Jacob on the ground; entering this life in the form of a fragile child. But the ultimate message is the same, Jacob sees God in the muckiness of life. It is a wonderful experience, a sacred experience, not one without a cost — he is vulnerable, he suffers mightily, and he walks away with a limp — and yet, they are costs he is willing to pay.

So, what is the message for us in this story? The message is that we can find something good and sacred in our time alone. We might rather choose to spend some time alone as part of a life shared with others, though how much time alone do we choose in an intentional way in ordinary times? But since we have this time, why not make the best of it, try to find something good and sacred in it?

Part of what we find, like Jacob, is a better self-understanding. It is not all about difficult and dark things, though struggle is inevitably involved. But what Jacob learns about himself is ultimately good. He has many things to be ashamed of, many things to fear as Esau approaches with four hundred men, but this night he discovers other important things about himself.

He is willing to face his flaws, own his vulnerabilities. Contrary to popular opinion, this is a strength, not a weakness. He is willing to struggle as much as necessary to learn what he needs to learn. He will not give up. He does not run a way, but clings to his adversary. And as a result, he discovers a depth of character he did not know he had.

So it goes for us. We think we know who we are, what our strengths and weaknesses are. But rarely do we know the whole story. In being willing to do the hard work of personal reflection — in the light of God’s grace, of course — we discover we are more than we thought.

In some of our time alone this week, Dana and I have watched Julian Fellowes’ adaptation of Anthony Trollope’s novel *Dr. Thorne*.

Set in mid-nineteenth century England, a time of clearly defined classes and rigid morality, Dr. Thorne raises a niece named Mary whom people think they know. But there is a great deal that even Mary does not know about herself, details her uncle hides because of the shame they would bring. And, as it turns out, there is something rather significant that Dr. Thorne does not know, something hopeful.

Mary is in love with a young man from a family beyond her standing in society, and her hidden background would make her even less worthy of him. He loves her anyway, but the family, though noble, is desperately in debt. He needs to marry for money, and Mary has no money. Or doesn't she? I don't want to give away the whole story, but the tension of the entire narrative hinges on who Mary really is, and her identity is only gradually disclosed to all the characters and the viewer.

Yet such is our identity. We know who we are to a certain extent, we know the names others have given us as well as those we give ourselves. But we don't know everything there is to know. Only the One who made us, the One who comes to us in the struggles of the night, knows our full potential. Discovering more of this potential is worth the cost of self-reflection in this time or any other.

But another part of what we find in this time, like Jacob in his time alone, is a better understanding of God. Jacob discovers that God is not far away but willing to come to him. He discovers that God is not totally removed and refined but willing get down in the dirt and wrestle with him. He discovers that God does not demand perfection but affirms struggle, in fact, engages it. And thus, at the end of the night, Jacob receives a blessing, in truth, several blessings – a new name, a new self-understanding, a personal experience with God, and a pathway to forgiveness and reconciliation with his brother.

What might we learn about God in this strange and difficult time? We are learning something about how much trust we place in God as opposed to how much we like to think we do. We are learning that God cares for us, no matter where we are, in some way, often through other people. Might we also learn, with Jacob, that God is with us in our struggles, and even values struggle itself? This is the best quality Jacob reveals or discovers in the night. He doesn't promise perfection nor

does he achieve it after this night, but he does reveal a willingness to struggle for what is right, to fight for it with all his life.

Perhaps that is what God wants from us. We will never achieve perfection in our beliefs, thoughts, or actions. We will never answer every single question of the soul and heart. But are we willing to keep struggling for what is true, right, and just?

I think of what a number of you have said to me about our current struggles with race in this nation. You have been heartbroken over the injustices that still exist, but you have expressed feelings of helplessness in regard to making things better. Some suggest specific strategies of change, and there are things we can do and are doing. But this basic human tendency to devalue, dehumanize, and thus mistreat the other is a difficult demon to exorcise from our experience. The key is what you have revealed — a willingness to keep seeking solutions, a refusal to give up, a willingness to struggle for answers.

I think of the ending in Goethe's *Faust* wherein the one who has done so much wrong, even made a deal with the devil, is whisked away to Heaven by the Virgin Mary and the heavenly hosts, as they sing, "Those whose searching never ceases are ours for their redeeming." Such a conclusion is possible because God knows our weakness and sin, our imperfection and need. What God wants from us is a willingness to keep searching, to do our best, to struggle with everything we have and are.

Jacob called his time alone and place of struggle Peniel, the face of God, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." What will we call this time of so much struggle? There is something good and sacred to be found if we are willing to look for it.