

“A Third Way? Both Ways?”
Genesis 32:22-31; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8

Rev. Kenneth M. Locke
Interim Pastor/Head of Staff
First Presbyterian Church, Fond du Lac, WI
October 16, 2022; 24th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Jacob, The Trickster, is in a world of hurt. Across the Jabbok River, coming towards him, is his brother, Esau, whom he had tricked out of his birthright years before. Now, Esau is coming towards him. Jacob is afraid Esau has murder in his heart.

The night before Jacob and Esau are to meet, Jacob spends the night wrestling. It's a long night and his hip is knocked out of joint, but in the end, Jacob wins and he is blessed. He receives a new name. Remember, at this time names were thought to have power. A new name means new power and prestige.

Jacob's new name is a blessing. No longer is he Jacob the Trickster. Now he is Israel, The One Who Strives with God. It is a blessing, but it comes with a cost. He limps. But now he is ready to face Esau because he knows he has struggled with God and prevailed.

There are many ways to think about this passage and there are many important lessons we can draw from it. Probably the most common is the admonition to go out and wrestle with God. Wrestle with God, we're told. You may limp but if you persevere you will be blessed.

But do I really want to wrestle with God? Come on. Does anyone really want a God you have to wrestle? I thought God loves me. Do I have to wrestle with God, and maybe get hurt, to receive a blessing?

Hmm. I don't know about you, but this makes me very uncomfortable. Very uncomfortable. Let's move on.

Let's look at Luke. Now here's a good story. A widow demands justice. But the judge refuses to hear her case. Finally, he is so sick and tired of her constant nagging he gives in. "I fear neither God nor man, but this widow is wearing me out. I'll give her justice just to get her off my back."

There are many ways to read this parable, but the most common is to focus on Jesus' last line. "I tell you, God will quickly grant you justice." We don't have to wear ourselves out. God is not an unjust judge we have to beat up to get what's coming to us. God loves us. God wants to give us good things. God wants to rain down presents from heaven. Now that's more like it.

You don't have to look very hard to realize these two stories are pretty much opposites. But which is right? Do we have to wrestle with God? Or will God bless us quickly? Which is right? Which one is correct?

Hmm. This is making me uncomfortable. Let's move on.

In our Epistle Lesson, Paul is giving instructions and encouragement to his young friend, Timothy. Apparently, times are hard and Timothy needs help. He needs a shot of courage.

Paul lays it out pretty clear. Continue in what you have learned and believe. In good times and bad, in season and out of season, proclaim the message of God's love in Jesus. In good times and bad, when you feel like it and when you don't, when it's rewarding and when it's not, when it feels like an all-night wrestling match and when the gifts are falling from heaven, proclaim the message. Proclaim the message. Keep on keeping on. Proclaim the message.

And maybe that's the point. Maybe that's how we're supposed to read the story of Israel and the story of the widow. Stay connected to God. Keep on keeping on.

Every relationship has ups and downs. Sometimes we wrestle with the relationship, sometimes blessings fall from the sky. That's the nature of relationships. It's the same with God. Sometimes it feels like we are up all night wrestling with God. Sometimes it feels like gifts are being handed to us left and right. The point is to stay connected and keep proclaiming the message.

Paul's message to Timothy and us as individuals is also Paul's message to us as the church. In good times and bad we, the church, are to carry on, proclaiming the good news.

Some of you will know the British expression, "Keep Calm and Carry On." It's supposed to be the British motto. When things are hard, and life is tough, what do you do? You keep calm and carry on.

Keep calm and carry on proclaiming the good news. Even when it feels like the church is wrestling with God. Even when it feels like gifts are falling from heaven. As a church, we are to keep calm and carry on showing the world how much, how much God loves us.

The time has come when people have grown board with good news. They have itchy ears and want something new. They do. Our culture is becoming less and less Christian, more and more secular. That's just the way it is.

But for us, the mission is the same. Continue sharing what we have learned and firmly believe. Proclaim the message of God's love. In season and out of season, in good times and bad, tell the world how much God loves us.

Which is right? Which story is correct? Do we have to wrestle God? Will God shower us with gifts like rain from heaven?

I think both stories are right. Sometimes one will happen. Sometimes the other. What matters is hanging in there. Staying in relationship with God, as individuals and a church, staying in relationship with God. As close as two wrestlers. As persistent as someone seeking justice. Stay connected with God. As individuals and as a church let us stay connected with God, proclaiming the good news about how much God loves us.

Staying connected to God, let us keep calm and carry on.
Amen.