

“Burdened by Blessings”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
August 6, 2023 - Tenth Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 13

[Genesis 32:22-31; Matthew 14:13-21](#)

Dark nights of the soul -- difficult, soul-searching moments -- are universal, experienced by all of us, from the least to the greatest, as part of life's journey. Today's scripture readings from the lectionary provide us with stories of two characters who were themselves experiencing such dark moments, and they provide important lessons for us today that can help us better understand and live with our own unique difficulties and the challenges of others in the world.

The main character of our first reading from Genesis is Jacob, whose story we have been following over the past few weeks along with the stories of his ancestors. Today, we find Jacob traveling with his family away from his father-in-law Laban, with whom they had been living for many years in Mesopotamia. Following the instruction of God, Jacob and his family and flocks were heading west towards Palestine when he received word that his twin brother Esau was coming to meet him and that Esau was coming with hundreds of his men. Earlier in their lives, Jacob had cheated his elder brother Esau out of his inheritance and the blessing of their father, and so this family reunion was not bound to be a happy one. The events of today's reading took place the night before Esau and his men would be coming upon Jacob and his family. Jacob, fearing the wrath of his brother Esau, was alone, dreading what would happen the following morning, when “a man” shows up and wrestles with him until daybreak. We learn from the story that this mysterious, wrestling visitor is not just any old man, but is God appearing as a man, who struggles with Jacob throughout the dark night of his soul and who leaves in the morning, but only after blessing Jacob, giving him a new name, Israel, and leaving him with a bum hip.

The main character of our second lesson, Jesus, was also experiencing a dark night of the soul at the beginning of the reading from Matthew. Jesus had just received the news that one of his own kin, John, who had earlier baptized Jesus at the beginning of his ministry, had been unjustly executed by King Herod Antipas. And so, grieving, likely angry, and probably concerned about his own fate, Jesus left from where he was by boat and went alone to a deserted place. But the

crowds would not leave him alone. Many gathered where Jesus was, and though he himself was hurting, he had compassion on the crowds and healed those among them who were sick. And moved by compassion because those in the crowd were hungry, he took a few loaves of bread and two fish and miraculously fed the whole crowd with them, and more food was left over after they were fed than they had to begin with.

Maybe you can relate to these stories of Jesus and Jacob experiencing moments when they were troubled, when they were perplexed and just wanted to be left alone. We often withdraw from others when we are afraid, or grieving, or are otherwise distressed, and we tend to do our best disappearing acts in these moments. As a result, we face great problems in our society as too many of us despair alone, and too many of us consume a variety of substances to numb our pain and cope with our loneliness, only to find our feelings masked but momentarily and that we have become even more isolated.

A message of good news from today's lessons is that God seeks to interrupt our cycles of solitary soul-searching. At times, God shows up in ways we don't expect, or can't recognize in the moment, to wrestle with us, showing us that, no matter how strong we are in body, mind, or spirit, we cannot out-wrestle God, but we that can have our own hearts and minds changed by grappling encounters with God, and we can find ourselves blessed by God through the dark nights, perhaps emerging from them, like Jacob did, with a new identity and direction in life, or perhaps like Jacob's bum hip, we can receive some daily reminder of our own suffering that can help us to be more compassionately concerned about the suffering of others.

We can find ourselves blessed by God when we act, like Jesus, out of compassion for the good of others in need around us. I've witnessed, hundreds of times while working for many years as a youth minister, that young people, many of whom hurt alone and experience a dark night of the soul every night, have a light that begins to shine in their lives when they get out of their own heads for a moment (and get off their phones) and work together to help others. This is one reason why I am so happy to see so many of our own teens working here this coming week to help lead our children's Vacation Bible Blast program. For when we serve others, no matter the pain we ourselves might be experiencing, and we choose to

be channels of God's love, we will find God's life sustaining us and growing within us, giving us more than we need so that we have a bottomless basketful of leftovers, a burden of blessing, to carry and share with others.

Whatever you are experiencing in this moment, whether it is a moment that is dark and stormy or it is more of a bright, sunshiny day, may you sense God's presence in your life. May you see God grappling with you, especially through hard times, working to soften your heart and mind and to create a more compassionate person. May you be moved by compassion to care for others as they face their own difficulties. And as you work to bless others, may God's life well up within you and be overflowing. Amen.