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Athelstone Uniting Church #114

2 August 2020

Face to Face

Text: *Genesis 32:22-31 and Matthew 14:13-21*

Play song:

Everybody Hurts – REM cover by The Corrs.

Watch here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_GIT-ee4Pzw

Or with lyrics here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=px36tdaCPDk>

Sermon

When your day is long
And the night... The night is yours alone
When you're sure you've had enough of this life
Well hang on

Don't let yourself go
Cause everybody cries
And everybody hurts
Sometimes Sometimes everything is wrong
Now it's time to sing along
(When your day is night alone)
Hold on, hold on

This song beautifully sung by The Corrs, originally recorded by the band REM, was written with young people in mind: those facing the challenges of youth – finishing high school, starting Uni or work, leaving the shelter of the home environment

The words really apply to anyone who is struggling
Anyone who is hurting

Everyone goes through struggles and pain at some time in their life. if not you, it's very likely you know more than one person who is struggling right now.

The good news is that God is there with us in amongst the struggles, and does not let us go.

The story of Jacob struggling – wrestling with an angel or perhaps even God, is a great image of someone struggling



This image on screen was painted by Mike Moyers.

<https://www.mikemoyersfineart.com/illuminations?lightbox=images3>

He says: the painting depicts the night when Jacob wrestled with God. After the match was over, Jacob was given the name "Israel," which means "God Wrestler."

I'd like to read to you a story called Jacob Struggles. It is based on the Genesis reading

"I had sent them all away; I was completely alone at the border of my homeland hoping to re-enter in peace, to meet my brother without hostility, to be able to come home after so many years in self-imposed exile.

Suddenly, a stranger appeared, didn't greet me or make an introduction, just stood there! My first thought was that my brother had sent him, and he held some malice intent towards me. I had left home in terrible circumstances. I had been deceitful and dishonourable; it would not be surprising if this stranger had come here to this lonely place, so close to my homeland, to punish me for those past wrongs.

We stood face to face. I struggled to know what to do, how to behave, what to say. I couldn't let him stay here without explanation. I couldn't let this stranger go, let him journey toward those I loved without knowing who he was and what were the intentions. I couldn't put them in danger. So I stood tall and straight and demanded that he tell me who he was, and what he was doing here.

Nothing, not a word! I was determined not to let this pass, not to let him think silence would appease me or give any advantage over me, and so I stepped forward – and that’s when the struggle began.

I was stunned, but not so overcome that I could not defend myself, and so I grabbed this stranger, and the two of us began thrashing about on the ground. I was struck on the thigh, it was painful and debilitating, but it made me more determined to hold on, not to give up. He tried to hold me pinned to the ground, but I twisted around and held him down. He struggled to get out of my grasp, but I held on tight and refused to let him go. Throughout the night, we remained locked in this battle of will and strength and all the while, not a word uttered.

Birdsong broke through the silence of night and day began to break in rays of pink and gold. The stranger spoke and demanded to be set free. Maybe it was the sound of the voice, but suddenly I was struck by the memory of the last time I was in a place like this on the edge of home and alone – God had come to me and spoken to me. Could it be that this was God? I needed to know if I was right, I breathlessly asked for a name but still got no response. I drew on my strength and demanded the stranger’s name.

My demand was refused, but if this was God then at the very least I needed a blessing. I could not let this struggle go until I had the reassurance that God remembered the promise made to me all those years ago when I was on the run. But then he asked me my name. “Jacob,” I said.

“Your name is no longer Jacob, you are now Israel, for you have wrestled with God and with every kind of person and have not been defeated.”

I let go. Once again, I have encountered the God of my ancestors, and I have been transformed.”¹

On this dark and scary night, Jacob is scared! He has sent ahead herds and herds of gifts to his brother, hoping to ease his way home by softening Esau up, but he doesn't know if it will work. Now, on the bank of the river, Jacob is all alone in the deep of the night. Perhaps he's developed enough of a conscience to realize that his brother has every right to feel fresh anger at the return of the one who has stolen everything from him.

Rather than a sweet dream, Jacob is visited by a stranger who wrestles with him all night long, without a clear winner.

One commentator wrote: Sooner or later, God meets us where we live. For crafty, scheming, heel-grasping Jacob, that meant God getting down into the mud and blood of this earth and quite literally wrestling with the man who had devoted his life to getting ahead by being stronger and smarter than every opponent.

Earlier in the Jacob story, we become aware that struggle is a familiar experience for him... Jacob wrestled with Esau in the womb, wrestled with Esau out of the womb. Next Jacob wrestled with his father, Isaac, and then for about 20 years had a wrestling match with his

¹ Seasons of the Spirit Fusion resource August 2020

uncle-cum-father-in-law Laban. God had stayed with Jacob through all that and even had made some pretty big promises to him at a place called Bethel.

But what Jacob did not yet know is what a lot of us are slow to realise: the best things in life come by grace alone. The old self – the scheming, live by your wits- self – has to die and only then can God bring us the blessing of a new identity. Jacob became Israel.

In Christ we become children of God.

Each of us has a different awakening moment where we see God's own face and discover the glorious truth that grace alone ushers us into God's wonderful light.

Did you notice that both bible readings were set close to darkness?

In Matthew's feeding of the 5000, it is evening, and the disciples are ready to rest.

Jacob's wrestle lasts throughout the night until daybreak

In both cases, rest is interrupted by miraculous encounters of divine power.

Jacob wrestles with an angel and receives a blessing

The disciples debate with Jesus about sending the crowds away to find their own food, and instead witness a miraculous feast from some loaves of bread and a couple of fish.

Even in our darkest hours and times of great fatigue, God is with us, offering miraculous opportunities for blessing and ministry²

God is with us in the light and in the darkness.

We all struggle with personal dilemmas – and sometimes we struggle to see God during these times. These times might take a physical toll – much like the sport of wrestling. But Jacob does not give up.

Jacob doesn't let go and neither does God!

So take heart! Hold on.

Because God is holding on to you

And so are we

This last week has been particularly difficult for me personally. It wasn't *one* thing in particular, it was one thing after another that finally had me overwhelmed and in tears yesterday.

After our few days away last weekend I returned to a full week of ministry:

Long days, some heavy pastoral concerns, with people dealing with major health and relationship issues, a key leader in hospital, church council meeting, lots of conversations about how to make various activities at church COVID safe, and a funeral to plan for and officiate at. Paul has also had a heavy week and there are extra stresses with staff

² Abingdon worship annual 2017

redundancies happening around him. Then on Thursday and Friday, major work was done at the manse to install new air-conditioning. The noise levels and interruptions as I worked at home were very stressful and have meant that most of my productive work has happened in the evenings. It has been a difficult week

Yet, in amongst the struggles there have been blessings:

Being able to provide support to people in crisis – all because of relationships built through Threads. A great blessing

Being able to journey with a family with little to no church connections as they grieved the loss of their loved one. Such a blessing

The manse, our home, is so much more comfortable now – the new air con is warm and quiet. Lovely – a great blessing

yesterday, in the midst of me feeling very overwhelmed, Paul (my husband) pointed out 2 Eastern Rosellas, just outside my window. the colours of their feathers were captivating. Such a blessing

Paul himself has been a wonderful support throughout. Such a blessing.

a little later, a friend called to ask how I'm going. They knew that I had the funeral on Friday and the air con was being installed. They had been thinking of me and rang. Such a blessing

and then, yesterday in the afternoon, I kept a promise to my 5 year old grandson Eli, to spend some time with him. What a joy! We played with playdough. I cut out some heart shapes. He stacked them up in a pile and held them up to me and said: This is how much I love you Nona! Blessing upon blessing.

Struggles and blessings

Everybody hurts
And God is there with us
And we are here for each other.

When your day is long
And the night... The night is yours alone
When you're sure you've had enough of this life

hold on, hold on
Hold on, hold on
Everybody hurts
You are not alone

May God be with you in the struggle,
with the love you need,
with the strength you need,
with the hope you need.
And we will be here, too.

We are here for you. Amen