

# Scripture Readings and Sermon

*August 2, 2020 by Rev. Mark Brechin*

## **Commentary on Genesis 32:22-31** (*Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#)*)

After the birth of Joseph in Genesis 30:24, Jacob begins to make plans to return home but Laban offers another deal. This time instead of laboring for a bride price, Jacob will be laboring for his own livestock. With the help of a dream from God, Jacob grows his herd and becomes more powerful than Laban and his sons. Knowing that Laban and sons were growing increasingly jealous, Jacob flees Laban only to have Laban catch up with him. Through mediation by God and some deception by Rachel concerning idols she had stolen, Jacob and Laban formed the covenant at Mizpah (31:48-49). After coming finally settling things with Laban, Jacob now needs to face Esau and learns that Esau is coming to meet him with "four hundred men" (32:6). For the first time, Jacob humbles himself and prays to God (32:9-12). To soften the reunion, Jacob first sends a large herd of 550 animals as a present to Esau and then sends his family while he stays behind to prepare for the meeting. It is during this preparation that Jacob struggles with the stranger. The nature of the stranger and the fight has been the subject of speculation from the first time the story was shared. How could 'God' or even an angel of God 'not prevail'? Why did he have to leave before sunrise? Can we really strive with God and prevail? Here are some possibilities to consider: 1) did the man really not prevail when he can dislocate a hip with one blow or is the point that Jacob did not give up; 2) is there some supernatural reason why the stranger is afraid of sunlight or does the stranger leave because one can not look fully into the righteousness of God and live; and 3) instead of prevail, should the Greek variation of 'proven able' more aptly apply? Using these options, the struggle is a testing of Jacob's commitment to not give up but rather to seek a blessing even during difficulties, a trait that the people called 'Israel' will need. One final note: the name change reflects a character change from 'Jacob', the deceiver and usurper, to 'Israel', the one who struggles to seek God's blessing.

Genesis 32:26 Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."

Rather than making deals, Jacob has begun to seek blessings even during struggles.

When did you find unexpected blessings in the midst of a struggle?

Do you find God even in the difficult times?

We are taught to obey but is it okay to struggle with God?

When have you struggled with God over a decision you feel God is asking you to make?

## **Commentary on Matthew 14:13-21** (*Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#)*)

The story of the feeding of the five thousand occurs in every gospel (Mark 6:32-44, Luke 9:10-17, John 6:1-15) with only minor variations. In both Matthew and Mark, Jesus is filled with compassion for the people. This feeling of compassion for others is made more poignant in Matthew due to Matthew's inclusion of Jesus' desire to go to a 'deserted place' in response to the news of John's death. Rather than focusing on his own grief, Jesus places the pain of the people before his own and later asks his disciples to do the same and 'give them something to eat'. Matthew leaves out the discussion of money in Mark or shopping in Luke. Rather Matthew after blessing the food, asks the disciples to personally distribute the food. The twelve baskets being symbolic of the twelve tribes. The emphasis on compassion as a personal act reflects Matthew's larger theme of doing God's will for "the least of these".

Matthew 14:14 Jesus saw a great crowd and he had compassion

The word 'compassion' in the gospels means a gut wrenching pain that demands a response.

Compassion often happens when we least expect it. Has this happened to you?  
When has God called you to act out of compassion?  
Did you find that when you were led by God to love everything thing seemed to work out?  
Have you ever been part of a planned "act of compassion" that seems to fall short and feels inauthentic?

### **Commentary on Romans 9:1-5** (Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#))

After laying out a detailed plan of salvation from the human condition, the role of law and faith, and the role of Jesus and the Holy Spirit, Paul turns to the "children" of God. While some "Jews" accept Jesus as the Messiah, others like Paul had once been continue to rely on the covenant relationship established through Israel. These "Israelites" have been blessed with the rich relationship with God detailed in the Old Testament but refuse to accept Jesus as the promised Messiah. They choose to follow tradition and the law rather than the Way and the Spirit. This is especially painful to Paul since at one time he was one of them and understands how they view Jesus. From his reformed perspective, Jesus is the logical conclusion of all the promises given to Israel and yet like him they are too blind to see it. Paul will not limit the following chapters to the Israelites but will critique the entire community for not living up to the glory God has given in Christ through the Spirit.

Romans 9:2 Paul says, "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart."

Have you ever seen something that makes you cringe in pain?

What if the person suffering is someone you know or even love?

How do you feel when you see someone making a costly mistake? What do you do?

What if all of your logic and experience falls on deaf ears, how do you feel?

### **Sermon "Blessed Struggle"** ([Sermon Video](#))

The story of Jacob wrestling with the stranger is not just the story of the patriarch but the story of all those who are grafted onto the tree of Israel (Romans 11). While the name Israel today refers to a nations and its inhabitants, Israel in the Bible is rooted in a promise. This promise is not about land or inheritance but rather it is about a relationship with God. There is the promise that as long as we live in the world, it will be a struggle to follow God and culture. In the midst of the struggle, however, there is also the promise that the faithful will find a blessing. This is not the "prosperity gospel" the believes that following Jesus will make life easy. The cross has never been nor will ever be easy. The cross is the choice to follow God above all else. The cross is the faith statement that says it is better to struggle with God even to the death than to submit to popular culture and die for an eternity. Faith is not avoiding the struggle but staying faithful even in the midst of the struggle.

At this point, it is important to define "the struggle". One could say that all of life is a struggle in one way or another. We struggle with daily decisions and the consequences of those decisions. At times we struggle with our health and our relationships. Jacob in one sense could be viewed as struggling with his conscience which manifested as a stranger. Jesus struggled with the news of the loss of his cousin John and the people struggled with their physical suffering as the chased after Jesus. Paul even struggled with his love for those he grew up with not accepting Jesus and finding the peace that Paul had found. Struggling in life is nothing new or sacred. The question is, if in the middle of the struggle, do we seek God's blessing.

When we seek God in the midst of our struggles, we transform the nature of the struggle. Struggling with things of this world and priorities set by others become pointless. Our relationships given to us by God and the gifts of friends and family become struggles worth fighting for because of our faith in God. When we strive toward the direction God is calling, we find renewed strength for the struggle and unexpected blessings. Those who sought Jesus not only found physical healing but were

fed by the love of God. The disciples not only experienced the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes but more importantly the joy of showing compassion to others. It is often because of our own struggles that we become more sensitive to the struggles of others. By seeking a blessing in our own struggles, we can be a blessing to others. One way to transform the nature of the struggle is to pray for others who are also struggling. By being aware of that struggle like Paul, we find that our compassion brings us closer to the heart of Christ.

Struggles in life are all around us especially today. We can become isolated and depressed in our struggles or we can ask God for a blessing. Our struggles begin to lose their power when faced with the love of God and the suffering of others. By acting with compassion and being there for others, our struggles are lightened and we find that Christ is carrying the load. It all begins with the first step: seeking a blessing in the midst of our struggles. Will you find a blessing today?