

“Struggle for our Better Angels”

Much in the same way that the scriptures last week seemed to be focused on gratitude, this week the theme seems to be struggle. There is Jacob struggling with the angel or God and the widow struggling with the judge. In between we have the reading from Second Timothy that speaks of impending struggle between the congregation and the Roman society. Even the psalm hints at struggle as the psalmist asks “from where is my help to come?” Of these I find the story from Genesis the most intriguing.

First of all, we need context for the scene we just heard. Jacob was born as the twin brother of Esau. His name, Jacob, means “heel grabber” because he was holding on to Esau’s heel when they were born. Heel grabber also refers to Jacob’s personality in that he was a trickster, much as a modern saying “pulling your leg” refers to a jokester or trickster. Jacob’s first instance of trickery is taking Esau’s birth right for a bowl of red stew; a birthright that Esau seems to give up rather callously. Later, Jacob, under his mother’s tutelage, will trick his father Isaac into giving him the paternal blessing, due the first born son. He does so by putting on sheepskins to confuse his blind father into thinking he is the hairy Esau instead of the smooth skinned Jacob. Esau is not so callous about this loss and vows to kill his brother.

Jacob flees to the home of his mother’s brother Laban. When he reaches the land of his mother’s family he quickly falls in love with Laban’s younger daughter Rachel and asks for her hand. Laban says Jacob can marry her if he works for seven years. At the end of the time there is a wedding. But Jacob the trickster is tricked by Laban into marrying Leah the older daughter, as she must be married first. Jacob is told he can marry Rachel, after working another seven years.

Once Jacob and Rachel are married Jacob and have had a son, Jacob devises a scheme to get much livestock from Laban. It is a strange scheme involving wooden rods and watering holes, but the result is that Jacob has many spotted and striped goats and black lambs.

At this point he decides to “git while the gitting is good,” before Laban can take retribution on him or perform a trick of his own. His destination is close to where his brother still resides. At the time of today’s reading Jacob is approaching his homeland and has gotten word that his brother is on his way to meet him. Jacob sends his wives, children and livestock ahead, but in a direction that should keep them from meeting Esau.

Jacob stays behind to rest and prepare to meet his brother; a meeting that he thinks could become violent. As he sleeps he encounters a man or perhaps an angel or God, with whom he wrestles throughout the night. The man/angel/God does not prevail over Jacob. As dawn nears the divine being tells Jacob to release him, but Jacob refuses unless he receives a blessing. The blessing he receives is two-fold. First, he receives a new name, Israel, which means “struggles with God.” The second blessing is a dislocated hip. Not an apparent blessing but another reminder that he struggled with God and was not overcome.

Jacob’s new name, Israel, becomes the name of the people that are descended from him and his twelve sons. The rest of the Hebrew Bible is a record of the struggles that the people of Israel have with God. But it is not just the people of the Old

Testament who struggle with God. As is apparent through the rest of today's readings the struggle with God continues. Indeed, it continues up to this day.

We struggle as the writer of the letter to Timothy warned we would when he wrote, "For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths." That is how we find ourselves not only in a secularized world, but one where parents are more interested in their children playing soccer than they are in their children getting a solid foundation in their faith. It is a world where we fill our minds with violence that masquerades as entertainment. It is a world where language that used to get your mouth washed out with soap, is heard casually in the media, from politicians and seen on t-shirts even on the streets of civil Middleburg. The overwhelming availability and mainstreaming of pornography is yet another symptom of a world without a compass. A world that has stopped struggling with God and harkens to easy answers and human myths about the importance of power and the goodness of greed.

We are a world and a people in struggle with ourselves and with God. What are we to do? Like Jacob, like the psalmist, like the writer to Timothy, like the persistent widow we are called to continue the struggle. We are called to keep struggling with God as if the struggle is for our very souls, because it is.

Struggle with God in prayer. Struggle with God in scripture. Struggle with God in dreams. But most of all struggle. For in struggle there is blessing and redemption, and ironically there is peace.

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Jacob Wrestles with the Angel by Eugène Delacroix

