

**“To Meet the Test”**

**New London UMC**

**Sun., Aug. 2, 2020**

**Genesis 32:22-31 *The Message*; Psalm 17:1-7, 15 *NRSV***

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With many of the professional sports leagues restarting this past month we've been given a glimpse of how they are preparing and practicing in a mix of new and old ways. For example, all of the NBA teams are working “in the bubble” of a highly structured environment in Orlando. The intent – and their hope – is that everyone who enters the “bubble” is healthy, and that everyone who stays in the “bubble” will stay healthy until the end of the season. They are banking on the “bubble” to work as Florida records an incredible number of new COVID-19 cases each day. The “bubble” had better deliver or they will have the same problems that Major League Baseball has had since so many members of the Florida Marlins tested positively.

In our reading from Genesis, Jacob goes about creating his own “bubble” of space apart from others in preparation for his meeting his brother Esau after all these years. You may remember that when Jacob left, Esau was so angry with him – he could have killed Jacob. But when Jacob finally headed home from Haran he received a report that Esau was coming WITH four hundred men to meet him. Well, that sounded ominous. Perhaps Esau was still a tad upset with Jacob? Why else would Esau bring an army of men with him? So Jacob split up his household and flocks into two distinct groups and sent them across the Jabbok – hoping that if Esau arrived before dawn at least *some* of Jacob's family would be able to escape from harm. And with his family taken care of, Jacob was left in his “bubble” on his side of the Jabbok, by himself, to get ready to face his brother Esau.

But Jacob discovered he wasn't alone. And his struggle with an “unknown man” became a different type of preparation for meeting Esau than what Jacob probably had in mind. Jacob found himself struggling with God in human form. And because God met Jacob at the same level of physical ability as Jacob, God knew that the only real danger to Jacob would come at dawn. Why then? Because only someone without sin can live through the experience of seeing the face of God in all of God's glory. And as we know, Jacob was not without sin and he would not survive actually seeing the face of God in the light of day. (But, yes, he did go on to boast that he *did* see God's face. And such a lie is a sin. Although Jacob might call it just an “exaggeration.”) Yes, it was for Jacob's own good that God wanted to end their struggle before the light of day. But the struggle couldn't end until Jacob was also willing to stop and let go. But Jacob was not willing to let go. It would seem that Jacob had reached the conclusion that it wasn't some “unknown man” that he was struggling with, it was God. And Jacob wanted God's blessing.

To me, this is just another one of those times when I think Jacob took things too far. He had already pressed his luck and powers of deception to get his own father's blessing;

and somehow even finagled a blessing from his Uncle Laban; why would he continue to push for a blessing from God? Wasn't it enough that Jacob knew God had come to him that night? That God had tested Jacob's perseverance and helped Jacob to rebuild his confidence going into his meeting with his brother Esau? Is there a BIGGER confidence builder than holding his own against God? After this night of struggle Jacob should be pumped to face his brother! Wasn't that enough? Did Jacob REALLY have to press God into giving him a blessing on top of that? . . . But we're talking about Jacob, aren't we? When has "enough" EVER been enough for him? . . . So Jacob kept pressing to get what he wanted – right up to the very last second before daylight. And just as Jacob didn't give up, God didn't give up on Jacob. God made a commitment to him by blessing him. God committed to continue to struggle with Jacob as God would continue to fulfill God's promises to Jacob. But God also left Jacob with a reminder that he, too, would need to continue to struggle, to work, to stay fully engaged in the process with God to fulfill those promises. Jacob's limp was a physical reminder that Jacob had met God's test this night – but God was clearly not done with him yet, because their relationship would continue to hold them together.

God showed up to help Jacob prepare for the next stage of his life's journey – AND God committed to continue with Jacob on that journey. . . . Do feel wildly jealous of Jacob? I know I definitely feel jealous of Jacob because he seems to get such clear and vivid experiences of God's presence and God's support for him. I think of Jacob's experience and it makes me want to be able to grab hold of God in the same way. And to *hold on* until God will give a blessing. . . . Perhaps it's just the rising tension of trying to live through the COVID-19 pandemic; to protest injustice, inequities, and the need for basic human rights; and trying to ignore more political advertising than anyone should be exposed to on a daily basis – but my gosh, doesn't it feel like we've been struggling for months on end without any glimpse of daylight? If all this is preparing us for the next stage in our life journey with God – it shouldn't feel like God has slipped out of our grip without first giving us a blessing. . . . I know there are some days when I think it would be blessing to simply *feel* God's grip on me, to know that God is here not just to wrestle me – but to help me wrestle with everything that is happening. It may sound odd, but I think it would be comforting to feel God's grip.

So, yes, I'm jealous that Jacob was able to experience the comfort of being engaged in such a gripping struggle with God. I think that's why I was drawn to Psalm 17 this week:

*Hear a just cause, O Lord; attend to my cry; give ear to my prayer . . . From you let my vindication come . . . If you try my heart, if you visit me by night, if you test me . . . My steps have held fast to your paths; my feet have not slipped. I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God; incline your ear to me, hear my words. Wondrously show your steadfast love, O savior of those*

*who seek refuge from their adversaries . . . As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness.* (From Psalm 17:1-7, 15 *NRSV*)

I want to wake up and be satisfied. I want to see the kind of morning that Jacob had when he said, “I saw God face-to-face and lived to tell the story!” I want to feel the warmth of the sun as it comes up and to know why I’m limping along on the way forward. I want that kind of CERTAINTY. I want to feel that sure and that secure – instead of feeling like I’m just limping along because I’m not sure I can take whatever is going to happen next. The uncertainty of this on-going struggle is exhausting. This night just seems to go on and on and on. That’s why I’m jealous of Jacob.

That’s why I keep praying for daylight and God’s blessing.

Amen.