

Luke 18:1-8
Genesis 32:22-31
October 19, 2025

The Adversary

One of the interesting cycle of stories in the Book of Genesis is centered around Jacob; the second son of Isaac, the grandson of Abraham, the twin of Esau. The highpoint of the Jacob stories is found in the text we have read today.

It is Peniel. The Face of God. At the ford of the Jabbok, Jacob is on the threshold of life-changing events. Earlier he had stolen his brother's birthright and cheated him out of his inheritance. To escape Esau's wrath he had to leave and while he was away, he married and had children, and made a fortune; had done pretty well for himself. The time for his return was upon him and this meant an encounter with this older brother whom he had cheated.

On the night before they were to meet, after he had sent his entire family and household to the other side of the river, he remained behind to prepare himself for the day ahead. Perhaps he was anxious because he didn't know how things were going to turn out. Or he was feeling guilty and was not sure if his brother would forgive him or if Esau was still angry enough to kill him. The text does not say.

Little did he know that his signature life-changing event would not wait for the next day's dawning. During the night a man appeared and the two of them wrestled each other until dawn. When it became clear

to this mysterious and nameless opponent that victory over Jacob would not come, he merely touched the hollow of Jacob's thigh, crippling him.

The man got up to leave but Jacob clung to him, hoping for a blessing. Upon hearing that his name was Jacob, the man did in fact give him a blessing, and a new name as well, he called him Israel, for he had struggled with God and with men, and had prevailed. That is an interesting idea, God and human beings contending with each other. Jacob named the place, "Peniel," for he said, "I have seen God face-to-face, and yet my life has been preserved."

Some may be uncomfortable with the notion of God as an adversary rather than a friend, yet in the same way that teachers and coaches and even parents can at times seem like adversaries, the concept of God in that kind of role should not be dismissed easily.

The final scene would work as the ending of a Hollywood movie, showing Israel with the sunrise to his back as he made the final phase of his homeward journey, limping because of his thigh. The wrestling match in the night does not seem related to the trajectory of Jacob's life. It has to do with more universal themes.

Let me address those themes. The theologian Barth speaks of the human predicament in terms of a cul-de-sac, life as lived on a street with no outlet. When one reads the bible it is healthy to understand that the specific texts and the history described and all the

particulars are not there for their own sake, but to speak of this situation in which we all live. Jacob was not trapped by the river, which was only a small obstacle, nor was the brother his adversary, he was at the end of a different kind of road. This aspect of the human condition may be called, mortality. There is no where to go.

Other readings for the day are worthy of attention and help us in our reflections. One of them is the alternate reading from the Psalms, the 121st;

“I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.
2 My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth . . .” and then it ends,
7 *“The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil: he shall preserve thy soul. 8 The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore.”*

And there is the first Old Testament reading from Jeremiah, in which God makes the following promise,

*“I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.
I will be their God,
and they will be my people. . .
For I will forgive their wickedness
and remember their sins no more.”*

The epistle reading is from 2nd Timothy. In it Paul exhorts Timothy to a higher life and then he says, “All

Scripture is inspired, and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

And then we come to this simple parable found only in the Gospel of Luke, in which God is presented as an irreverent and unjust judge who has no idea of helping the poor widow in her contention with an opponent that treats her unfairly, but who comes at last to her aid because she pesters him to death.

What are we to make of this presentation of God? Some have focused on the woman and made it a parable about prayer and concluded that it means that we should remain vigilant in our prayers, never giving up when the answers are a long time coming or not what we envisioned.

In our contention with God, we should last long into the proverbial night and like Jacob with the adversary, hold on with the fierceness of desperation, *“I will not let you go unless you bless me.”* Never stop asking, even if we find ourselves ashamed at the selfishness of our requests; keep on until we can pray better prayers and be ready to hear better answers.

The idea is of a God who contends with, but does not destroy the human adversary, but rather preserves them, builds them up and teaches them. We are led beyond the surface of life into the depths, and in that experience to consider the meaning of our lives with a

sense of respect for the circumstance, and for the one who meets us there.

These texts speak like the rest of scripture about God, and about us. About how people are attached . . . can I say even addicted . . . to what makes them feel good; a pleasing experience, a beautiful sight or sound, taste or smell, an accomplishment, anxiety relieved. None of these experiences last. They do not give us exit from the lane we are in. If we make them our goal and chase after them, we will not only end up endlessly disappointed, but by doing harm.

Time and again, both in our personal lives and as a part of the world's life, we are confronted with the inability to escape the tendencies of our nature that lead to behavior that only makes things worse.

In our longing for peace and wholeness, justice and beauty and mere sustenance, for eternity, let us remember all these sacred words about the God we serve, The blessed adversary, who is neither unjust nor unmerciful, but who contends with us not to destroy but to make us truly human, and who has promised at last to put the divine law in our minds, to etch it like on a stone into our hearts, to be our help and to care for us along the way, and to deliver from the end which sits before us.

The cul-de-sac. It is a dead end. We can enjoy ourselves along the way or be miserable. We can acknowledge or ignore or deny. We can be thoughtful or thoughtless. We can run away or face reality. The

cul-de-sac is the same regardless. There is no way out unless it is under the umbrella of God's grace and power.

Then to be thoughtful and to acknowledge and to face reality, matters. The encounter between Jacob and the adversary, and the divine help, the instruction chiseled on the heart, the inspired Word all speak to it, at church it is our reason for being. It is who met Jacob at the ford, what the wrestling match is about.

The message is that as the years and decades go by we are not merely faced with the stages of life or the challenges common to earthly life, but are being led to face the reality of the cul-de-sac, led, sometimes in ways that seem adversarial, by the Lord of the cul-de-sac, to face the reality also of the eternal gift, which overcomes the predicament, and demands of us our very lives.

For those long on the journey, take heart; for those at the threshold of decision, have faith; and for those returning after long absence, persevere, keep the image of Jacob limping home in your mind's eye as you make your way home, as we all face the blessed adversary.

[Back](#)

[Home](#)