

Genesis 32:22-31 Matches and Meals
Matthew 14:12-21
August 2, 2026

The Feeding of the Multitude and Peniel, two well-known bible stories, have been read in our presence this morning. Both are compelling because of their staying power in the imagination of the faithful, and others as well; and because of their centrality as important parts of the Sacred Story.

The telling in the Book of Genesis about the encounter between Jacob and the angel at the Ford of the Jabbok presents *struggle* as an important feature of the divine/human relationship. One might not expect such a thing. There is an interesting kind of contention that each person has with God.

In the case of Jacob, when he is returning home after years in the north, this mysterious person leaps out of the night darkness and attacks, and Jacob defends himself mightily without either prevailing or succumbing. Afterwards, he named that place, “The Face of God.”

Jacob’s life story is mixed. He was the younger of two brothers, but he desired to be the heir. He succeeded in taking his brother’s birthright by, of all things, feeding him when he had just returned from an unsuccessful hunt, and thus was hungry.

Later, he dressed up as his brother and entered the tent of their blind and aging father who was fooled by

his disguise. In this way he also stole Esau’s blessing, which was apparently more important to Esau than the birthright was, so Jacob had to flee his wrath.

The text read today refers to the time, decades later, when it was necessary for Jacob to return home, reconcile with Esau if he could, or fight a war with him, and *take his place as Isaac’s heir*. The midnight encounter with the angel of God reveals a different, and deeper meeting, and not between Jacob and his brother, but between the human being that Jacob was becoming, and the living God.

At the moment when the angel’s strength appears to give way, this messenger from God merely touches the hollow of Jacob’s thigh, and cripples him. Jacob is crippled but not killed. He, like Job, must admit that he was destined to suffer defeat in his contention with God, no matter how well it appeared to be going at the time.

He wrestled, nonetheless, with great energy. I have always liked the way Frederick Buechner interprets this passage by calling it a “Magnificent Defeat” of the human soul at the hands of God.

When all hope was lost, we find Jacob clinging to the grappler in the dark as if his life depended on a blessing, also in the dark. This was his coming of age moment, when all the simpler assumptions of youth confront a much more difficult reality. Jacob becomes, Israel,” in a fierce struggle with God without being

destroyed in the process. He left wounded but blessed.

The other story is, of course, the feeding miracle out in the country where Jesus had been preaching and teaching the people, and healing all their diseases. When the end of the day drew near and dinner time was upon them, Jesus multiplied the loaves and fishes, which fed a multitude in what appears to be the (one of the) central events of his earthly career.

It happened in the middle of the journey of Jesus to Cross and Resurrection, and at a turning point. Along with Peter's Confession that Jesus was Christ; and the scene at the lake on the water when he came to them walking on the sea; and on the mountain of Transfiguration where he was changed before them, the Lord gave the disciples the spiritual substance that sustained them through the trials that lie ahead.

There were left over twelve basketfuls, representing Israel itself, and its twelve tribes. One gets the impression that the Feeding of the 5,000 was as important as a lesson for the disciples as it was as a meal for the hungry.

In these two stories God is presented as engaging with people in different ways; in the one case, as an adversary, and in the other as a benefactor. It was a wrestling match and a miraculous meal. In both cases it is human well-being, thriving, maturity, that is sought. It is God's purpose for each of us that we grow up to the fullness of faith.

In the story about Jacob at the ford of the river, It is a literal wrestling match. When, however, it is gifted to the later history of Israel through its time in Egypt, the establishment of the monarchy, the division between north and south, and the decline and fall of the civilization altogether, the idea of a contending with God takes on added meaning, because it is refined by centuries of pain and suffering. It is in this condition that the story is passed along to us.

The story is not, of course, just about Israel. It is also the human story. It stands for the growing up to maturity of individuals and societies.

Whatever is happening in the personal life of an individual or the larger life of a nation, or the world, there stands at its foundation, an encounter with God. It is ignored by some, but ignoring it is nothing more than a coward's way of not dealing with it. In the end, it must be faced . . . when it is faced with integrity, it becomes a reckoning, a blessed reckoning.

Alone, Jacob faces the representative of, at least, the Maker of Heaven and Earth. At issue is the nature of humanity. What kind of people shall we be?

The contentious nature of the divine encounter is only one way of speaking about it. There are others; friend, guide, mentor even, savior. But this one, opponent, is presented here as essential for our maturing as human beings under God.

It is a crucible, a refining as if by fire, a heart and mind shaping revolution of human life that presses each of us to leave behind our former selves, characterized by selfishness, greed, anxiety and fear, and very often anger, restlessness, the paralyzing tendency to compare ourselves to other people.

The result is a life centered in God's grace, producing humility and gratitude, concern for others, willingness to reconcile and forgive, and sacrifice, to be obedient to the good even when it costs; all of which creates a confidence that replaces anxiety and leads to inner peace, joy and hopefulness.

It is a reckoning of the human soul with God. Like Jacob, we may walk away with a limp, but we will also walk away transformed.

It sometimes seems like a relationship with God is very hard, always accompanied by difficulty and stressful situations. But the wrestling match happens under the merciful watch of the gracious God. It is not intended to destroy, but to make, that is, it is constructive, not destructive. It prepares us for whatever is on the other side of the river.

One might think of it like practice; football practice perhaps, suffering the heat of late summer, repeating the tasks and plays that are meant to lead to success. Or perhaps piano practice, redundantly teaching the eyes to read the notes and the fingers to strike the keys that lead to *the music that restores the soul*.

When it becomes clear that all the work and discomfort threatens exhaustion and hunger; the need to be replenished by rest and nourishment. And here we find God, not engaging us with struggle, but nurturing us with kindness; the restoring of the body that comes with a good meal, a miraculous meal that does more than feed the body, but also the soul.

It is a wrestling match and a sacred meal, that is what we believe these last two-thousand years: The Lord's discipline, that is the wrestling match; and the Lord's gracious care, that is the meal. May we be humbled and thankful before it.

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