



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE TENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 13A, AUGUST 2, 2026
GENESIS 32, 22-31; PSALM 17:1-7-16; ROMANS 9:1-5; MATTHEW 14:13-21

ON SABBATICAL ODYSSEYS AND DARK NIGHTS



Good morning. It is good to be back with you!

It's been four months since I last worshipped with you here in this place. The sabbatical was a delightful blessing, but, oh, how I've missed being here!

When I began my sabbatical on April 6th, the Orion II space capsule was five days into its journey around the moon. Five days later it would splash safely down to earth. That

journey served as metaphor for my travels—the separation by long distances, but never without gravity's tethered pull, a steadfast connection to home. There were periods of black-out in communication, and moments when checking in made sense. There were liminal zones on the journey, when what was... transitioned to something new, and not entirely without risk. Leaving orbital familiarity, returning to it when the hot plasma of this wonderful life of a parish priest

on reentry can be a bit overwhelming, and still so good.

The journey was a bit of an odyssey, if I can be so bold as to call it that, and this cathedral is my home, newfound again, so it seems fitting today, my first day back, that the reading from Genesis has us deep in the throes of Jacob's odyssey, every bit as rich as a Homeric epic, and that is where I would like to invite us to journey together. To ancient times, with Jacob the wrestler. His saga is well worth the read full-on. Tricks, lies and holy scrapes could be the title for his biographical tome. Stolen blessings, duplicitous kinsmen, sly animal husbandry, stone pillows, angels on ladders, dreams and more dreams, and this scene where Jacob has a nocturnal knock-down, drag-out.

Jacob may be our spiritual ancestor, a patriarchal figure, but make no mistake, he is a complicated man whose moral impulses are questionable, even tragic at times. Even here, as he prepares to meet his brother Esau, from whom he stole the firstborn's birthright decades earlier, he anticipates a brother's enmity that would seek bloody revenge. So what does he do? He puts a river and his family between him and his brother—his children, his wives, leaving them exposed as first line. He will sleep alone that night, or he will not sleep at all, tormented by what must have surely been a dark night for his soul.

The late psychiatrist Gerald May helped me understand the notion of "the dark night of the soul," described by Medieval mystics John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila. The

dark night of the soul is not a euphemism for simply experiencing bad things; it is the crucible of the human condition during which one ultimately comes to understand keenly three things: 1) I am not as in control of my life as I think I am, 2) that in the dark night, we are asleep to the truth of who we truly are and what we were created for, and 3) we stifle the power of love in our lives when we become attached to things other than God who is the source of blessing.

If you identify with those three things at all, then surely we can agree that the story of Jacob's night of wrestling has lasting revelatory power precisely because it gathers us into its orbit of truth. We wrestle with control, with who we truly are, with who we are created to be, and we wrestle with God, who comes to us in love, rather than remaining far away in some celestial disinterest. And yet God remains a mystery still.

If physical combat is too rough a metaphor, choose a different one that works for you, but the point is, this is our story, friends.

Regardless of the motive that got him there, Jacob is alone, haunted even by all that has gone before, and it is there, in the dark night, beneath the same stars that still hold vigil for us today, that Jacob wrestles with all that brings him up short.

He is injured in the encounter, a limp to remind him of the night. He is blessed, but we do not get the words of blessing. They are his alone. He is told his name henceforth will be,

not Jacob, but Israel, because he has struggled with God. There is power in naming another. He asks for the name of his counterpart, but it remains an ineffable mystery.

Bible scholars debate whether this “man” who spars with Jacob is actually God or a human or some alter ego imprisoned deep inside Jacob’s weary spirit who desperately seeks release.

What we do know is that the next morning he arises and sees his estranged brother Esau, with four hundred men, coming toward him. He rushes to his family, and goes in front of them this time, bowing to Esau seven times. He expects bloodshed, slaughter even, but Esau hugs him instead, and they share tears of reconciliation together. I wonder if this turn of events would have been possible only a day before, before Jacob was changed by his dark-nighted conversion. Could bellicose Jacob even allowed it?

Friends, our hearts are heavy with violence and war these days. That weight went with me across three continents, and here at home, too. Gang violence and gun violence may seem so distant, until it’s not, until it erupts in a familiar place too near to allow for some celestial-scale disinterest.

We seem to be unable to extricate ourselves from the orbital weight of war in Iran, and so many other places on this fragile earth, our island home.

There’s been a lot of talk about just war theory in recent months. Pope Leo wrote an encyclical this spring saying we need to

rethink our hold on that theory that is so often distorted to justify the violence. Giving space for self-defense in its truest sense, he said the theory is now outdated. And no one can use Jesus, the King of Peace, to justify war.

“He did that to me, so I can do this to him.” I suspect it may require a veritable dark night for all humanity to awaken to a new way of seeing the world, a new way of seeing each other. What Leo called a peace that is “unarmed and disarming.”

It is not lost on me that Jacob is the progenitor of Israel, and Esau is the progenitor of the Edomites, an ancient clan of what we would call Palestinians today. The genealogy of Genesis and the scriptural books that follow gives ample reason for these people to mistrust each other and perpetuate the killing as justifiable. Just war theory run amok. I agree with Pope Leo, we need a new paradigm.

Nevertheless, I remain hopeful humanity can come to its senses precisely because Jacob/Israel is changed by his dark night struggle, and Esau chooses mercy and peace over continued violence.

Remember, this is our story, right?! And God is the catalyst for conversion, right?! Yes, it is odyssean in its unfolding, but here we are. Home. With a limp of wounded reality, to be sure. So what are we to do?

Well, one more brief sabbatical illustration to leave with you as you contemplate that question this week...

This Thursday, the 6th of August, is the anniversary of the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Kathy and I visited the bomb site and surrounding museums and monuments in May. The people of Hiroshima could have become embittered by the experience, unfolding to a perpetual impulse to violence and vengeful tit-for-tat. Generational trauma has a way of doing that.

But they chose to orient to peace instead. Not some pollyannish peace, mind you. The signs of devastation and stories of horror are firmly and forever fixed to that patch of land by the river. But at its center is a cenotaph for peace, an arched monument that holds all the people of this world in its hopeful embrace for another way than war. The people of Hiroshima gather there every year, on August 6th, inviting American presidents to join them as our



representatives, to remember the past, to hold vigil in the present, and to pray for a peaceful future. Japan and the U.S. bitter enemies; today, we are siblings bound together for good.

Conversion comes in myriad ways, but can we trust God to be in it? Can we come through the dark night experience with a truer sense of who we are and who we were created to be? Can we embrace the brother who has done us wrong, and consider what mercy and justice and peace look like?

Let's work for that world vision, shall we? Jesus would have it no other way.

Genesis 32:22-31 *[The same night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.]*