



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
The Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, *Rector*

Recognizing the Jabbok When We Reach It

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, August 3, 2014
The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52*

Everyone loves the story of Jesus' feeding the multitude. What's not to love; it is a story of compassion and hospitality, of abundance over scarcity, of joyous togetherness—a monumental party! When embraced as an adult and freed from worrying about if or how it happened—it is way too true to be bound by prosaic literalism—it becomes for us a flagship story of Eucharistic blessing, a testimony to the fact that in a world of mutuality and shared resources there is not only sufficiency but plenitude for all of God's children. On that day, all who came were welcomed; no one had to qualify; each was invited to receive at this table of abundance without question of creed or heritage or worthiness. It was a brilliant and earthy display of the wideness of God's mercy—and none of the church's numerous efforts to narrow God's invitation will ever ultimately succeed. This is a human story, not a tribal one.

And, yet, it is the Hebrew story from Genesis today that caught my heart and mind for the sermon. In fact, this story about Jacob's wrestling with the strange figure who turns out to be God makes me cry or at least tear up—for reasons that are probably too deep for me to truly understand and undoubtedly too personal to share from the pulpit. I should quickly note that I am way too uptight to actually weep while preaching! The Southern Baptist church of my youth was a much less flamboyant, more reserved denomination than the one into which it has morphed in the church's migration to the right—a movement which over the years has caused my mother great consternation. Once when speaking of the increased emotionalism of the preaching in her church, she told me that should her minister ever resort to "weeping and carrying on in the pulpit," as she put it, she would be found heading full speed to the nearest exit. And I knew she meant it. As with many of her positions, I am shaped by this one and shall comport myself accordingly—which is to say there shall be no weeping and carrying on during my sermon this morning.

The chronicle of Jacob is one of several pre-historical accounts of the patriarchs of our tradition, which provide not only the beginning narrative of what we call the "history of salvation" but also our principal archetypes. Told first and for hundreds of years around campfires, these intricately spun tales set forth and lay claim to great universal truths, as understood by our forebears, about God and humankind. None of the patriarchal sagas is about one person. Jacob, who in this story is renamed Israel, is every man, every person, every soul on the journey to God. It is his shared humanity with us that touches us so deeply.

A scoundrel from an early age, Jacob is known as the trickster, a trait he honed at the feet of his doting mother (so many problems from the beginning). You know the details: he steals the birthright due his brother Esau and as very well he should have had to do, has to flee to a foreign land, where he manages to trick Laban, his also less than upright father-in-law. And now as he begins to reckon with the consequences of his behavior, he has begun the long trip home. The story drips with narrative overload: the man who leaves his home for complicated reasons and in the wake of much pain and suffering and potential death, in search of fortune, which largely he achieves, now finds himself being tugged or dragged homeward once again to the place where he must at last face the truth of himself. And it is on this trip home that he meets God.

But the God of Jacob who comes to him in the dark of the night is not gentle and meek, not some fairy tale creature who is all forgiveness and light. Jacob is headed home to face the music with his older and once stronger, more rugged brother, Esau. He is vulnerable, more vulnerable than he has admitted being in a long, long time, perhaps forever—a truth about him that makes him particularly open to God. And, yet, the God who confronts this returning

penitent is not present to coddle him but to wrestle him into deeper and deeper truth about himself, about the way he has lived his life and the choices he has made—not to punish him but to prepare him for the rest of his life.

The penetrating truth in this story is that such moments occur, must occur, in each of our lives. They are in fact the moments in which we are most distinctly human and the times which most often occasion the keen presence of God. Most of us have not stolen our sibling's birthright or tricked our father-in-law with a variety of shenanigans as Jacob did. A few of us have done worse, most of us have done less, and I shan't share where I am on the continuum! I dare say, though, that every last one of us has made some deal with the devil along the course of our lives, and probably more than one. No amount of success or running or denying protects us from the moment of truth, a moment such as the one Jacob experienced at the ford, the crossing of the River Jabbok.

It was a long night and one that did not leave Jacob as it found him. The "come to Jesus" moments, as we sometimes call them, the occasional convergence of circumstances that demand truthfulness from us about who we are, who we have been, and who we might become never leave us the same. And though their long term result is almost invariably joyful, the process is not. In our rush to make the invitation to a deeply spiritual life inviting, if we have claimed that an encounter with God is inevitably a sappy, Hallmark moment, we have diminished the power of what it means to be a human being in search of an authentic life, to be on the path to God who resides at the crossing of the truth about ourselves. It is not about determining whether we are bad or good; always we are both—bad and good. It is a reckoning that demands of us the assessment of how truly we are living **our** lives, not ones assigned us by others but the lives we have been created to live.

Anyone who comes to such a moment and leaves it without an obvious limp probably has another night or several nights of wrestling yet to come. Richard Rohr in his wonderful book *Falling Upward* and in a variety of other places makes the point that wrestling with God is essential, absolutely inevitable for one who seeks to know the truth of him or herself. Rohr writes, "The blessing usually comes in a wounding of some sort and for most of us it is an entire life of limping along to finally see the true and real blessing in life."⁽¹⁾

It seems that we are created in such a way that for a large part of our lives, usually the first portion of it, but individual in every case, we "lay waste our powers." For complex reasons that are part of being human, we order our lives along paths given to us by others, longing for the approval of everyone and everything outside ourselves, "getting and spending," (apparently I am intent upon borrowing heavily from Wordsworth this morning), all in search of something that cannot be bought. And then, as Rohr writes so well, as did Jung and others before, we face a moment: a moment that exists before God—terrifying in some ways, wounding in fact, but infinitely clarifying—from which we may limp away but with a knowing of ourselves, ironically which comes only from knowing God (or whatever we call God). Only then are we finally free and honest enough to live the lives that are ours.

The path is not easy; for sure, I am at the beginning of it. But by the grace of God, I have lived long enough to recognize the Jabbok when I see it and more importantly long enough to know that after a night of wrestling with God, morning comes; and that in the morning God and truth lie side by side. And the promise is good.

In the name of God: *Amen*.

(1) From Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation, July 30, 2011, Center for Actions and Contemplation.

© 2014 **St. Bartholomew's Church in The City of New York.**

For information about St. Bart's and its life of faith and mission
write us at central@stbarts.org, call 212-378-0222, or visit stbarts.org
325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022