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Exodus 13:17-22
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Wrestling with God Finale

This morning I will be concluding our series on Wrestling with God. It has been based on a book by Ronald Rolheiser, Wrestling with God, which has been incredibly helpful in my spiritual journey...and most particularly as I have wrestled with God over this past season of COVID. Through discussions with my spiritual director, we discerned that what I had been experiencing was something known as “The Dark Night of the Soul.” I wasn’t losing my faith in Christ, but my faith was moving beyond the honeymoon phase and into a more mature phase of faith beyond feeling and emotion...and into a deeper knowing of unknowing.

I was also intrigued how much this dark night was surely experienced by the early disciples right after Jesus’ crucifixion. They were alone. They were scared. They were uncertain. They were lost. Much like the Israelites in our scripture story today when God had led them through the desert and into the Promised Land. As with the Israelites, God had not abandoned Jesus’ disciples. In fact, Jesus was leading them through this cloud of unknowing and uncertainty and preparing them for something much greater than they could have ever imagined.

For me, I’ve found that the more I studied and shared with you about the dark night of the soul, the more I felt led by Jesus. The more the darkness lifted. So this time of processing with you has been invaluable to my soul. I feel that I am in a much different place than where I was just three months ago.

But I’m curious how this series has spoken to you. Was there something that has really hit you, intrigued you, or made you go hmmm? Would you be willing to share that with us this morning?

What has been your take away?

As I mentioned, our scripture comes from Exodus when God led the Israelites out of Egypt and into the desert. Interesting that there was a direct route that they could have taken, but apparently, God thought the least direct, most obscure, confusing, almost hidden route was best.

Join me as I read from Exodus 13:17-22.

17 When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For God said, “If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt.” **18** So God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea.[a] The Israelites went up out of Egypt ready for battle.

19 Moses took the bones of Joseph with him because Joseph had made the Israelites swear an oath. He had said, “God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up with you from this place.”^[b]

20 After leaving Sukkoth they camped at Etham on the edge of the desert.

21 By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. **22** Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

We began with Genesis...which was a great place to start...looking at the story of Jacob and how he wrestled with the angel of the Lord and won. There were several things that we took away from that encounter that helped us understand his dark night of the soul.

He was alone. He was wrestling with his self and past choices long before God challenged him. We saw that the wrestling was multifaceted and there was a blessing in the wrestling. Jacob was changed on account of it. Not only was he impacted, but so were his family, his friends, his country, and the world around him. And finally we saw that God’s ultimate purpose for Jacob’s wrestling was reconciling the broken relationship between Jacob and his brother Easau.

We were challenged not to be afraid of the dark night of the soul but to embrace it. And God, knowing that God welcomes our questions, our fears, our doubts, and our suspicions. We found that this time of uncertainty will bring a new understanding of ourselves and of God.

And may we never forget, “the one who is in us is greater than the one who is in the world.”¹

Then we moved into wrestling with grief where we considered the story of Mary and Martha in the Gospel of John. We see how Jesus didn’t come and rescue their brother Lazarus when he was sick and dying. We heard a story by Philip Yancy about a young theologian who after experiencing some tragic loss struggled to believe what he had written previously about God. As Yancy listen to this and other stories of grief and loss, he settled on three key questions that no one dares ask outloud. Is God unfair? Is God silent? And is God hidden?

Certainly Mary and Martha wrestled with those questions in their grief. As have all of us.

But from my own experience of learning to walk in the dark, I think what God has been doing is weaning me from the romantic gushy feelings that I had in my early faith life. Only in walking through darkness and grief can we grow to having

¹ 1 John 4:4

a mature relationship with God. To enjoy God for who God is and not be dependent upon how God makes us feel or what God does for us.

We then continued following Mary and Martha in the Gospel of Luke and Martha's complaints about facing unending needs as she prepared the evening meal for Jesus and his disciples. We learned that there are always more needs than we can personally fulfill. And that sometimes we need to lay down those needs, let them go unattended, and simply sit at Jesus' feet to regain a proper perspective and rest.

We talked about acknowledging our personal limitations and realizing that unlike us, God is unconstrained by time, space, or resources. God is God. We are not. We also learned the importance of putting some spiritual practices in place that will ensure that our cup is constantly refilled as we pour ourselves out onto others.

We then turned to the Prophet Jeremiah and talked about what it means to wrestle with God as we wrestle with fear. God called him to be a prophet but then Jeremiah comes up with all kinds of reasons why he shouldn't go.

We talked about the difference between healthy fear and unhealthy fear.

We were challenged to acknowledge that fear is normal. To name fears out loud. To understand that sometimes we are our worst enemy. To take our fears to God.

Unhealthy fear comes from the enemy who scripture warns us kills, steals, and destroys. Where as a healthy fear of Jesus gives us life and life to the full. And finally we were encouraged to not let our fears paralyze us. We learned that our wrestling with fear is normal, that God loves us and always has our best interests in mind.

Our journey took us back to Exodus and Moses who wrestled with himself as he wrestled with God. Like Jeremiah, Moses questioned God and his abilities to do what God had called him to do.

Sarah Foster delivered an excellent sermon on one of her favorite biblical characters, Gideon, who was directed by God to fight the mighty Midianites. Gideon didn't feel very confident in his calling, yet God promised to go with him. That assurance of Jesus' continued presence with us is always enough to help us face even the worst of our enemies.

We see this same lack of spiritual confidence in Thomas, Doubting Thomas, in the Gospels. The gift of knowing that God is with us is not the gift of having someone direct our lives. The gifts are the comfort and truth that never leave you. Gideon was told where to go and what to do, yes. But what gave him the strength to serve was the knowledge that God was with him, that God loved him, and that God would not abandon him or His people.

So we can rise to the occasion, take our best shot, and trust that God will achieve the purposes for which he sent us out.

We then dove more deeply into Thomas' story who often gets a bad rap for not having believed without seeing. He struggled to believe that Jesus has actually been raised from the dead.

We heard about Mother Teresa and her wrestling with faith and doubt throughout most of her career. She described her faith as dry, empty, lonely, tortuous, dark, and devoid of all feeling. During that time she was unable to imagine or feel God's presence or existence. What Mother Teresa experienced was the dark night of the soul.

We saw that wrestling with faith and doubt are as natural as breathing the air we breathe. There is nothing really wrong with us. What maybe wrong, however, is our view of God in us.

At the other end of Thomas' dark night of the soul, we saw how he proclaimed to Jesus, "My Lord and my God."

We then turned to a whole of story with Jonah and his wrestling God to take the Gospel to a people he didn't particularly care for. Like us, we know the Good News that we are to share, but we choose not to share it or go wherever God calls.

And finally, we need to know that God's judgement and mercy are not subject to human manipulation. Whether we are faithful or not, we cannot thwart God's plans. God will accomplish what he wants to accomplish however he chooses whether with us or without us.

We then returned to Genesis and the story of Abram and Sarai who struggled with God and their age to believe that they would give birth to a son in their later years.

As with Abram and Sarai, regardless of what was promised or certain earlier in lives, we are called to set our sights upon the faithfulness of the one who makes the promises. God. Whether or not what we receive what was promised. Because God might have something else in mind for us. We were also challenged to let go of past disappointments in life which may hinder us from embracing where God is leading us next.

It was at the point that I had just returned from the United Kingdom and shared my experiences of driving on the opposite side of the road. And how if I choose not to obey their traffic laws, there would have been quite a horrific accident. In the same way, sometimes we come head to head with different cultures. And God uses those conflicts to gain our attention.

We looked at the story of Peter denying Jesus three times after telling him that he would die for him. And yet when push came to shove, Peter abandoned Jesus in his time of need.

We talked about the many cultural wars taking place in our country and around the world. How polar opposite forces are tearing the world apart.

We asked the question, “So where is God in all this mess?”

Rolheiser reminded us that, “Jesus ‘took away the sins of the world’ not by some magic act but by holding, carrying, purifying, and transforming tension. He did this by taking in bitterness, anger, jealousy, hatred, slander, and every other kind of cancerous negativity within human community, and not giving it back in kind.

In essence, Jesus did this by acting like a purifier, a water filter of sorts: He took in hatred, held it, transformed it, and gave back love; he took in bitterness, held it, transformed it, and gave back graciousness; he took in curses, held them, transformed them, and gave back blessings; and he took in murder, held it, transformed it, and gave back forgiveness. Jesus resisted the instinct to give back in kind - hatred for hatred, curses for curses, jealousy for jealousy, murder for murder. He held and transformed these things rather than simply retransmit them.”²

First and foremost, my friends, we remember who we are and whose we are. We are followers of Jesus Christ and sons and daughters of the living God.

We also remember that those with whom disagree are not our enemy and that maybe God is using them to get us see through different eyes.

We embrace the fact that things are changing around the world at speeds faster than any of us can comprehend. Along with that change comes new ideas about rights, identity, sexuality, religion, and freedoms.

We resist getting pulled into never ending, unwinnable cultural wars which may require us to step outside our comfort zones and consider fresh perspectives for a change.

We acknowledge that while we are called to live in this world, that we ourselves are not of this world. We belong to a different country. We are only resident aliens passing through this land.

We were called to display humility and know that we may not have the full truth on any one particular issue. There are many ways to look at different ideals. God seems them all. We do not.

The world is watching to see how we as a Church respond to many of these cultural hotbed issues. People will either listen to us or discount us as irrelevant and out of touch. Remember no one has more to lose over the cultural wars in the Church than Jesus Christ himself.

And finally last week, we looked at Jesus’ own dark night of the soul where he wrestled with God’s plans for him in the Garden of Gethsemane. We learned that

² Ronald Rolheiser, *Wrestling with God, Finding Hope and Meaning in our Daily Struggle to be Human* (Image Books:New York, 2018), 182-183.

God is sovereign. God is able to know the past, present, and future simultaneously. God also knows the outcome of each plan that he sets in motion and the character he aims to produce in us.

We also were reminded that God is good and is for our good. Even when we cannot fully understand why something is happening or when some plans change, we can hold on to the truth that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”³

We heard that God’s plans are more rewarding than what we could ever plan for ourselves. Though they may not be easier. In fact, most times God’s plans are harder, much harder.

Ronald Rolheiser states that this “darkness can be confusing, it can also be maturing: it can help us move from being arrogant, judgmental, religious neophytes to being humble, empathic men and women, living inside a cloud of unknowing, understanding more by not understanding than by understanding, helpfully lost in a darkness we cannot manipulate or control, so as to finally be pushed into genuine faith, hope, and charity.”⁴

Just like the Israelites as they wandered the desert for 40 years in a cloud of unknowing by day, and a pillar of light in the darkness, we know that God’s change of plans in our lives may involve sacrifice and a release of what we had hoped would be. As Jesus prayed to the Heavenly Father in that Garden, “Yet not as I will but as you will.” The truth is that learning to embrace God’s will over our own is one of life’s greatest lessons.

So that has been the past three months in a nutshell.

As I close, I hope that we will not be afraid of the dark night of the soul when when it comes. May we welcome it in as a friend, knowing that we cannot manipulate it or force it to leave. For it stays as long as God desires, or until God’s purposes for it are achieved through it.⁵ May we remember that God is good and is for our good. May we always hold fast to the truth that as we wrestle with God and God’s purposes for our lives, Jesus will never leave us nor forsake us.

That is Good News!

Amen!

³ Romans 8:28-29

⁴ Ronald Rolheiser, *Wrestling with God, Finding Hope and Meaning in our Daily Struggles to be Human* (New York: Image Publishers, 2018), 112.

⁵ Philippians 1:6