

The Rev. Dustin D. Berg
Calvary Episcopal Church / Kaneohe, Hawaii
9th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 13A: 2 August 2020
Genesis 32:22-31 / Psalm 17:1-7,16 / Romans 9:1-5 / Matthew 14:13-21

Good morning... to all of you here in person, and online. It is good to see you after the hurricane scare last week, which thankfully the good Lord steered away from our islands.

You may have heard, or read, some of the coverage around Congressman John Lewis's funeral service this last week. Or you may have seen the images of his body making one last trip over the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama – this time with rose petals laid down before it. Or you may have heard some of the tributes, or perhaps read his last words to the nation, published on the day of his funeral service. Much of it was a moving set of remembrances, of course, but the words of The Rev. Bernice King, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s youngest daughter, echoed for me as the nation remembered this beacon of courage and hope. She quoted her father, saying, "Death is not a period that ends this great sentence of life, but a comma which punctuates it to a lofty and higher significance."¹

A lofty and higher significance. Whether it's Lewis or other leaders of similar courageous faith and hope, they lead us to that place of a lofty and higher significance through calling us toward our truest identity. Though they speak in terms of this nation, I believe there is much that is commendable in that sentiment to us as people of faith as well. As people who believe and trust and hope in a higher way, a more excellent way, a way that brings dead things to life, this is, in fact, our identity. A lofty and higher significance – in the one who is life itself.

As I read the scriptures for this Sunday, I became struck by this sentiment. The stories of Jacob wrestling with God, and of Jesus feeding 5,000 lend themselves well to calling us toward that higher, nobler, more faithful way that is our spiritual home, our identity. (And really, Jesus probably fed more like 10,000 or 15,000, or 20,000, because the text only counts the men in that story, and doubtless there were women and children!)

Take Jacob's all-night encounter with that stranger on the far-side of the Jabbok River. There are lots of ways to read this, of course, not least being that we as humans, or more particularly, the people of Israel have oft wrestled with the one they, and we, call God. And so it is here. Determined but not defeated, the wrestling concludes with a draw, basically, and Jacob, wearied by the all-night struggle, wants to know the name of his worthy opponent. No such luck. The man with whom he wrestled will not reveal his name. However, Jacob does secure a blessing – an acknowledgement, perhaps, that he, too, is a worthy opponent, and one who does not give up a divine challenge when it confronts him.

¹ <https://www.npr.org/2020/07/30/895152469/john-lewis-towering-civil-rights-icon-to-be-memorialized-at-atlanta-funeral>

There is much to be commended here in this story. The wrestling with God (for that is who we are to understand is represented by this stranger), the willingness to be challenged, and the need for being blessed by and knowing the name of his opponent, Jacob leaves us with this sense of a confidence, a hope, and a perseverance that our struggle, in our day, is also not over. We are in it for the long haul – for our faith that hopes and trusts and perseveres in our own day. Jacob continues in the struggle that is God’s struggle – and so must we.

Jesus, too, I think even in the Feeding of Thousands (I just can’t call it the Feeding of “5000” anymore!), Jesus entrusts a kind of responsibility to us that follow him. His disciples notice that there’s a large crowd, it’s getting late, and they’re hungry. And you know what he does? Compassionate, loving Jesus, do you know what he does? He said to the disciples, “Figure it out.” “They don’t need to go away; you give them something to eat.” You are part of this mission and kingdom-calling and work, so you do it.

Now in the past I used to think Jesus was being kind of rude to those disciples. That he didn’t want to be bothered. But now I don’t think so... instead, I think he is doing the same kind of thing that God was allowing with Jacob – for him (and now, the disciples), to be part of the struggle. To work it out with the knowledge that God, indeed, is in this place. God has work to do here, and you’d better be part of it. And the disciples, of course, they do what any of us might have done “well, all right, but we only have 5 loaves and 2 fish”. And that’s when it happens. “Bring them to me,” he says. Then, taking the fish and bread, the disciples pass it out – *and all ate and were filled*. The disciples here in the story – they rose to the higher calling. They did, then, as the Lord had commanded them to do. Feed the people. And so it was.

So I wonder, and I suggest, here with you today – that we are some of the same people. We are like Jacob, who struggle, who wrestle, with God’s very presence among us. We don’t get it. But yet, we, like Jacob, are called to stay in it. For the soul of our people. For the soul of this land. And with the disciples? The abundance of the Lord is here, when we look for it. When we trust the Lord’s commands, “You give them something to eat... bring [what you have] here to me,” we enter into that higher purpose and calling and hope. Our lives take on the significance of God’s work in our land, among our people, with that same kind of hope.

Friends, I leave you with those images today: We, too, wrestle with God. We’re meant to. We’re meant to keep at it, to stay in the fight, the struggle, that God’s presence and kingdom and hope are made real. We’re meant to make real those commands of the Lord, even when they are not immediately apparent what he’s going to do with them, or with us. Because the truth is, when we give of ourselves in the struggles and in the work of God among our people, our land, our country, we are lifted to that higher and lofty significance. We are in it for the long haul, and we are blessed by the same God, to go and bless our world.

Amen.