

I was listening to an interview on the CBC earlier this week. Apparently calls to mental health crisis lines in the KW region have spiked in the last month. It's no secret that many of us are finding this time really challenging – and perhaps even more so, as the uncertainty drags on and the repercussions of the shutdown become more pronounced. And of course it's not just the pandemic, is it? There's the racial injustice hardwired into how we have organised ourselves as societies which is being dragged into the cold light of day – like it or not. There's the disappointment in and frustration with our political leaders as we discover again that we all seem to have our blind spots – and we find ourselves distracted even as we wrestle with life and death issues.

So we can find ourselves crying out, 'Does God really give a toss?' 'Can God even do anything about this mess?' It may or may not bring you comfort to know, that we're not the only ones asking these questions. Sure, the psalmist has phrased it slightly differently this morning, but his words are in fact ours.

Hear my plea of innocence, O Lord; give heed to my cry; * listen to my prayer, which does not come from lying lips (Ps 17.1).

The psalmist is articulating our heart cry too. And that's one of the things that the readings appointed for this Sunday do. These texts take seriously our angst, our distress, our despair and they take just as seriously God's concern for our all too human need.

The God who appears to us through the pages of Scripture is a God who cares deeply for us... is a God whose track record with the community of faith is one of suffering love and compassionate provision.

Which is what Jacob discovers in this morning's reading from Genesis, the book of the Bible which Bishop Todd has been unpacking for us in his sermon series. This story of Jacob's wrestling with the 'man' (whoever he is) at the ford of Jabbok is one of the Bible's classic stories of struggle. Jacob is struggling with God; Jacob is also struggling with himself. Sometimes we find in our own times of wrestling in the dark night of the soul (as it has been described), that it is not only God we may be contending with – 'how could you possibly have allowed this to happen?'; we are also struggling with ourselves – 'why can't I just get over this?'

Some back story to how Jacob gets to be engaged in this evenly-matched nighttime brawl. It's been twenty years since Jacob fled his brother Esau's ire after duping him out of Esau's rightful inheritance and blessing as the first-born. Jacob heads into the wilderness north of Beersheba when he has his famous dream – the vision of angels on a heavenly escalator. He settles in Haran, where he discovers that his uncle Laban is just as duplicitous as he is. Jacob works fourteen years for the hand of the love of his life cousin Rachel. He also acquires the hand of her sister Leah, and between them they produce eleven children. His speckled and spotted flocks increase. Then God commands Jacob to return home.

Only that is going to mean running into his estranged brother Esau. And sure enough, Jacob gets word from one of his lieutenants that Esau is coming out to meet him. So Jacob organises his empire he is travelling with into four identical groups – slaves and servants, sheep and goats, camels and donkeys – and sends them ahead at carefully calculated intervals. He is wanting to impress Esau and perhaps to repay an overdue debt.

Jacob then does something else – probably much wiser and more mature. After sending everyone else across the river, Jacob decides that he will spend the night alone on the other bank before meeting with his brother. It's in the dark of night, that this figure, a stranger, mysteriously appears and wrestles Jacob. With dawn breaking, the man wounds Jacob and then asks Jacob to let him go. Jacob refuses to release the stranger unless he blesses Jacob. Jacob asks the stranger what his name is and receives the odd response, 'Why is it that you ask my name?' Only then does the stranger bless Jacob and vanish. Jacob comes to understand that he has in fact been wrestling with God, and he limps away from the encounter.

Now we may not necessarily characterise our struggles in whatever we are living as an encounter with an unknown assailant in the dead of night. We may have other ways of describing what I imagine is a universal human experience.

Whether it is coming to terms with more uncertainty in our lives than we've ever had to deal with before; whether it's grappling with the gaping wound of grief over the unexpected loss of a loved one; whether it's railing against a system that consistently pushes some folk, folk just like you and me, to the back of the line... most of us understand what it's like to feel as though we are fighting for all we are worth barely to keep our nose above water. What this cryptic story from Genesis reminds us in the midst of our wrestling with God and with ourselves is that God's final and most enduring word to us is one of grace. In the end, the stranger (whoever he is) blesses Jacob and gives Jacob a new name. 'You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed' (.28). He is no longer Jacob, the schemer, the supplanter (as his name translates). He is Israel, the survivor, the striver with God.

What Jacob learns in his struggle at Jabbok is not that he is a schemer; what Jacob learns is that God knows who he is and accepts him anyway. I don't know what new name God may be wanting to give us as we do our best to navigate the challenges we face. What I do know is that Jacob's struggle at Jabbok reminds us of the good news, the gospel, that God meets us precisely wherever we are, how ever we are, with whomever we are; God not only meets us, God calls us by name – beloved daughter, beloved son of the Most High God, endowed with an abundance of love – and preserves us as he did Jacob (.30) in order to grow us in the image and likeness of his Son. Thanks be to God. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.