

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

August 3, 2008

Proper 13A - 2008

In the Name of our One Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today's readings are "bible talk" at its best. Although 2000 years separate the historical setting of the story of Jacob's wrestling with God in the wilderness and Jesus' feeding of the crowds in the wilderness, both stories tell great truths about God and God's relationship with us humans. Both stories are rich in imagery and are very personal.

In today's lesson from Genesis, we return to the story of the creation of Israel as a people and as a nation. We are at the very early stages of the saga of the Patriarchs with the story of Jacob, son of Isaac and grandson of Abraham. We are dealing with a family fight and today's story might be captioned "The chickens come home to roost". Jacob was younger born twin of his brother Esau and he came out of his mother Rebecca's womb grasping onto Esau's heel. It seems that since birth Jacob was a liar, deceiver and an all around dishonest person. He had tricked his somewhat oafish brother into selling his birthright as the oldest son for a bowl of stew. Later on, in cahoots with his mother, he tricks his blind and dying father into believing he is Esau and thus steals the blessing and inheritance his father meant to give to the eldest son. Nice guy, huh!

Not unsurprisingly, Esau falls into a rage and threatens to kill Jacob and Jacob flees to his mother's brother Laban's land where he eventually marries Laban's two daughters. Jacob and Laban spend the next twenty years or so deceiving and

cheating one another. What a great family! Jacob and his wives and children leave Laban – but not before Jacob tricks him out of much of his flock and Rachel steals her father’s household gods. This is really a dysfunctional family!

Today we find Jacob about to meet up for the first time with his brother Esau. He learns that Esau is coming to meet him – along with 400 men. Fearing his brother’s hatred and violence, Jacob divides up his wives, children and flocks and sends them off in two different directions. He prays to God and spends the night alone where he wrestles all night with some unknown visitor. Neither will let go and they struggle; eventually, the visitor puts Jacob’s hip out of joint – and still Jacob holds on demanding a blessing. The visitor gives a blessing and Jacob realizes at daybreak that he has struggled face to face with God and has lived to tell about it.

In today’s Gospel lesson we have the story of the feeding of the thousands in the wilderness. It is in all four Gospels and, thus, is a very important story for the early Christians. Jesus has just heard of the gruesome beheading of John the Baptist by Herod. That incident drove Jesus to the wilderness to seek solitude and perhaps safety in prayer. Jesus’ solitude was short lived for the crowds – 5000 men, more when you count the women and children – arrive to be with him and hear his teachings. Jesus looks upon them with compassion and heals many. They stay until dusk and the disciples ask Jesus to send them away so they can go into the villages and buy food. Jesus dismisses that idea and turns the problem back onto the disciples. “You feed them,” he says. When they protest about the impossibility of this order, given that they only had five loaves and two fish for themselves, Jesus had the crowd sit down. He had the loaves brought to him. He blessed them and gave them back to the disciples to

give to all. The gospel said all ate and were filled and there were 12 baskets full of left of broken pieces.

What are we to make of such stories? Our 21st century minds immediately ask “Is it true?” and “How could it happen?” Many modern commentators and preachers struggle with those questions. But are these the only questions to ask? Premodern people of the Bible would first ask, “What do these stories mean? What truths and miracles do they point to?”

Jacob was left alone in the wilderness that night with his fears. All of his tricks and lies and deceptions were going to be no match for Esau and his 400 men. Jacob was left alone in the wilderness that night with the truth – he was a cheat and a fraud and he had grievously and unjustly wronged his brother and his dying father. But Jacob discovered that in solitude and encountering his deepest self, he also encountered God. Rather than running away, he struggled with that fact and discovered that God would hold onto and struggle with him with the same determination and intensity. We struggle with God’s compassion and goodness and God struggles with our faults and brokenness. Out of that struggle came a blessing and a new name. Jacob’s life was transformed and he was given a new name to point to his new future – Israel – for he would father a nation. If you read the rest of his story, you’ll see he did become a different person and he and his brother reconciled.

Our gospel story is rich in images. Some point to the past - to God’s caring for God’s people in the wilderness by feeding them with manna and having them gather and sit down to be given the Law. Some point to the future – to the Last Supper and the Eucharist and to the heavenly banquet to which all God’s children are invited. Jesus fled to the wilderness after John’s death with questions about himself and God

gave the answer – the crowds came. Was the miracle the feeding of so many or was the miracle the same miracle that happened to Jacob – what happens to people when they find themselves in God’s presence? Was the miracle that so many stomachs were filled or the transformative power of experiencing and feeling God’s love and compassion? What filled the people so they went away renewed and refreashed?

What do you remember most vividly – the most fulfilling meal you ever had or the most genuine and compassionate act of love you have experienced? I don’t think the crowds went to Jesus looking for a meal. People traveled with provisions in those days. Jesus learned what the people needed and he told the disciples to feed them when they wanted to send them away. The disciples were clueless about what the crowds really needed to be fed – so Jesus showed them how.

Today people don’t come to church so much out of habit or because of social pressure. People come to church because they need God’s love and compassion and they look to us as a community. We demur like the disciples because we are broken and imperfect ourselves. But we are the Body of Christ and so we have to hold on and let Christ work through us. In the process we change.

This Sunday, our oldest and one of our most faithful members, Mitsue Asato, will leave us to go live on Big Island and Oahu with her children. I feel brokenness but I also know she and each of us have experienced God’s love and compassion together and that is forever. We are better people for knowing one another and worshipping together through the years. We each have our wilderness, but we are never alone. Like Jacob if we hang on we will find the God will be there struggling with us willing to bless us once we realize God’s presence and compassion.