

“Getting Serious”  
Genesis 32:22-29, Revelation 3:14-22, Luke 12:22-31  
August 11, 2019

If you are anything like me, you’d probably like to keep out of trouble as much as possible. By this I don’t mean to say that trouble seeks me out, or that I have a way of getting into wrangles and hassles any more than the next person.

What I am saying is that I prefer life to run smoothly with as few disruptions as I can manage. If possible, I try to avoid the traffic jams of life, even if that occasionally means taking the path of least resistance - something I hardly ever recommend to others.

I would guess that to a certain extent this is not the worse path to follow. But to avoid the hard and rocky road, to try to get out of scaling the mountain top in favor of the lazy man’s way, has dangers of its own. And sometimes these dangers are more treacherous than the troubles we are trying to avoid in the first place.

A very good friend of mine - we were classmates at Georgetown almost 50 years ago - is now a rabbi in Maryland. We were both in divinity school in the UK at the time - he in London, while I was in Scotland - but I traveled down south to see him for a long weekend, even taking part in a synagogue service he was conducting in London’s East End. He makes this very same point about shrinking from confrontation in an explicitly Biblical way by pointing to our Old Testament lesson for this morning.

Most of us are familiar, at least in passing, with the story of how Jacob wrestled with an angel through the night. In the course of the tussle, Jacob’s hip became dislocated - but in spite of the resulting pain, Jacob won out. The angel begs Jacob’s permission to leave, but as a condition Jacob exacted a blessing from the celestial being. “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel,” said the angel, “for you have wrestled with beings both divine and human, and have prevailed.”

Who, asks my Rabbi friend, was this angel? Jewish tradition says that the mysterious figure who fought against Jacob was the guardian angel of Esau, Jacob’s estranged twin brother. Perhaps you remember the story - how Jacob tricked Esau out of

his birthright, and a furious Esau vowed to never be reconciled to his manipulative younger twin. In history, Esau's descendents became the Edomites, who - you guessed it - became the arch enemies of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, who were descendents of Jacob's twelve sons.

But Israel, throughout its history, has had many more enemies than just the Edomites. And so succeeding generations of "the children of Israel" saw in Esau the representative of an almost endless array of opponents throughout their history, such as the Babylonians who threw Jews into fiery furnaces in an early version of the Holocaust, to pagan Greeks who desecrated the Temple in Jerusalem by slaughtering a pig on the high altar, to the Romans who insisted their Emperor was god incarnate - one of the worst blasphemies imaginable to the Jewish mind, to the medieval Christian Church, which continued persecutions of Jews through the Inquisition and pogroms and the like.

And so in a real sense Jacob - or Israel - has always seen itself as wrestling with the guardian angel of Esau. At every point in their history God's people have been set upon by outsiders. Sometimes the experience has been painful and caused injury - just as Jacob's hip was dislocated in Genesis 32. But all this was necessary if "Jacob" was to emerge from the confrontation and become "Israel," the chosen people of God.

But, as I noted earlier, there are those of us who avoid confrontation. Some sects of believers would wall themselves off entirely from the world, living in closed communities, to shut the door to conflict with outsiders. Others submit to the world without a struggle, intoxicated by the ease of adapting to the common culture, seeing no value in retaining a distinctively religious character of their own. Either approach is relatively "safe" - the one would avoid conflict by hiding their light under a bushel; the other would avoid confrontation by surrender.

But there are some of us who are prepared to struggle - which is what the name "Jacob" actually means - to struggle against Esau, in whatever form the Esau of the Age

might take, exposing ourselves to danger, yet holding out for ourselves the prospect that through it all, as a result of it all, we might be transformed into God's ideal.

And so, the struggle goes on for all who would hold to their ideals and refuse to surrender them. The confrontation is necessary if we are to be the leavening which is to raise the entire loaf. Conflict will be the result if we "get serious" about our faith.

Jesus, indeed, warned his disciples that they were to wonder where they went wrong if everyone in this world agreed with them. In fact, Jesus repeatedly told all those who would follow him that they were to act "not as the Gentiles do," but stand out, in contrast, as an example to all. Or, as the Apostle puts it in his letter to the Romans, "be ye not conformed to this world."

A few months ago the mid-week Bible classes looked both at Genesis as well as the book of Revelation as part of our study of angels. Getting a little side-tracked, we also did some talking about the bizarre imagery of the Apocalypse - the great harlot, the dragon, the beast with seven heads and ten horns, the false prophets, the new Jerusalem. Not too surprisingly, we really didn't get around to the messages to the seven churches, found in the opening chapters of the Revelation to Saint John, the Divine - part of which we heard this morning.

If there is a fairly common problem in these churches - and by no means are all seven of the churches condemned - it is that they are becoming too conformed to this world. Rather than struggling to maintain their own identity, they are all too willing to accommodate themselves to the common culture. Rather than proclaim ideals unswervingly, they are all too willing to water down their message. And this morning we heard about the church in Laodicea, condemned because it was too willing NOT to be different. It was neither hot, nor cold. It was lukewarm - insipid.

And that was not just a problem 2000 years ago. A 20th century American prophet put it this way during the Civil Rights movement of the 1950's and 60's: "On some positions the coward asks the question, Is it safe? Expediency asks the question, Is

it politic? Vanity asks the question, Is it popular? But conscience asks the question, Is it right? And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but we must take it because our conscience tells us it is right.”

All too often, many of us are eager to take no position at all if something is controversial, hoping somehow to muddle through, to get by with the least amount of resistance or difficulty. To do that is NOT always wrong. For if we are to witness, if we are to battle, if we are to answer the call, then let us expend our efforts, our treasures, on what is truly important. There is no sense in exhausting ourselves on what is trivial.

But if we, as the church, are to be true to our call, we must remember the ideals of our Founder, who had no trouble calling the head of his government deceitful, who declared that the religious leaders of his day were hypocrites, and who was willing, in the end, to remain true to those beliefs even when it meant his own personal destruction.

Jesus makes it clear: Faith is not for the timid. It is not for the pessimist. It is not for the faint-hearted. It comes as a response to a call: a call for devotion to truth, for adherence to justice, for allegiance to righteousness.

If we would count ourselves among those who are on the Lord’s side, there is one command that we might heed: we must start getting serious - serious in striving, in persevering, in conquering ... so that we might be worthy of our Biblical name as the New Israel, God’s chosen.

Let us pray: