

"Will He Find Faith???"

Genesis 32:22-31 & Luke 18:1-8

October 21, 2007

The ending of our Gospel test this morning is disturbing. "When the Son of Man comes [again], will He find faith on earth?" Do you ever wonder about that? Will we continue to pass the word of God from generation to generation so that people of faith continue to exist? Or will our world / our at least our culture, slowly evolve away from religious things and become more and more 'secular' so that eventually faith in Jesus Christ simply fades out of existence? It is a disturbing thought. Perhaps we would rather not even think about it. I suspect that most of us in the church would not really struggle with the question too long - perhaps, for many it is just assumed that the church has always been and will always continue to be - it has survived 2000 years of a great many pressures and has remained unchanged by time or circumstances - why should we worry now? Those outside the church probably think that it is an unimportant question - I am sure that some think that it hardly matters if the church exists or not - I suspect that they believe that the church and faithful believers don't really impact the world in any positive way anyway. Of course, I do not agree with such a thought - it does matter if faith is found and the church continues. And so we ponder the question just as Jesus does: will there be any faith that continues to exist in the future - will the church continue to be alive and well?

There are a lot of great "Peanuts" cartoons. One has Lucy planning a picnic for the next day. Looking at the cloudy sky, she says to Charlie Brown, "I just hope to goodness that it doesn't rain ..." Walking away, Charlie answers, "Hoping to goodness is not theologically sound." For the people of faith, "hoping to goodness" is not a sound practice. Fixing our hope upon God is. But in our world today we seem to be turning away from God more and more to find things on which to pin our hope. Will He find faith in the future?

Today's OT text lets us in on a very private struggle which is a part of Jacob's life. To read the text is to find ourselves in the midst of an almost mystical event with which we might find it hard to relate. But the struggle in which Jacob is engaged goes far beyond the hours of that night of which the text speaks. As that evening approaches, Jacob sends his family across the river and away so that he can be alone. There in the solitude, someone appears and what would appear to be a very real physical battle begins. Through the long, dark hours of the night Jacob wrestles with this unknown figure identified only as 'a man' - a figure that is never named. As the long hours of the night finally draw to a close, the one with whom he has struggled imparts a blessing even though Jacob is left with the scars of the struggle. What we can understand only by reading a lot more of the scriptures that

precedes this text is that Jacob has a twin brother with whom he has struggled all of his life. The two of them have been completely different all of their lives. In addition to simple physical, emotional and lifestyle interest differences, there has been deception, trickery and a stolen birth right that has separated them even more. In the years preceding our text they have also be separated geographically. But now they will meet again. And Jacob is filled with fear and guilt over all that had taken place between himself and his brother.

Back in the 16th Century there was Catholic priest that has come to be known as Saint John of the Cross. He wrote about some of the deep struggles that we as human being go through. At one point he referred to those deep emotional and spiritual struggles as "the dark night of the soul". It is a powerful image and something that I suspect most of us can relate to. It is a part of the human experience to face many of those dark demons that are associated with the sinfulness that is a part of this life. Fears, guilt, anger, disappointments, despair, discouragement, failures, hatred, isolation & loneliness and many, many more results of the brokenness associated with sin leaves us wrestling in the darkness that we are experiencing in those times of life. It is interesting that, in our times the phrase, 'dark night of the soul' was picked up by a heavy metal band who's name is "Mayhem". The name of the band itself captures the darkness of a world trapped in sin.

I don't know exactly who or what it was that Jacob wrestled with that night. The figure is simply described as 'a man'. But I suspect that the real struggle was one that is very human. I suspect that Jacob's struggle was that 'dark night of the soul' where he did battle with the mayhem of his world that had been touched by sin. And it became a 'spiritual' battle in which he encountered a loving and forgiving God. And as that dark night of the soul passed he received the merciful blessing of God - a blessing which freed him to go forward to meet the brother that he had so badly mistreated.

It is an incredible story. It is a story that is easily lost in time and the surreal images with which the story is told. Yet, it is our story - a story that we know all too well. Sin and brokenness often leave us separated from our brothers and sisters and we struggle through those dark nights of our souls. For us too, it is a spiritual struggle in which we must decide whether we will receive the blessing God chooses to bestow upon us or not. It is a spiritual decision in which forgiveness, restoration and love will replace the brokenness of sin. It is tough stuff. It is a wrestling match which can make us weary and find us wanting to give up. Still, time after time, we hear the call to persistence in faith.

The Apostle Paul tells his friend, Timothy, to be persistent through favorable and unfavorable times. Jesus just tells us a parable about a woman who would not give up. Too often we read the parable and think that it is about God being like the unjust judge and we need to be obnoxiously demanding in order to get what we want from God. Quite the contrary - we are told that God is always ready to give us

what we need. Jesus tells us in the beginning that the parable is about never losing heart - never lose faith - keep on wrestling with the darkness.

I read recently about the first transcontinental flight from New York city to Long Beach, CA. It was completed by American aviation pioneer Cal P. Rodgers in an early Wright flyer called the Vin Fiz [named after a soft drink company that sponsored the trip]. On September 17, 1911 he left Sheephead Bay at Brooklyn NY and arrived in California on December 10, 1911, 84 days later. Rodgers actual time in the air was only 3 days, 10 hours and 14 minutes. The airplane was forced down both by weather and mechanical failure - more than 30 times problems resulted in crashes - some were "light crashes" with little damage - other crashes required major repairs. When Rodgers landed in Long Beach the only original parts on the airplane were the rear rudder and the oil pan on the engine. The author of the article I read admitted that he would have given up the first time he lost a wing.

And how about us? When do we give up? When do we simply allow the darkness to enfold us? When Christ returns, will He find faith?

Jesus concludes the parable by asking us a hypothetical question. "Will not God grant justice to His chosen ones who cry to Him day and night? Will He delay long in helping us?" The implied answer is: "Yes", God hears our cries in the dark nights of our soul and, "No", He will not delay long to come with the blessing of forgiveness and life. Will we be persistent in holding on to our faith?

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