

Sermon for Sunday, October 20, 2019 - "Grace That Lurks in the Night"

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
October 20, 2019
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

"We are seared and we are scarred by those things that make us restless in the night." That line about Jacob's all-night wrestling match has stayed with me since I heard it from Wartburg Seminary Professor Craig Nesson. (Sermon for the Northeastern Iowa Synod Fall Theological Conference, October 2016)

What keeps you up at night, tossing and turning?
How have you been seared and scarred by worries, fears and regrets that plague you by night?
What blessings have come out of the wrestling?

The night Jacob wrestles with a stranger 'til daybreak he has so many reasons to be anxious and afraid. He's been leaving messes in his wake and running from it all and now there's so much stuff from his past with which he has to contend.

Jacob's life to this point has been marked by contentious relationships. When he was born, he was grasping onto the heel of his twin brother. Apparently even in the womb he was striving with his brother, trying to get out first. His parents gave him the name Jacob which can mean trickster or overreacher or the one who supplants others or even just the heel. Talk about a loaded name.

Jacob lives up to his name. He tricks his brother Esau into giving away his inheritance, Esau's birthright as the first born. Later he tricks his blind father into giving him the blessing that should go to Esau. Esau gets spitting mad and Jacob has to run for his life. He flees to his uncle Laban's house and then spends years trying to get the upper hand in their fraught relationship. Jacob marries Laban's daughters Rachel and Leah, gives Laban lots of grandchildren and works for him. But as he is leaving Laban to finally go home, he does Laban wrong in a business deal and has to flee with things he stole from Laban. As Jacob makes his way toward home, he learns that his brother is approaching with 400 armed men.

Jacob is between a rock and a hard place. He wants to go home but his angry brother stands in the way. He can't go back because he's made a mess of things with Laban. His life is full of things that keep him up at night.

Our backstories may not be quite as fraught as Jacob's. Most of us don't have to worry that our family conflicts will end in armed warfare.

Yet there's still so much that weighs on us - so much with which we must contend: fears, worries, regrets, disappointments. And, we are seared and scarred by these things that make us restless in

the night. The good news is that God doesn't leave us to wrestle with our stuff on our own. God doesn't say: Wow your life is a mess, good luck with that; have you tried a sleeping pill? Instead, God gets into the mix of it all with us.

This is what happens for Jacob. At the point we pick up his story, everything is catching up with him. He gets his family safely settled and goes off by himself to prepare to face his brother. Jacob likely feels so alone as all the fears and worries crash in on him.

Yet he isn't left alone to wrestle with all his stuff. A stranger shows up to wrestle with him. When it's all said and done, he finds that he has been wrestling with God. God is there to say, "You can't keep running. You've got to face this. You've got to engage your life and I'm here to help you to do that."

God does the same for each of us. God is a wrestling partner who challenges us, engages us and pushes us to confront everything that is keeping us up at night.

We see this throughout scripture and in the person of Christ Jesus. God doesn't stay removed and at a distance. God gets involved in the nitty-gritty stuff of our lives. And God is not above contend-ing with us when needed.

When God contends with us, it is not as our enemy. God's challenge is not to destroy or defeat us. It's to get us going, like a sparring partner who gets a boxer prepared for a good match. It's to get us to wrap our arms around life and lay our hands on God.

The thing is, it's rarely apparent that we are wrestling with God. Like Jacob, we often don't recognize God in the wrestling match. It may often feel as if God is distant, silent and removed. Yet as Pr. Steve Garnaas-Holmes describes it, whether we know it or not we are always wrestling with God. He says, "No matter what our struggles, our deepest anxiety is about our identity, our Source, our meaning, our future, our worth, which means we're really wrestling with the One from whom those things come. This is good news because as much as it may appear that the difficulties of our lives are our enemies, at their heart is a God who is our ally and deepest friend and companion." He continues, "God comes to us in dark, lonely places, in struggles and mystery. So, grapple vigorously with this life and its Creator. Trust the grace that lurks in the night."

This wrestling and struggling isn't warm, fuzzy and uplifting the way we might prefer encounters with God to feel. It may even leave us feeling wounded. Yet the wrestling also brings deep blessing. We find that God is present when we thought we were most alone. We find that God has a hold of us and that God will not let us go.

God has claimed you in Christ Jesus and you are held in God now and always. Whatever struggle and wrestling you face, God is with you. God is your ally, friend and companion always. You can trust the grace that lurks in the night for you.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.