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Struggle at the Jabbok: Lessons of an Ancient Wrestling Match

“What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?”

That’s one of the most famous questions in all of theology, posed by a thinker named Tertullian in the 2nd or 3rd century. It’s also one of the most problematic statements in all of theology. Usually, it’s used as a means of policing the borders of Christianity, lest any unwelcome influences be discovered there. The idea is that theology - or faith, or the Bible - has its own independent logic, which stands over and against other cultural traditions. What the question implies is that the way of life designated by “Jerusalem” has little in common with the way of life embodied by “Athens.” In Tertullian’s formulation, “Jersualem,” by which he meant the way modeled by Jesus, has little need of anything at all, other than itself.

It’s a troubling idea for all sorts of reasons, not the least of which is that it’s demonstrably false. Jerusalem has always been in conversation with Athens. Theology has always drawn from so-called “secular” sources. The Christian, and Jewish, traditions have always been sourced from many other cultural traditions. That’s also true of the Bible itself. It’s a kind of collage, or bricolage, sourced from the stories of many of the surrounding cultures throughout the Mediterranean world. Traditions, like texts - like people - never speak in a singular voice. They - we - always contain multitudes.

I offer all of that as background to the cross-wiring of Greek and Hebrew stories that I wish to accomplish this morning. One of the stories is familiar to us all. It’s Jacob wrestling with an angel - or God - over the course of a long night at the river Jabbok. The other is a story familiar to some of us, though probably not as many. It’s a story found in *The Odyssey*, and it bears a number of striking resemblances to the story of Jacob. Imagine, then, that we’re brushing some live wires together, in hopes of generating a spark of electricity, or several sparks, that might course straight through us, jolting us to life. But first, have a look at the wires themselves.

Here’s one of them. In Book IV of *The Odyssey* we encounter a god that, to readers of the Bible, might seem strangely familiar. Menelaus is on his way home from the Trojan War, and like Odysseus, he is stuck on an island. He’s told that if he can question the god Proteus, his way home will be revealed. The problem is that Proteus is elusive, and cannot easily be approached. He must be trapped, and then wrestled to the ground. Menelaus is instructed that once he has hold of Proteus, he must not let go. The god will twist and writhe, and will even change shapes. But if Menelaus can hold on, Proteus will eventually yield his knowledge.

Proteus is a water god, called by Homer the Old Man of the Sea. And so Menelaus hides himself at the edge of the waters, and he spies Proteus emerging in order to bask on the shore. That’s when Menelaus rushes him, clutching him, refusing to relinquish his embrace. He holds on while Proteus tries to get away, changing first into a lion, and then a serpent, and then a leopard. But Menelaus holds on. Then the god changes into a pig, and then into water, and then into a tree. Still, Menelaus refuses to let go. Finally, the god Proteus tires, and he accedes to Menelaus’s request. He tells him what he must do in order to return home. In his way, he blesses Menelaus at the end of the struggle.

That's one of our live wires. Now for the second. In the book of *Genesis*, Jacob also encounters a god next to a body of water. He too is making his way home after a long period of exile. He is about to be reunited with his brother Esau, and it's a fraught moment, for Jacob had cheated Esau out of both his inheritance as the eldest son, and of his father's blessing, to which Esau was entitled. Jacob knows there could be trouble, and so he prepares himself by spending the night alone at the river. It's then that some form of divine being emerges - the text suggests that it's God, but it's not entirely clear. As in the story of Menelaus and Proteus, they wrestle. And Jacob, like Menelaus, refuses to let the spirit creature go, even as the god - or God - does his best to escape from Jacob's grasp. The similarities don't stop there. As in *The Odyssey*, so in *Genesis*, the god at the river does not wish to be identified. It's as though he wears a kind of mask - or changes form - so that he can't be pinned down. And so too, both Jacob and Menelaus need something of their opponents - a blessing, or a kind of knowledge, which will clear the way for them to return home.

Those are the two live wires. Now let's cross them. Let's create some electricity.

The first spark - jolt - shock - that I would have us feel is this: that very cross wiring, which we can detect in the first moments of the Bible, is as firm a foundation for a progressive understanding of faith as any I can imagine. When newcomers visit this church for the first time, and sometimes even when people have been coming here for a while, the question comes up - but what do you believe? Well, start here - we believe that faith requires the understanding that as individuals and as a faith tradition, we are not on an isolated island. We're engaged in relationships, an intimate exchange of cultures and stories that disrupts any notion of our own self-sufficiency. We see that first of all in the earliest pages of the Bible, which is itself in conversation with other cultures and theologies from all around the Mediterranean world. To be biblical, in the broadest sense of the word, then, to be faithful, isn't to confine oneself to the stories we already know, to the stories that supposedly "belong" to us. To be biblical, in the deepest and truest sense of that word, is to be promiscuous with our sources of revelation, to be open to all manner of ways in which the truths of faith might find us. That's why, as one of our morning hymns puts it, we seek not to limit the truth - or truths - of God. It's why, in sermons, in prayers, and in our liturgies, we draw from many different sources, including the Bible, to illuminate our lives. It's why we all do well to be capacious in our openness to our cultural surround, listening, and watching, and reading everything we can. The borrowing or sharing of source materials in *Genesis* suggests a generosity of spirit, as if to say, "I need your story too if I am ever to tell my own." When we seek to tell sacred truths, in other words, we need the insights of other cultures, of other peoples, of other individuals if we are to speak and write our truths well.

That's the first spark. Here's another jolt of electricity. The stories of Menelaus and Jacob, of wrestling with God, suggest what it means to live with religion over the course of a lifetime. We wrestle with it, even as the form can change and shift across the years. Still, for most of us, we haven't managed to let go of it. As one theologian I admire has put it, "God is the name of a promise I have never managed to keep, but also one I have never managed to break." If we're honest, isn't that what it feels like, sometimes, to have faith? We wrestle with it, and we refuse to let go, even as its very shape transforms under our grasp, like Proteus in the grip of Menelaus.

Many of us have found our way to FCCOL from other backgrounds. Many of you, I know, grew up Catholic, and found it necessary to try something different. You weren't able to let go of faith, to let go of God, but gradually, as you wrestled, the reality of God shifted for you.

And it brought you here. A few of you, like me, had formative experiences as evangelicals, and you've found a home here as well. You've wrestled, and your sense of faith and of God has morphed into something you may not have expected. There are also those who start as Congregationalists and find it necessary to move toward other expressions of faith. Part of what it means to be alive to the reality of faith is that the very thing we're seeking to understand shifts and transforms within our grasp. That can be confusing, but it can also be a gift, for it suggests the many different dimensions that faith - and that God - can take over the course of a lifetime. Even for those who have been here all along, it has sometimes felt as if God has shifted. When we have learned from the insights of Black theology, for some, it has felt as if God was changing form. When we have learned from the insights of Feminist theology, or Queer theology, or liberationist or post-colonial theology, God has felt, somehow, different, as if taking an altered form. Some have even been tempted to let go in the wrestling match. The lesson in the stories is that it's worth it to wrestle. It's worth it to keep the questions alive, to keep our faith alive, to wrestle it through all the changes, until God - or life itself - blesses us. More on that in a bit.

Let's throw off some more electricity. What does it mean, in both stories, that the god does not wish to be identified? What does it mean, in both tales, that Proteus, and the figure we call God, wish to be released from our grasp? It's an uncomfortable question, because as often as not we imagine that God is the parent who rushes to welcome us home, who wishes to embrace and to hold us. We don't often imagine that God seeks to slip from our embrace, to be free of our grasp. What might that mean?

Perhaps it's helpful to recall what happens when we come to believe that we have identified, and fully grasped, something like God. We tend to imprison that God, pressing God into the service of some cause or other. That's when we see things like crosses at the Capitol insurrection or Christian chapels built upon slaving forts. That's when you find crosses burned as a sign of racial terror or you witness tanks blessed with holy water, as General Patton used to do. Or to name another grotesque example, it's when you have Orthodox Churches lining up to bless Mr. Putin's barbaric war. You can appreciate, I hope, why God might wish to slip away unidentified, rather than being pinned down and forced into service. Once we can assign a name to God, once we can pin God down, once we can domesticate all that transcendence, we make of God something less than Divine, and something less than human too.

It's a lesson that applies even to those of us who sense the call of God in the cry of a suffering humanity, and a suffering planet, those places scarred by oppression and injustice. I trust that God is far more likely to be discovered in such moments than in the exercise or attempted capture of state power, but even there, even then, we have the tendency to reduce God to something manageable, to a kind of team mascot for our projects and goals. The stories of Menelaus and Jacob alike suggest the ways God may wish to be freed of our projects, the better to surprise us, the better to challenge us, the better to free us from our own reductions and idolatries. Grasp too hard, and God twists away.

The final jolt of electricity I wish to throw off comes from a profound difference between the two stories. When Menelaus wrestles with Proteus, he emerges from the encounter unscathed. Not so Jacob. When he wrestles with God, his hip is thrown out of joint, creating a site of permanent vulnerability, a limp. What does it mean that in the tradition we name as sacred, to wrestle with God somehow produces a wound?

There are all sorts of ways that religion can and has wounded people, but I don't believe that's what's at stake here. Rather, the story seems to suggest that, for Jacob, he would need to confront the world from a sense of his vulnerability, aware of his own fragile weaknesses. It's

telling that that is how he is forced to confront his brother, whom he has wronged - from his weakness, from his vulnerability. We can wonder if that's one of the reasons that his brother chose the path of forgiveness, rather than vengeance, which he had every right to pursue. Might it have been because Jacob presented himself as somehow more vulnerable, open, broken, and thus, somehow, more trustworthy? Menelaus returns home every bit a king, thus seeming not quite human. But Jacob returns home as a limping and vulnerable man, owning up to his mistakes and begging forgiveness. It's a telling and very moving difference.

That too has to do with us. To be engaged in the long process of faith, to spend a lifetime grappling with God, means that we come to terms with our vulnerabilities, and learn to use them as sources of wisdom and strength. I don't know about you, but when I am my happiest and most cheerful self, I often fail to perceive the deep needs, and wounds, that others carry around with them. I become something closer to an island. But at other times, when I'm more in touch with my own vulnerabilities, I'm somehow able to understand similar dynamics in others. I can't say for anyone other than me, but paradoxically, that's when I tend to be at my best as a human being. It's when I'm most compassionate, most empathetic, most open to the deep stories of those who I encounter. I suspect that's something of what is happening for Jacob at the River Jabbok. It strikes me as a beautiful and soulful contrast, a correction if you will, of the Greek ideal of self-possession embodied by Menelaus. In faith, we learn what it is to live into our own deep wounds and vulnerabilities. It's that fundamental orientation in life that opens toward the sequel to this story of wrestling at the Jabbok, which is the scene of reconciliation and embrace.

Is that not, finally, the meaning of the blessing that Jacob receives? Menelaus receives knowledge, and it is enough to return him home. Jacob receives a wound and a blessing, and it sends him forth into the world a changed person, humbler certainly, wiser perhaps, kinder we hope. Perhaps that's what it is to receive the blessing of God in this world. It's a wounded vulnerability that allows us to perceive at last that amidst all the divisions and conflicts that separate us, and amidst all the boasts of self-sufficiency that have defined us, we are one human family.

Four sparks, four jolts of electricity, born of rubbing two stories together that Tertullian, and those following in his wake, would sooner keep apart: the spark of recognition between ourselves and others, along with the realization that we need one another if we are to speak our truths well; the spark of acceptance that if we are to inhabit the life of faith over the course of a lifetime, the God whom we grasp will change shape as we mature and grow; the spark of awareness that God, and religion itself, cannot and should not be domesticated and made to serve narrow ends; and the spark of our painful growth into maturity, as we come to learn what it is to encounter one another not from our pride, not from our sense of superiority, but from our very vulnerabilities - those places where our hearts are splintered, where our steps are halted by the trace of a limp. What I wish, what I hope, is that some of that electricity courses through your veins.

What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? Everything. For as Jacob learned at the Jabbok, we are one human family. I like to think that that's the blessing we all receive when we stay in the struggle. I like to think that's the gift of wrestling with God through the night, and maybe across a lifetime.