

Sunday 19 April 2009 (first Sunday after Easter)
Peace Church, Munich
Emily Zumpe

Beauty of the Night
Genesis 32: 22-32 (Ps 17:1-7, 15; Acts16:25-36)

Let us pray:

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts be holy and pleasing to you,
God, our Rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Good morning brothers and sisters

On this first Sunday after Easter, it is a nice time to think back about the whirlwind of the last few weeks. I don't if any of you are like me, but between family gatherings, work, visits with friends, extra meditations at church, many all-age worship services filled with activities, daily readings of Peter Storey, shopping, evenings in the beer gardens and generally being very busy, I am a bit exhausted. But the strange thing is, when I lie down in bed at night, I never manage to sleep more than a few hours. With the first rays of sunlight I awake feeling rejuvenated and eager to start the day. Now that may be normal for some of you early birds, but I love sleep and I love my bed. I am a true enthusiast for reading at night and in the morning in bed, taking breakfast in bed, mid-afternoon naps in bed. Sometimes I wish I could spend a whole day in my pajamas and in bed – it's a place to relax, to let go, heal, sleep, rest, to simply be still. For those of you who know me, you know that still is not a word one would usually use to describe me! So in the midst of the busy Easter season, what had me up and out of bed so early each morning?

I was wrestling. I am still wrestling. Just like Jacob on the banks of the Jabbok. And I have been wrestling with this passage from Genesis for months now. You see, Caroline chose our OT reading today for the last Thursday evening Bible study that I attended at Pastor Christine's house. For those of you who have never joined one of these evenings, you should really consider it. Christine has introduced a method of Bible study where a passage of scripture is chosen and read aloud by a

volunteer. Then there is time for silent meditation and we are asked to consider what word or phrase strikes us most in the passage. At the end of the time allotted, we are asked to share our thoughts if we'd like, although we are encouraged not to comment on the statements of the others, but to focus on our own individual ideas. The passage is read a second time by someone else and we are asked to consider what God is trying to say to us personally through the passage. After a period of silence and sharing, the passage is read a third and final time by another person. We are then asked to reflect on our response to God's individual message for us. Our response may also be shared with group if desired. This is a simple and elegant method of studying the Bible – no need for teachers, books, materials, preparation. No research or previous religious experience required; just simple listening, considering and responding.

And so on one evening a few months ago, Caro chose the story of Jacob.

(read story from Genesis 32: 22-28, only)

So many things struck us about this story, which takes place at the end of Jacob's life. Many of you remember the story of Jacob: a miracle birth to a barren couple, Isaac and Rebekah, an ambitious teenager who made his twin brother Esau trade his birthright for a bowl of soup, a devious young man who tricked his dying father into blessing him as a leader of the nation. You may remember Jacob on the run, fearing that Esau would kill him for stealing the blessing, Jacob asleep on a rock for a pillow, alone in the desert, dreaming about a stairway to heaven. Then Jacob marries, has a family, builds a successful business, all the while lying and cheating and stealing. Jacob was not the type of son his father Isaac could be proud of – he was certainly not a man we would think deserving of a face-to-face encounter with God. But here we find him, all alone on the banks of the Jabbok river, in the middle of the night, nearing the end of a life filled with greed, ambition and selfishness. Here we find Jacob sending away his family and possessions – nothing left but him and God alone – and he fights to be blessed. He wrestles, is injured in the process and doesn't stop fighting until daybreak,

when God finally says, “enough!” And in the first rays of dawn, Jacob turns to God and asks for what he wants – he asks to be blessed. And right away, God blesses him.

It’s as simple as that. Ask and you shall receive. Jacob didn’t deserve a blessing, but God doesn’t check his credentials. God doesn’t ask questions or force Jacob to earn his blessing. He doesn’t require anything at all. He was probably waiting all night long for Jacob just to ask for the blessing. I wonder if God thought, “Ok, Jacob. Here we go again. My arms are open wide and I am ready and waiting to love you and bless you. But if you need to wrestle all night, then that’s fine with me. I do wish you would realize, though, that it is not I who asks you to suffer, but you who seeks out the suffering!”

There are many interesting messages packed into this one little story. At first, I noticed that God did not save Jacob from the consequences of his actions – when you wrestle, you sometimes get hurt. So Jacob came away with a broken hip. In the same way, God promises to protect us and love us, but when we make bad decisions, he does not protect us from the consequences. In some cultures and throughout history, many people believed that everything that happened in life was a direct result of God’s choices. Many people fail to look in the mirror, to see their lives as a product of their own choices, to take responsibility for themselves and the result of their actions. This is a lesson we can all learn, one we continue to learn throughout our lives. God will always be there to help us pick up the broken pieces of our life, but if we want to smash it about, he will not stop us from doing so.

Secondly, I noticed that even though Jacob had stolen the blessing of Isaac, even though he had acted in illegal and dishonorable ways to get what he wanted, God still let him keep the blessing. There was no punishment from God, no setting the record straight. Isaac promised to bless Jacob, and God followed through, even though Jacob had given God enough reasons to punish him.

Thirdly, I noticed that this story took place at night. Night, darkness, the absence of light – these are concepts found throughout the Bible and throughout literature in every culture. Nightfall is often portrayed as a dangerous time, a time when mischief or chaos may reign and sinful things are hidden and protected by the darkness. In church, we are urged to walk as children of the light, to put away dark deeds, to let our little light shine. But if we look closer, there are many stories in the Bible, like Jesus praying in Gethsemane, or Paul and Silas praying down the prison walls, which occur during the night. And these stories are not stories of danger and sin, but stories of great rejoicing with God or earnest prayer and a deep connection to God. So what is it about starlight and shadows that bring us closer to God? When we cannot see what is around us, are we more aware that God is always with us? When the world is sleeping, does God start working overtime? Or is it just that when we slow down, stop talking, stop running around to various meetings and appointments, stop the chatter, just STOP! – is it then that we can finally know that he is God, can finally hear God speaking to us? Very directly, very intimately, very clearly.

The night, then becomes an invitation – to meet God, to be with God, to experience his love and acceptance, to receive his blessing. And to begin to see ourselves as he sees us – worth to be loved, worthy to be cared for, **worthy**. When we stop and listen, when we stop wrestling with our own guilt, our own depression, anger, fear, self-loathing, loneliness, sadness, pain – when we stop fighting alone, we can hear God’s voice, understand that we are not alone. We can hear him say, “Here I am. Still waiting. You may continue to struggle and to suffer as long as you like, or you may stop and claim the blessing that I have been saving for you all this time.” The prophet Jeremiah described this voice of God so beautifully, “For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

When we slow down and when we are all alone with God – in the middle of the night or in bright daylight, out in a remote field, on a mountainside or even in the heart of a busy city like Munich – when we close our mouths and open our ears and our hearts, we can gain a true understanding of

ourselves, the world and God's love. We realize that we are his children, created in his image, and he is love. Which means, that we, too, are love – each and every one of us. It is our birthright, it is our calling, it is our purpose in life. Pure, undeserving, ecstatic, life-changing, life-shaping, revolutionary, awe-inspiring, boundless, endless, unlimited, amazing love. (sing: Amazing love, how can it be, that you my King would die for me? Amazing love, I know it's true. And it's my joy to honor you in all I do, I honor you.)

When we allow God to fill us with this love, with this peace that passes understanding, we begin to see ourselves and others in a different way. We begin to love more, to know more, to feel and to live more – our patience grows, our doubts subside and we begin to feel connected to God and to one another. We feel a part of the family of God, and we are not afraid to step outside our comfort zones to reach out to others, to touch others, to love others and include them in the family of God. Barriers of race, religion, culture and creed begin to fade, anger calms, ignorance melts, hatred dissolves, and hearts are healed. We are healed.

On this sunny spring morning, in the wake of a beautiful Easter season, we can come to the cross and lay down our burdens, just like the rocks that Dawn passed out last Sunday. I found them in a coat pocket this past week, and I thought – now why did I bring **those** home with me? We can bring these burdens to God and walk away feeling as light as a balloon. We can dance, not just holding hands and dancing through Peace Church like we did last Sunday, but holding hands across the world and throughout our entire life. We can put away the violence and death of the cross, and become a part of the living cross, our hearts clean and pure and as beautiful as the flowers we placed on the cross last Sunday. We can live our lives like Easter people – singing triumphantly in our hearts, He lives, he lives. We can rejoice in our intimate fellowship, in an amazing friendship with God. We can know that we are not alone – we never have been, and we never will be.

I began this sermon by talking about sleepless nights. I used to dread them – waking up without feeling rested, trudging through the day, exhausted and always on the edge of anger or frustration. As the first light of morning hit my closed eyes, I used to think, “Why me? Why can’t I just get some rest? Not again!” My mom said that it was just age – I turned 30 last December and boom – suddenly I became an early riser. I didn’t want to accept that, and I missed my days in bed, but it is true nonetheless. I can’t sleep as long anymore. But thanks to Jacob’s story, and to this Easter season, I have learned to look forward to sleepless nights and solitary sunrise meditations. I am learning to be still, to listen for God’s voice and to delight in my time alone with him. And although I may not seem very “still” on the outside now, and maybe I never will be, I am learning that a still heart can lead to great things. The blessings of a direct fellowship with God are everlasting.

Please consider Jacob and his wrestling match as you go throughout your week. When there are times in your life filled with fear, pain and worry, please try to remember Jacob’s example, try to stop struggling alone and simply ask God to be with you and to bless you. Won’t you consider today the ways that God may be trying to speak to you, to comfort you, to love you – in the still quiet of this morning?

Amen.

Let us pray:

Father of the light and of the darkness, you are holy and wholly good. You are love, you love us and we are your children. Help us to remember our birthright, to love ourselves, to share your love with others and join with you in fellowship in the stillness of our hearts and lives.