

Eighteen years ago today was my first Sunday back in the pulpit after my sister's death. This week I looked back at what I preached that day to try to remember how I had expressed an idea. I discovered that while that was in many ways tied to that particular time and set of circumstances, most of it was just as applicable today. So I am going to share a revised, revisited version of that sermon with you today.

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My sister was suffering for a very long time, and really wasn't herself for the last year. The last week was, frankly, hellish, and I sincerely pray that none of you ever have to live through such a thing. But it's over now; she's free. Her death was a blessing, even if she wasn't willing to accept it as such until her very last breath.

The day before she died, she told her partner Tom that the angel was there. We took comfort in that—even those who dismissed as a hallucination—but apparently Sherry did not. She was not ready to go and she made that angel wait all day and night. Struggling to breathe, writhing in pain, she was not ready to let go.

The day after she died, I had a little bit of an argument with a hospice chaplain, who tried to console me by saying that it all went on so long because God wasn't ready for Sherry yet. And I blew up. I told this chaplain

that God WAS ready for Sherry, that God had been ready for Sherry to come home months ago, but Sherry was not ready to let go—she was exercising her free will up until the very last minute. “Don’t try to pin this on God,” I told her. “God is not responsible for Sherry’s suffering. God is not a sadist.” I tried to calm down a bit, and explained that I appreciated what she was trying to do, but that I took great *comfort* in knowing that God let Sherry do this on her own schedule, even if it was horrible for the rest of us. God let Sherry take all the time she needed to finally trust that it was safe to accompany the angel wherever he led her, and let go. This chaplain argued a bit more until I told her I was done with the conversation and walked away, somewhat stunned with my own rudeness, but knowing I needed to step away before I *really* lost my temper.

At Sherry’s funeral, this same woman walked up to me, hesitantly, and told me I was right. She told me that she took what I said to heart, and would take a different approach to such situations in the future. Thank God for that, I thought. And knew that some good had come out of the whole messy situation.

But it did remind me of the question my spiritual director so often asks. Where was God in all this? Not as an accusation against God, but just as a way of processing what happened. Where were the places I expected to find God, and didn’t? Where were the

places where God showed up unexpectedly? How did God fulfill my expectations, and how did God surprise me?

Part of our work in this life is figuring out where God is, in the midst of things, and our readings for today tell us that there is no one, single answer to that question.

Sometimes the answer is easy. If you have 5000 men *plus* women and children, and somehow manage to satisfy their hunger with five loaves and two fish, it doesn't take a lot of work to figure out that God had a hand in that. It's easy to see God in the BIG miracles.

Sometimes the knowledge of God's presence and role in a situation is felt in our hearts, as Paul felt in that reading from the letter to the Romans. Sometimes there isn't any physical evidence to point to, but our conscience confirms it, by the Holy Spirit. These moments are a little harder, and can be dangerous: it can be awfully easy to confuse our own prejudices and pre-conceived notions with God's will.

Most of the time, however, figuring out where God is in all of this is more like that story of Jacob wrestling on the ford of the river Jabbok. If last week's passage from Romans is my absolute favorite part of Scripture, this story runs close behind. There is something in it that

speaks to my experiences with God, and I bet I'm not alone.

Let me remind us of the context. Years before, Jacob cheated his brother Esau—not once, but twice. He got that birthright, that extra portion of the inheritance, which was bad enough. But he also tricked his father into blessing HIM with the special blessing of God, passed down from Abraham. The blessing that extended not just to him but to any of his offspring. The blessing that Isaac meant to give to Esau, the firstborn. And when Esau found out what Jacob had done, he was ticked, to put it mildly. So Jacob ran away, ended up with his mother's relative, Laban, who was a tricky fellow himself. Last week you heard the story of how Laban cheated the cheater, and stuck Jacob with his eldest daughter, Leah, as wife, when he thought he was marrying Rachel, for whom he had worked 7 years.

Today we pick up the story several years later. Jacob has two wives, two concubines, numerous children. He has developed a nice flock of sheep and goats, and has built up some wealth for himself. But he's tired of being under Laban's thumb. So, ever true to his own deceitful character, Jacob runs away in the night. Laban does catch up with him eventually, and that is an interesting story in itself, but we join the narrative a little further along. He manages to get away from Laban without violence, only to be met with runners who tell him that

his brother Esau—remember Esau, who was furious with him?—Esau is coming out to “meet” him with a large host...it looks like Esau is coming out ready to fight. And Jacob, dear Jacob, what does he do? Does he face up to the consequences of his actions and go out and face his brother in the daylight? NO. Jacob sends everyone on ahead of him across the river, and stays on the bank by himself. He puts all the property and family he has accumulated out between himself and his potentially murderous brother. Even at this point, he’s a big chicken, ready to sacrifice everything—including his own children—to save his own skin.

And what happens? “A man wrestled with him until daybreak.” It took Jacob all night to figure out who it was he was struggling against. At first he probably thought that Esau had somehow managed to get through to him, despite all his precautions. He fought with all his strength, believing this man was bent on killing him.

But as it grew lighter, with the approaching dawn, Jacob began to see that it was NOT Esau. It was...someone, something, else. We usually say it was an angel, although the text doesn’t actually use that word. The text actually tells us, eventually, that Jacob was wrestling against God. However Jacob understood it, his motive switched as the sun rose. He stopped fighting to

be let free, and started fighting to hold on. He wasn't letting go until he had received a blessing.

And what an odd sort of blessing it was—a limp and a new name. A limp, I believe, to make it clear that he couldn't run away from his problems anymore. He needed instead to slow down and look them straight in the face. And a new name, as a promise that he could make a new start. He could set aside *Jacob*, that name that meant liar, cheat, deceiver, and become *Israel*, the one who has striven with God and humans, and prevailed. Probably not the kind of blessing he was expecting. But a blessing, nevertheless. To all of us, as well. He wrestled with God, and prevailed. And so can we.

We can claim that blessing for ourselves, as well, the promise that wrestling with God always ends with a blessing. When we find ourselves wrestling with something difficult, with something painful and based in fear, it's important to keep our eyes open, to look for God in every situation. Sometimes we're wrestling with the consequences of our own actions or the random events of life in this world, and all we can do is call out to God for help.

But sometimes, we discover that what we're wrestling against is God's own self. We're struggling to break free from the Divine grasp that has taken hold of us.

Sometimes we tell the angel that he can sit in the corner for as long as he likes, but we are NOT going with him, not today, thank you. And God won't force us. God will just keep holding onto us until we discover we want what God wants. We stop trying to break free from God's grasp, and instead start holding on as tight as we can, coming to understand that God will bring blessing, not curse. Welcome, not condemnation.

So when you find yourself in a difficult situation, confused, maybe even heartbroken, wondering what's going on, and what to do next: ask yourself where God is in all this. Ask GOD where God is in all this. The answer may surprise you. But if you face it, even if you face it by struggling against it for a while, sooner or later, you will recognize where God is, and you will find the courage and the strength to ask—to demand—that God bless you.

Just be ready, because the blessing isn't necessarily going to be in the form you were anticipating. But it will be the blessing you need. And there is no doubt that you will walk away changed.

Amen