

12 Pentecost  
Sermon for August 3, 2008  
Raymond Raney

Genesis 32:22-31  
Psalm 17:1-7,16  
Romans 9:1-5  
Matthew 14:13-21

There's something miraculous about today's readings. A man wrestles with God and wins, and another man feeds at least 5,000 people with next to nothing. The readings didn't start out as miracles.

To beg a cliché, both readings begin with a “dark night of the soul.” Moments when hope seems like some distant dream, and reality too sharp and biting. These are moments that send us into frenzy: what do I do next? It is what we do that makes all the difference.

Jacob got up and sent everyone away from him, and Jesus withdrew to a deserted place. Two men who separate themselves from everyone they love and everyone they know – from everyone. That is what most men do, isn't it? But maybe it's not just men, maybe women, too. Maybe it's what most people do when things threaten us, when we are afraid, when the world seems to be falling in on us.

Jacob and Jesus both had good reasons to retreat into the darkness, into the safety of isolation. They both feared for their lives.

Jacob is returning to the land of his birth, the home that he fled after he and his mother tricked his father into giving Jacob the blessing that belonged to his twin brother, Esau. He sent word that he wished to return, and he has just learned that Esau is coming with 400 men. Jacob is scared. He has split his tribe and sent gifts in hopes of appeasing Esau's righteous angers. He has divided his family in hopes that not all of them will be killed for what he did. And he waits for the dawn – alone.

Jesus has gone off in a boat to be alone. He has just learned that Herod chopped off the head of his cousin, John, the Baptizer, the cousin who leapt in his mother's womb at the approach of Mary; the man who baptized him in the Jordan and watched as heaven opened up and the voice proclaimed, “This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased.” And now, his cousin is dead for proclaiming the truth of the Kingdom of God, just as he, Jesus, is doing. And he waits for the dawn – alone.

That's not a bad coping mechanism. If I isolate myself, I only have to deal with me. Besides, I don't want to bother those around me with my problems. I'll just sit here in the dark for awhile, and maybe I'll feel better.

That's what I always did, after all, that's what my father did: go off alone – get away from the family, don't share what hurts. Protect them from my feelings. If he was angry he mowed the lawn, if he was down, he went for a drive, if he was sad, he'd go sit in the swing and stare into the distance. That's what I always did too.

But Jacob wasn't alone. Just when he thought the darkness was complete, he must face a man, or is it God, and he must wrestle for his life. Through the night he wrestles with what he must face when the dawn comes. And Jacob won't let go “unless you bless me.”

This is Jacob's second encounter with God, and both times he is in fear of his brother, Esau. The first time was when he fled, and this time is when he is returning. Jacob believes that this is God and God has promised him a bright future. He doubts, as we all doubt, that the promise is true when he faces the anger of Esau. But he is blessed and given a new name – Israel – because he has striven with God and humans and prevailed. Out of his fear and terror, he emerges to the dawn in exultation.

Jesus has no direct encounter with God, instead, he encounters God's creation in humanity. In his sadness as he grieves over the death of John, as he ponders the death that he believes he will face in the near future, as he wipes tears of sadness and fear from his eyes, Jesus hears the voices of humanity calling to him. These voices beckon him from the darkness of his isolation to embrace them with compassion. He greets them with his peace and heals their sick and teaches them the lessons of the Kingdom: love God and love your neighbor – care for each other and God cares for you. Jesus leaves the fear behind and emerges into the promise of the abundance of God's kingdom.

My own dark night came in the midst of depression some thirty years ago. My personal life had fallen apart over a lost love. I was barely able to maintain a hold on my work. I worked every day, and then came home and sat in the dark. I don't remember how long that depression lasted – weeks or months. But in that darkness one night, I seemed to hear a voice calling, and I could see night sky out my window with stars and the moon. And I heard this voice tell me: “everything will be all right. You don't have to worry anymore. You are not alone.” The dawn came for me that day like the dawn of the first day of creation.

I reached out to people I knew I could talk to and got help. I found a new life professionally and personally. Jacob limbed on to be embraced by his brother and welcomed home, and to become the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. Jesus did so much more.

There's a line from last year's film “Batman Begins” that has stuck with me: “It is not who I am inside that defines, but what I do.”

After a day of teaching in the hills far away from everything, Jesus asks his disciples to feed the multitude. “I'm sorry but Smith's is closed and WalMart isn't open.” Nobody could feed this many people, send them home.

But Jesus asks for what they have: five loaves and two fish. Jesus blesses the food and breaks it and begins to hand it out to the people. Food is distributed to everyone: 5,000 men besides women and children – at least another 5,000, and there are twelve baskets full left over.

What happened? Was it a miracle? Was Jesus able to pull food out of thin air, like God feeding the Hebrews in the wilderness or Elijah making a widow's flour and oil last for the length of the drought? Or did everyone just see the generosity of this man giving away the only food he had and opened up their cloaks to share all that they had with those around them? I don't know. Whatever happened, it was a miracle.

That miracle is what we share each Sunday when we come to this table, this altar and share in the Eucharist. We break the bread to share in the life of the risen Christ. No one is turned away from this table. There is always enough to eat, enough to share.

This bread sustains us in this world to give us the strength to work for the Kingdom of God, here and now. That bread that we share feeds us with the bread of life that we might be the body of Christ.

That was what Jesus gave us in the feeding of the multitude. That was the true miracle – He turned us into the body of Christ. We need never be alone, not in the darkest night, not in the deepest fear, not in the terror of facing the unknown.

We are the body of Christ, and heirs of this world and the next. We are called to be witnesses to the truth by how we live our lives and what we do with the gifts we have been given. We are the body of Christ. We are called turn the challenges of this life into the opportunities that seem like miracles to those around us.