

The Joy that Comes with the Morning

Sermon by [Cynthia A. Jarvis](#)

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Genesis 32:6-13; 22-32

Luke 15:1-10

“Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning.”

Spoken beside the corporate thanksgiving of “Old Hundredth”, a psalm that pulls out the stops for the sake of our praise in the great congregation, the 30th psalm sounds a sober note this morning. This too is a psalm of thanksgiving, but a psalm of individual thanksgiving provoked by the psalmist’s experience of rescue from his own impending death. Listen!

I will extol you, O Lord, for you have drawn me up,
and did not let my foes rejoice over me.
O Lord my God, I cried to you for help,
and you have healed me.
O Lord, you brought up my soul from Sheol,
restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit.

Sing praises to the Lord, O you his faithful ones,
and give thanks to his holy name.
For his anger is but for a moment;
his favor is for a lifetime.
Weeping may linger for the night,
but joy comes with the morning.

Old Testament professor Artur Weiser presumes sickness has brought the psalmist to the brink of the grave. Perhaps, though I think he just as well could have been overcome and subsequently healed of countless other fears. They are the fears that threaten to overtake us still today: the fear of sickness unto death, the fear of financial ruin, the fear of love lost or never found, the fear of public humiliation, the fear of some enemy at our gate who will better us in battle, the fear of being found out for the imposter that we are. Whatever its impetus, the things that we fear turn our minds toward our own end--sometimes literally but more often metaphorically. Then, in the middle of the night and on the brink of the grave, we toss and turn, we wrestle with an intruder whose presence makes us question ourselves, question the direction and worth of our lives, question the reality of the God whose face is obscured and whose will toward us is a mystery. In the light of day, the psalmist remembers praying, beseeching, bargaining with an adversary until daybreak:

As for me, I said in my prosperity,
“I shall never be moved.”
By your favor, O Lord,
you had established me as a strong mountain;
You hid your face; I was dismayed.

To you, O Lord, I cried,
and to the Lord I made supplication:
“What profit is there in my death,
if I go down to the Pit?
Will the dust praise you?

Will it tell of your faithfulness?
Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me!
O Lord, be my helper!"

It is as though, at the pinnacle of our achievements, at the turn in the road where we think we have arrived, in the fleeting moment when we are about to congratulate ourselves for becoming somebody, as we draw breath to say to ourselves, smugly, "I shall never be moved", death, defeat, destruction, disease enter in, bringing us face to face with the fact that we are dust, and to dust we shall return. We may, of course, kick against the limits of this mortal life; but finally we kick to no avail. Instead in the darkness, weary with well-doing, we beg, we bargain, we plead for the mercy of the God we have not needed in our success. "What profit is there in my death?" asks the psalmist as if God needed him more than he needed God. "Will the dust praise you?" In other words, if you give me another shot at things, I can be valuable to you! Why does God fall for this every time? But thank God, God does, so that with thanksgiving and by God's grace and providence alone, we live to see another morning, praying incredulously:

You have turned my mourning into dancing
you have taken off my sackcloth
and clothed me with joy,
so that my soul may praise you and not be silent.
O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever.

We pray this even though forever should again fade into our ordinary, everyday denial of life's brevity; we pray this even if, in a weak moment, we wrestled in the darkness at a distance from God and cried out for help. Then when help comes, or as John Baillie has put this and we have heard before from the pulpit, "if the imagined danger disappears as it usually has done, I incline only to think how absurd were my fears and to banish the whole little episode from my mind with a shrug of relief. How often I forget," he confesses, "to follow up my petition with thanksgiving!"

But these are generalities. As we consider the psalms of individual thanksgiving on the third Sunday of Lent, I think we would do well to consider an actual individual whose desperate cries to God--for help and deliverance in the night--were answered with the joy that comes in the morning. Reading and rereading the 30th psalm, I could not help but think again of Jacob. This time we meet up with him on the night he fears will be his last. Unless it should be that God will deliver him from the hand of his brother, Jacob knows Esau surely will take his life and the life of his family in the morning.

On one hand, Jacob has asked for this. His name says it all. A play on the Hebrew word for heel, he is a leg-puller, a heel-catcher, a supplanter, a trickster. Having met his match in his uncle and father-in-law Laban, God commands him to return to the place of his birth with his wives, his children, his flocks, his great wealth. In obedience, Jacob turns toward the land of his ancestors, his kindred, his brother. He turns toward death: toward Esau. Now this heel, who has lived by his wits, is at his wits' end. Jacob's only hope is the promise that accompanied God's command to return: God's promise to be with him.

Informed by his messengers that Esau is also headed his way and flanked by four hundred men, Jacob does instinctually what we all do when we find ourselves in a foxhole of sorts: he prays. Or as amateur exegete Leon Kass puts it, Jacob, "the *chronically self-reliant*, now turns to prayer. He has never prayed before; indeed, all his previous encounters with God were [God's initiative]—the dream at Beth-El, the speech to leave Paddan-aram, the appearance of the angels at Mahanaim. In fact,"

notes Kass, “rarely has anyone before [in the narrative] prayed to the Lord, or at least in this way, and not in the reader’s hearing. . . . Jacob, in his great need, pours out his heart to God, but not without using his professed humility to bolster his petition” that God keep his now inflated promise, a promise not only to be with him, but to do him good.

Addressing the God of father Abraham and father Isaac, Jacob leads with his unworthiness: *I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant*. Is this feigned humility, we wonder? More of Jacob’s chutzpah? Self-deceptive, at the least; disingenuous, even manipulative, at the worst? But I think not. Rather God is praying in this vulnerable man the prayer Jacob has never been able to pray on his own, so taken has he been with his own cleverness. The psalmist’s words come to mind: *As for me, I said in my prosperity, ‘I shall never be moved*. Face to face with his death, Jacob’s life flashes before him and, like the psalmist looking back on a night of weeping, Jacob sees himself as he really is. He sees trust misplaced in his accumulation of wealth, in his cleverness, in those attributes and possessions that bestowed upon him the illusion of self-sufficiency. Now in the conversation that is prayer, he beholds his life as gift rather than achievement: *for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan; and now I have become two companies*. Here are the seeds of thanksgiving! Then leaning on God’s grace alone, Jacob pleads, begs urgently: *Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, Esau, for I am afraid of him*. Deliver me, please, we beg, from the disease that stalks me by day, the failure that lies in wait for me every night, the enemy at the door of my conscious thoughts, my adversary sin which lurks in the shadows. *To you, O Lord, I cried, and to the Lord I made supplication.... Hear, O Lord and be gracious to me! O Lord, be my helper!*

“Jacob’s remarkable prayer,” writes Kass, “is met with silence: there is no immediate response from God. Never one to rely on God alone, perhaps believing that God will help him who helps himself, Jacob next tries to purchase Esau’s good will with gifts.” Because he is not yet at the point of trusting his life into God’s hand, Jacob once again takes the situation into his own. We know this move so well! But the next move is more mysterious. He sends wives, children and servants on ahead. “Whatever the reason,” says Kass, “Jacob, as it were, gives up everything his love and his cleverness have gotten him, in order to stand forth ‘naked’ before God and man.”

Jacob was left alone, we read, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. The sentences that follow are filled with silence, ambiguity, mystery. Jacob is no longer in control and yet he manages to hold his own against the one whose face he cannot see, whose name he cannot know, whose power to wound and power to bless are inextricably enmeshed in Jacob’s weary mind and body. There is little I know to say here, save that between the weeping that tarries through the night and the joy that comes with the morning, I think there is the wrestling we all have known in the pitch dark, when we are vulnerable rather than in control, when all that is unresolved floods into our psyche, when our anxieties take hold of our reason, when sin insinuates itself, separating us and daring us, naked on the mat, to do business with the one—both sibling and Savior—whom we dread and love in the same breath.

“The outcome of the wrestling,” says Walter Brueggemann, is ‘You have striven with God and with man and you have prevailed’. In the daytime, we would ask, ‘Now which is it, God or man?’ But at night things are not sorted out. There is in this meeting a convergence of the ominousness of holiness and the dreadfulness of brother. That, of course, is how it is in the night. We never get God alone, without all the complexities and unresolve of the neighborhood. And we never get wronged brother alone, without the

threatening face of God. The narrator understands that the hidden powers of conflict and the hidden chance of resolve occur at night, beyond our intent. There is something of the divine in our deep human conflict and something of humanness in the holiness of God, for at night heaven and earth come at us jointly and redefine us in radical ways.

In the morning, Jacob wakes as one who has seen God face to face and lives.

In the morning the psalmist has no doubt:

You have turned my mourning into dancing

you have taken off my sackcloth

and clothed me with joy,

so that my soul may praise you and not be silent.

O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever.

But what of the morning after a night of weeping and anger, of tossing and turning, when we wake neither changed nor chastened? In that dim light, I confess that I know only enough to wait for the God who is also the brother, the one who enters the narrative of our lives, in the flesh, to seek the lost one alone in a dark corner or to save the trembling one afraid on a cliff. The gospel is this: He is the One who has wrestled our death and our endings to the mat long ago on a cross, who alone has seen God face to face and lives. And because he lives, he will seek us until he finds us, until he carries us home where his Father, who has been weeping for want of us through the night, will rejoice with exceeding joy at our return with the morning. Thanks be to God!