

“I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope.” Psalm 130:5

Lost somewhere in last week’s media cycle of etch-a-sketch flaps, rising gas prices, and Seminole County 9-1-1 tapes, was Fabrice Muamba’s miraculous account of his death and resurrection. Muamba, a soccer player for the Bolton Wanderers in England, collapsed after 40 minutes into the first half against Tottenham. His heart stopped. He was 23 years-old. He was dying.. Medical personnel immediately rushed onto the field and within seconds they were attempting to revive Muamba with CPR. The scene at White Hart Lane, where the game was held, was ghastly. Players on the field held their head in their hands, some dropped to their knees and prayed. When not chanting his name, the fans in the stadium (of the opposing team, mind you) watched on in horrible silence with tears running down many of their faces. And then someone inexplicably pushed his way through the fans, and came out of the stadium, running onto the field. Normally this person would have been tackled immediately by security. But Andrew Deaner, a fan who also just happened to be a cardiologist, was allowed on to the field, which quite frankly is amazing and speaks to the severity of the situation. With the help of Deaner, the medical personnel were able to deliver two defibrillator shocks, but neither worked, so they loaded Muamba onto a stretcher and rushed him off the field, with both teams following behind. The game had been mercifully cancelled.

An hour later, there was still no response from the news outlets. It was assumed that he had died and that the team was preparing a statement. Hope was seemingly lost. And then came a flurry of tweets that he was alive. That somehow, miraculously, his heart was beating again. And then came an official report saying that after 78 minutes of effectively being dead, and after 15 defibrillator shocks, Muamba’s heart was in fact beating again. This, indeed, was a miracle.

A religious man, Muamba has since released a statement through his fiancé that he is thankful for everyone’s prayers and that he principally thanks God that he is still alive. Truth be told however, without the immediate response of the medical personnel and Deaner’s courageous choice to act, Muamba wouldn’t have made it. Medical reports have indicated that even a short moment’s hesitation would have resulted in a crucial loss of oxygen extinguishing any chance of survival. If those who acted were instead passive, God wouldn’t have even had the chance to be involved in the miracle that occurred.

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Several years ago when I was infatuated with The Onion and its brand of “news” I stumbled upon a spin-off website that truly spoke to me. It was called Lark News. Like The Onion, it was and still is only satire, but unlike The Onion, Lark News only reported on events within the world of Christianity. Many evangelical Christians were somewhat confused at first and took offense, which perhaps is not very surprising. They would even call into Christian radio stations, complaining about the fabricated story they had just read, condemning its fake subject matters and individuals. One such story always stood out to me, not because it was funnier or more poignant than the rest, but because I thought that one day it just might preach. Well, today just happens to be that day:

Man, 91, dies waiting for will of God

TUPELO: Walter Houston, described by family members as a devoted Christian, died Monday after waiting 70 years for God to give him clear direction about what to do with his life.

"He hung around the house and prayed a lot, but just never got that confirmation," his wife Ruby said. "Sometimes he thought he heard God's voice, but then he wouldn't be sure, and he'd start the process all over again."

Houston, she says, never really figured out what his life was about, but felt content to pray continuously about what he might do for the Lord. Whenever he was about to take action, he would pull back "because he didn't want to disappoint God or go against him in any way," Ruby says. "He was very sensitive to always remain in God's will. He was too afraid of letting the Lord down."

Like all satires, remnants of truth are woven throughout this tale. For how many of us have delayed our faithful response when we’ve been called to action? How many of us have hoped that God would take care of everything on God’s own, with nothing or just the minimal amount of effort being required of us? Just a month ago I preached on the virtue of waiting in patience and how it can make our spiritual awareness more acute; but this kind of waiting, a waiting marked by passivity is contrary to what we are called to be as Christians in the world today.

Moreover, it’s contrary to what we learn from Jacob’s example in our reading from Genesis. Now, Jacob perhaps is not the greatest figure to lean on in a sermon. After all, he had stolen Esau’s birthright and had taken up with two wives... enough dirt there to ruin anyone’s election campaign. But, as always, we must accept context and literary license when entering into Scripture, just as we should rejoice over inspirational messages wherever we can find them. And the narrative about Jacob this morning is as inspirational as it gets. For the man wrestled with God!

Unlike the man from Lark News, Jacob knew that an encounter with his brother Esau was coming and decided to do something about it. He didn't just wait around, immobilized by the fear of taking a misstep. Rather, he prepared himself and readied his servants and his family. Specifically, he sent them all away and chose to be alone on a stream named Jabbok, a play on the Hebrew word meaning "to wrestle." By doing all this, he in effect beckoned what came next: the Bible's first ever WWF wrestling match. In the red corner, standing at 5'6" – Jacob; and in the blue corner, standing at infinity -- God. Now, some commentaries say that Jacob wrestled with an Angel, while others theorize that it was a river demon symbolizing Jacob's struggle with human nature. Others however have argued that it was God's self who wrestled with Jacob, and personally, I like this commentary the best because it better fits my sermon (sarcasm).

But seriously, what's so interesting about this take is that God doesn't even win the wrestling match. The Yahwist, who authored this Old Testament narrative, doesn't even have God overpowering Jacob. Rather, he illustrates a virtual stand-off, and in doing so, argues that wrestling with God is in fact a good thing; that it can even allow one to see God face to face. That unlike the man from Lark News who died never knowing what God wanted of him because he never chose to act, Jacob found life and purpose and redemption (for in the next chapter, Jacob and Esau reconcile) principally because he actively sought and struggled with God.

Now speaking of redemption, *The Shawshank Redemption* has always been my favorite movie (smooth transition, I know). Of no great service, here is a short, rather terrible synopsis: Andy Dufresne, a successful banker, was convicted of murdering his wife – a crime he did not commit. He was sentenced to life without parole at Shawshank State Penitentiary. Several years later, after his hope for freedom had seemingly eroded, a young, somewhat flashy new inmate arrives. After they become friends, he tells Andy a story about a previous stint with a cellmate, a story that could in effect exonerate Andy. Andy thus rushes to the warden with this news, hoping he would do something with it so to reverse his conviction. This of course does not happen and once again hope for Andy's freedom appears to be lost. Tired then of waiting and trusting in an authority too flawed to care about his innocence, Andy carves his own hope -- "Get busy living, or get busy dying." And after 20 years locked away for a crime uncommitted, waiting for redemption that never came, Andy Dufresne tunneled out of his cell at Shawshank and bought his own.

Likewise, Mark tells us that as the Son of God was on his way to be with a dying girl, a grown woman who had suffered from hemorrhaging for 12 years spotted him. Jesus however, *the Authority*, did not spot her, nor was he coming to see her. In fact he was leaving and going in the opposite direction to see someone else. Can you imagine? The doctors already couldn't help her, so she put her hope in the Word, and yet it was walking away in the other direction! Tired then of passively waiting, this woman made a decision to act. Pushing through the crowds, like Andrew Deaneer running onto the field, she chased after hope as she ran after Jesus; and when she got near enough she lunged for him and grabbed his garment. Immediately everything stopped, immediately she was healed. And did Jesus berate her for taking his power, for not waiting her turn? Did Jesus exclaim that she should have done nothing and remained where she was, saying that sooner or later her time would have been redeemed and her hope fulfilled? No, he blessed her and commended her faith!

Grace, my friends, did not fall to her because she stood at a distance and uttered a prayer from the sidelines waiting for some hope to come her way. No, healing was hers because she desired it. Redemption was hers because she acted on it; and her personal salvation because she wrestled through a crowd to get it.

As a Christian culture however, we often hear that we can't wrestle with God, but that we have to "surrender" to God. That we must release control and leave it all in God's hands. That in order for us to be true believers, we must relinquish our humanity and let God take over. And though I always liked the idea, I've come to believe it to be largely irresponsible, especially as it can lead to spiritual paralysis and real ramifications. Take for instance the now infamous family account of my Great Grandmother.

My Great Grandmother had a daughter whose appendix burst. Being a firm believer in placing total trust in God's hopeful word and waiting on it, she did nothing but pray. Though all of the signs were critical, though she was urged by others to take her daughter to the local doctor, she refused and believed that waiting on God to intervene and surrendering to the Divine timetable was the right course of action. And so she prayed and she prayed, and waited and did nothing else, and hoped on a Word, until her daughter had passed.

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My friends, waiting on God as we ourselves do nothing is a mistake. More, it's unfair to God and dare I say, sinful. Rather, we must become joint agents with God within this world, doing as much as we can wherever we can all around us. For it is when we do instead of don't, when we jump out of the stands or push through the crowds, it is then that God can work through us such that providence may happen. Yes, miracles even can happen, but only if we take it upon ourselves to wrestle with the divine, to be responsive to God's call rather than passive, to chase after God instead of having God chase after us. Only then will we see God face to face. Only then will our hope come and will our time here be redeemed. Amen.