



the Sunday focus

Weekly Worship Resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

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Issue 47:

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Today's readings

Genesis 32: 22–32 (“Jacob wrestles at Peniel”)

The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, ‘Let me go, for the day is breaking.’ But Jacob said, ‘I will not let you go, unless you bless me.’ So he said to him, ‘What is your name?’ And he said, ‘Jacob.’ Then the man said, ‘You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.’ Then Jacob asked him, ‘Please tell me your name.’ But he said, ‘Why is it that you ask my name?’ And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, ‘For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.’ The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip. Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle. Amen. (NRSV)

Psalm 17: 1–7 (“Prayer for deliverance from persecutors”)

Hear a just cause, O Lord; attend to my cry; give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit. From you let my vindication come; let your eyes see the right.

If you try my heart, if you visit me by night, if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me; my mouth does not transgress.

As for what others do, by the word of your lips I have avoided the ways of the violent. My steps have held fast to your paths; my feet have not slipped.

I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God; incline your ear to me, hear my words. Wondrously show your steadfast love, O saviour of those who seek refuge from their adversaries at your right hand. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

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| 1 <i>Here in this place</i> (CH:623) | 2 <i>Come down, O Love Divine</i> (CH:489) |
| 3 <i>Jesus Christ is waiting</i> (CH:360) | 4 <i>Lord of all being, throned afar</i> (CH:125) |
| 5 <i>For the healing of the nations</i> (CH:706) | |

In the Name of the Father and of

Where does God meet us? That is a theological question if ever there was one. And I bet that right now, some in the congregation will be thinking: "Wonderful! He's going to give us the answer, and we'll know once and for all where it is that we can meet God." Others meanwhile might have a quite different thought running through their heads: "Here we go, lots of words ... but no answers."

Fair enough. Now let's see what can be said on this rather big subject.

If we want to know where God meets us, we could – of course – assemble a big bagful of evidence. Before long we might have framed a list of divine meeting places: in a quiet country church; on the top of a mountain; in the labour room of a maternity hospital; in the smile of a grandchild; walking along Princes Street; traipsing over a beach on a misty morning; by the side of a grave on a wet November day. God, it appears, can arrive in some unusual settings, surprising us in all sorts of ways.

It might be exceptionally hard for the person of faith to put into words exactly what makes such moments different from the usual. Yet those who can testify to having experienced an unexpected, momentary encounter with the divine will often say that God caught them unawares, leaving them changed in some way. And the experience may have been fleeting, but it was also powerful and totally convincing. Afterwards, they were never the same.

Of all the unexpected situations in which God turns up, surely one of the strangest must be that of struggle. You are met with an issue in life – a big issue that won't go away. It could be to do with your workplace, or a relationship, or a family concern, or a hard choice which just needs sorted. That big, big issue starts to dog your daily living. It keeps you awake at night. It roams around and around inside your head, yet it is never resolved. Eventually, your struggle might get the better of you and you cry out to God in despair.

Jacob is a biblical character who struggles. As a twin, he struggles with his very slightly older brother Esau, right from the word go. Robbing Esau of his inheritance, Jacob is guilty of a serious act of deception, so he makes his escape from his brother and goes into exile. Heading away on a long journey to the old family home, Jacob experiences a strange dream in which a ladder (or a flight of steps) connects heaven above to the earth below.

In Genesis chapter 28 we hear about this dramatic encounter with God. Jacob is told: '*Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.*' Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, '*Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!*' And he was afraid, and said, '*How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.*'

So Jacob has a first-hand experience of God, brought to him in that powerful dream. And by his reaction to a moment of divine intervention we can see that Jacob's life is turned around. He would never be the same again. Many years later we come to another dramatic story involving this flawed character who, once again, finds himself on the road. Now married to sisters Leah and Rachel and in the process of escaping with their entire household from their father Laban's demanding control, the party arrives at a ford. Jacob sends the rest of the caravan ahead while he lingers at the waterside. And there it is that Jacob experiences a further meeting with the divine.

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Is it God? Is it an angel? The story is a little hazy on the person whom Jacob comes across that day. But what a meeting it turns out to be. All through the night they wrestle, but try as the stranger might, his great power is not enough to overcome Jacob. Eventually, the godly figure relents and tells Jacob that he now has a new and impressive name:

'You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.'

Once again, Jacob (now Israel) is surprised by the presence of the divine in his life, but this time that presence is felt not in a quiet night-time dream but through a physical night-time wrestling bout. The all-too human traveller might have run away, but he chooses instead to struggle and struggle and struggle until, in the morning, he is blessed. His struggling has been worth it, and he leaves with a God-given name, even though he also leaves with a physical injury. In that fight his hip has been dislocated, but it was worth it.

I really like what the German theologian Dorothee Sölle has to say about Jacob's wrestling match with God. Consider her words: "One of the finest aspects of the story in my view is that after Jacob had struggled all night he was in the end not happy to let go of the mysterious guest. ... Survival is not sufficient. Jacob wants more; with and in spite of his dislocated hip he wants more than to have just managed to get away."

You may never experience an overwhelmingly persuasive dream like that of Jacob. You may never know what it is like to wrestle all night long with God until you emerge from your struggles enlightened. Then again, maybe you will – or maybe you have. In truth, God does not communicate with people in one single way alone. When we gather for worship or when we work together as the church, we may have a strong communal sense of God being with us – being with us *all*, all at the one time. But that can never be the whole story. The questions that you have *for* God and the struggles you have *with* God are uniquely yours. And yes, others will have their own questions and struggles too. So even although the whole idea of "church" is wrapped up in the concept of community, still the relationship that you have with God is unique. Your experience is *your* experience.

Jacob struggled, and God respected and honoured the sincerity and the persistence of that great struggle. In the end, Jacob made it through that long, dark, exhausting night there by the ford. And when he set off to continue his journey, he set off not only shaken by the experience, but *transformed* by it. We can only imagine how he greeted his two wives, his 11 children and all the rest of the travelling household: "Call me Jacob no longer. Now I am Israel, for I have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed."

What happens when we bring our questions to God? Either we can lay them at God's feet and walk away, or we can wrestle in the company of the One who wants us to move in faith and to grow in wisdom. If the lesson of Jacob is to be taken seriously, it seems to suggest that human struggles with God can and do lead to transformation. So don't hold back in your questioning and your yearning for the truth. Don't feel that you have to be submissive and accepting of a situation where answers are slow to come. Struggle and wrestle, looking and listening for God's wise word to emerge, setting you off on a new course.

As the church activist Kaji Douša has noted, with tremendous simplicity: "[Y]our questions are valid and blessed. Your challenges are never beyond God's reach. You are not meant to follow without question. Push back and see what God can do."

Amen.

Praying for others

God of all love whose light shines into our darkness,
we pray that we may be beacons of your light
for one another.

While we are physically separated by lockdown,
may we see the bonds that continue to connect us:
the healthcare workers who give of their energy and skills to serve us all;
the teachers adapting and innovating to educate our children;
the community leaders and volunteers
who pour their hearts and souls into supporting
their neighbours in times of need;
and the scientists whose wisdom, expertise and diligence
are guiding our path towards recovery.

We are surrounded by such brilliant light, Lord.
May each and every beacon know
the power of their loving service.

Give them strength we pray,
and grant us the eyes to see how brightly they shine.

In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

And finally . . .

Abigail Morrison considers money put to good use:

One of the really worrying effects of the Covid-19 pandemic – and one which we may not be aware of as it gets lost in all the coverage of infection rates and vaccinations – is its impact on people's livelihoods. Many people who were already only just making ends meet have lost their jobs or have found their income reduced or expenditure increased (or both). Longniddry is not immune from this.

Just before Christmas last year the Church donated £500 to the Preston, Seton, Gosford Area Partnership (this is a local authority supported group). This group allocates funding to various local organisations supporting our community. Longniddry Community Council and Longniddry Parish Church were asked to help fund provision of food to vulnerable or isolated folk in Longniddry and its surrounds. Both the Community Council and the congregation were only too happy to support the request from East Lothian Council.

Some received "Jingle Bags" at Christmas and New Year, as well as Christmas gifts, while several households received a plated Christmas dinner.

I thought you might like to know our funding helped provide the bags themselves and chocolates, Poinsettia plants and food for the bags, and some of the turkey for plated dinners. The funding also paid for the costs of delivering all these gifts and for flyers that went in the bags to give information on other sources of help.

There are still some of our funds remaining and they will be used to provide recipe packs and food for the pantry that is run from the Community Centre.