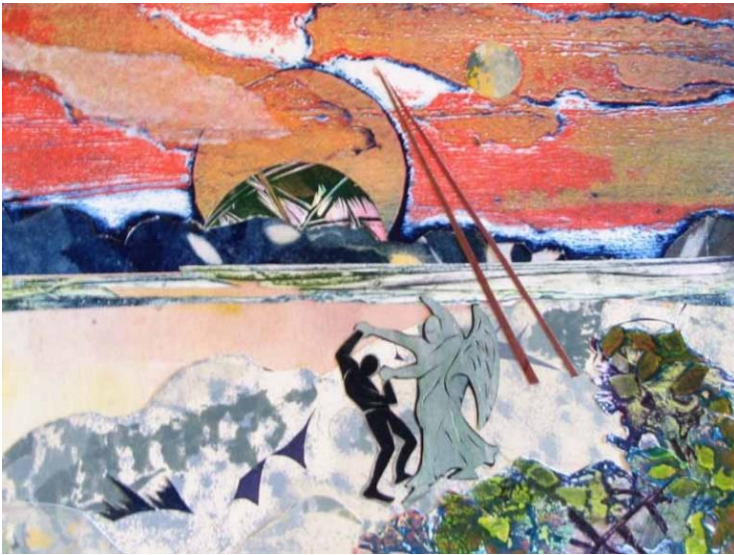


Jacob is on a journey, fleeing his old life and crossing into a new life that intersects with the decisions of his youth. He sends his family ahead of him out of fear for their well-being and meets a messenger of God alone beside a stream. He wrestles with an Angel until daybreak. Some interpretations of this text look to Jacob fighting with himself or his brother Esau whom he fears, but that text says, *“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.”* What does it mean to



Jacob and the Angel, Annette Gandy Fortt; Art in the Christian Tradition, Vanderbilt University

struggle with the power of God in our lives at a crossroad of hope and longing. What does it mean not to give up in the midst of the struggle and wrestle until the light changes? Does Jacob struggle in his sleep, in a vision, on the muddy gravel beside the stream? We do not know. The text tells us he receives a blessing, *“And there he blessed him..”* What is curious is that Jacob also leaves the encounter with a limp “because of his hip.” *“For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.”*

When we struggle in the darkness of fear in the presence of God, we are changed. Sometimes we receive a new name or a new understanding of ourselves and our relationship with others and sometimes the woundedness can be seen by others—and sometimes it cannot. Why does this matter in the context of this Sunday’s lessons? I offer the suggestion that it is all part of an attitude of prayer, praying and focusing our attention on God. When we turn to face God, something happens to us—Jesus would say—we are given new life...

Is the cry of the widow in the parable a cry for justice or for God to help? Yes. In this parable Jesus is pointing to the strength and persistence of the widow to get the justice that should be hers—not only by the judge’s decision but in a social system that honors all people and marginalizes no one.

*“Jesus told his disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’” And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. And*



*will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"*

To pray always and not to lose heart is a challenge to anyone. To a person who is turned away or marginalized because they have no voice, it seems impossible. What is curious here, as we have heard before, is that the judge relents, not because he is a God-fearing man, but because he is afraid of his reputation, afraid of getting a black eye, afraid of his social standing with his peers. God uses our ordinary vanities to help those who need it!

What about the widow? Presumably, she is also fighting for her family, fighting for others, and has been given an inner strength to cry out in a public way. In a time of divisiveness and a time of inequity that has led to people unhoused, hungry and without health care, lost in the horrors of natural disaster, violence and war, we need to wonder if we can cry out as advocates for them/us also. Can we be a voice that can heard which comes from an inner strength that can speak against injustice just because it is unjust?



Or perhaps, we are the judge, not attentive to the cries around us, and are able to change because God is speaking to us. What does our journey look like? How do we tell our story?

*Charity relieving Distress Gainsborough, Thomas, 1727-1788*