

## ENCOUNTER WITH THE DIVINE

October 19, 2025

(PROPER 24C)

### READINGS<sup>1</sup>

#### **Genesis 32:22-31**

*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, yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.*

#### **Luke 22:39-46**

*He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives, and the disciples followed him. When he reached the place, he said to them, "Pray that you may not come into the time of trial." Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me, yet not my will but yours be done."*

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<sup>1</sup> New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition of the Bible.

*Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground. When he got up from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief, and he said to them, "Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial."*

## REFLECTION

A woman in a small village once says a heartfelt prayer of thanksgiving, saying, "O Lord, we are forever grateful for your providence because, during the war, you spared our village by letting all the bombs to fall into our neighboring village; and that, during the famine, you let the locusts to destroy the crops in another nearby village and allow us to have our harvest; and that, during the pandemic, you let the virus to kill many people in the village across the river while you let the people in our village to stay healthy."

Friends, if we are not careful, our prayers too can become as selfish as the prayer of this fictional woman.

But why are we often so selfish in our prayer? I think it is because we often lack the proper understanding of what prayer is all about.

Let us take a look at our reading this morning from the book of Genesis.

Of all the teachings about prayer in the Scripture, the story about Jacob and the mysterious man is one of my favourites. This story always fascinates me. On the surface level, this story sounds like just another episode in the long story about the family of Isaac and his twin sons, Jacob and Esau; or in the even longer story about the family of Israel's forefather, Abraham.

But our story is more than a 'genealogical' story of Israel's 'fore-family' and the birth of the tribes of Israel.

First, we meet a mysterious man who wrestles with Jacob all night long. The identity of the man is not clear. One will be forgiven to think that the man is none other than Esau, Jacob's twin brother who has been looking for Jacob to kill him.<sup>2</sup> After all, up until then, Jacob has been running away from Esau after Jacob deceives Esau in the house of their father, Isaac.

Others, however, believe that the mysterious man is an angel from God.

As the story progresses, however, we are given clue after clue about the real identity of the mysterious man.

First clue: Jacob is given a new name, Israel, which means "the one who strives with God."<sup>3</sup> The mysterious man then says,

"for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed."

(Genesis 32:28 NRSVU)

Second clue: Jacob asks for the name of the mysterious man, just like Moses asks for God's name when he meets God for the very first time in the burning bush.

"But Moses said to God, 'If I come to the Israelites and say to them,

'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,'

and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?'

God said to Moses, 'I am who I am.'"

(Exodus 3:13-14 NRSVU)

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<sup>2</sup> John E. Anderson, *Commentary on Genesis 32-22-31* in Working Preacher from Luther Seminary.

<sup>3</sup> Footnotes b. of Genesis 32:28 in NRSVU.

Finally, the clearest clue about the identity of the mysterious man comes from Jacob's own mouth. After the man leaves him, Jacob names the place, *peniel*, which means "the face of God".<sup>4</sup> Jacob himself says,

"I have seen God face to face, yet my life is preserved."

(Genesis 32:30 NRSVU)

So, there should be no doubt that the mysterious man who wrestles with Jacob is none other than the Holy One of Israel, the Creator of all there is! Jacob wrestles with God, all night long!

Indeed, we see similarities between Jacob's story with the story of Jesus' praying in Mount of Olives. Just like Jacob sends his family away so that he can be alone, Jesus leaves his disciples so that he can be alone to pray. In Genesis, Jacob wrestles with God just before his fateful meeting with Esau, his twin brother, who has been seeking to take his life. Likewise, Jesus 'wrestles' with God in his prayer just before the most crucial moment in his life: his death on the Roman cross. And just like Jacob's wrestle with God, by all accounts, is a physical struggle—leaving him limp—Jesus' prayer becomes so physical that his sweat turns into blood!

This means that the story of Jacob serves as a template for the story of Jesus' praying in Mount of Olives, written more than one thousand years after the story of Jacob was completed. This also means that the story about Jacob's encounter with God is a 'typological' story that serves as a 'blue-print' for others' encounters with the Divine, including our own.

Friends, a true encounter with God does not leave us 'unscathed'. A true encounter with God would leave a mark on us. It would change us.

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<sup>4</sup> Footnote d of Genesis 32:30 NRSVU

That means, prayer—which, after all, is an encounter with God—should be about God changing us and *not* about us changing God. Prayer should *not* be about us shaping God to fit our wish; prayer should be about allowing ourselves to be shaped to fit the wish of the Divine in our life.

Prayer should be about surrendering our will to the will God. It should be about uttering the words that Jesus says in his prayer,

“not my will but yours be done.”

(Luke 22:42 NRSVU)

Yes, prayer should *not* be about us asking God for what we want; prayer should be about asking God to reveal what God wants for our life. Prayer, in the end, should *not* be about asking God to listen to us; prayer should be about us listening to the will of the Divine.

The Indian Jesuits, A. J. de Mello, once tells a story about a student who asks his teacher, “How shall I experience oneness with creation?”

“By listening,” answers the teacher.

“And how am I to listen?” asks the student.

The teacher answers, “Become an ear that gives heed to every single thing that the universe is saying. The moment you hear something you yourself are saying, stop.”<sup>5</sup>

“The moment you hear something you yourself are saying, stop!” That’s what prayer should be about.

But how often do we fill our prayers with expressions of our own wants and desires? Is prayer not supposed to be about listening, surrendering, receiving?

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<sup>5</sup> Anthony de Mello, S J, *One Minute Wisdom*, 1987m Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, p. 5.

Pastor Craig Groeschel, the Pastor of the largest church in Northern America, once complained about young church leaders who had asked for one-on-one mentoring session with him. He said that many of those young leaders, who asked him to be their mentor, tend to talk more about themselves rather than listening to what advice that he can offer! These people seek for validation instead of transformation.

But what's the point of having a mentor if, at the end of the mentoring, we remain the same person? After all, is that not the goal of having a mentor: to become a better version of oneself?

The same with our prayer. A prayer that does not change us as a person is not worth much. After all, just like Jacob receives the blessing after he has a new name and his hip is out of joint, we can only experience the true blessing from our interaction with God when we allow ourselves to be changed; when we allow ourselves to be moulded to conform to the will of the Potter!

Amen.

### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

1. When you pray, do you spend most of the time expressing your wish to God or trying to discern God's will in your situation?
2. How can you shift your focus from what you want to what God wants?
3. How does Jesus' posture in his prayer—which is expressed in his words: "not mine, but your will be done"—be manifested in your own prayer?