



## BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

**Pentecost 9**  
**Proper 13 (A)**  
**August 2, 2020**

**RCL: Genesis 32:22-31; Psalm 17:1-7, 16; Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21**

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

This story of Jacob wrestling resonates with divine power and mystery. It's an eerie scene—Jacob is at a turning point in his life, not sure how things will work out, and he's alone on a riverbank at night. An unidentified figure shows up, and the two of them wrestle until dawn. Jacob holds on tight and refuses to let this person go until the person blesses him. And finally, as Jacob leaves the riverbank with both a limp and a blessing, he recognizes he's somehow been wrestling with *God*.

Phyllis Tribble and other Biblical scholars have used this story as a way to talk about the process of engaging with the Bible itself—we wrestle, we struggle with scripture, and we find God's blessing in that struggle. Sometimes, we're wounded when we encounter hatred and trauma within scripture. There are some parts of the Bible that feel like a blessing right away and some parts that are more of a struggle, yet God meets us in the whole process.

- Have you ever wrestled with God? Have you ever recognized God's presence in an experience after it was over?
- Do you experience scripture as a struggle? Where do you find yourself wounded, and where do you find yourself blessed?

### **Psalm 17:1-7, 16**

Our lectionary skips some of the angrier verses of this psalm, where the psalmist cries out for God's vindication against enemies who are wealthy, complacent, and pitiless. Perhaps this omission is because many of us feel uncomfortable with the anger expressed in those verses. That kind of anger might not be something we want to hear in church when there may not be opportunity to address it or move through it with care—and this is a valid reluctance, as many of us have been hurt by anger. Perhaps the verses are omitted because we feel uncertain about claiming the position of a victim as we pray the psalm together. On the other hand, maybe the psalmist's depiction of the oppressor sounds too familiar for comfort.

Though I think some of the reasons for omitting these angry verses are reasonable, I also think that our church needs to work on better ways of understanding and engaging with anger. Now, in the summer of

2020, as we see a protest movement demanding justice for Black lives and an end to police violence, maybe we need all the verses of this psalm. Whichever verses we read, and whatever our feelings are about current protest movements, I believe that we as people of faith need to hear the longing for justice and the righteous anger in this psalm. We need to hear the psalmist's deep connection to God in the midst of pain. We need to hear the restlessness and the fury of people calling out for deliverance in an untenable situation.

- What is your church's attitude toward anger, and why do you think this is the case? How do you deal with anger in the Bible?
- Can you identify with any of the longings the psalmist expresses? Can you identify with any of the anger? Does any part of the Psalm remind you of something in your own life?

### **Romans 9:1-5**

Placed in context, this note of anguish from Paul comes right after one of his most confident moments—"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." It's a jarring transition. Yet this means that when we find ourselves moving back and forth between confidence and concern, between exultation and anguish, we can know that St. Paul is with us in the complexity and changeability of this human response to God's grace.

It's also important to note that this passage occupies a complicated position in Christianity's ongoing legacy of anti-Semitism and in our attempts at interfaith dialogue. St. Paul seems deeply concerned that many of his Jewish siblings may not be included in the salvation he experiences in Jesus. He seems to speak out of deep love and concern here, seems to still regard Jews as his own people, and has a deep appreciation for the ways in which he sees God relating to the Jewish people. And yet, this strand of exclusion has deadly consequences when Christians in power read Jews as enemies of Christian faith.

- In your own life of faith, have you experienced the kind of rapid shift in mood that we see here at the start of Romans 9?
- What do you make of St. Paul's conflicted concern for his Jewish siblings here? Why is he so distressed? And how have Christians moved from concern like this to religious hate?

### **Matthew 14:13-21**

It's common in our churches to hear narratives of scarcity. A budget shortfall leads to last minute appeals and difficult choices. We wonder when we'll have enough time to do the work we care most about instead of the work that's most urgent. We face shortages of resources and time, and we can often feel pressed and anxious in these conditions of scarcity. Like the disciples in this Gospel story, we may want to send people away to fend for themselves as we recognize the inadequacy of our resources.

And yet, in this situation of scarcity, Jesus offers abundance and hospitality. Instead of turning people away, Jesus invites the crowd to stay and feast in the wilderness. And the disciples—despite their previous

tear—are the ones tasked with distributing this blessed feast. Instead of hunkering down and doing out the little they have among themselves, they go out among the crowd and share the delicious plenty that Jesus has provided.

This Gospel story will not magically fix our budget woes or add hours to our days—and yet perhaps it does have some power to free us from our own narratives of scarcity. The story invites us to hope and pray and live toward God’s abundance, not just for our group but for everyone. We’re invited to share what we have and to loosen our grip on the questions of whether we have enough and whether we are enough. And we’re invited to feast on the bread Jesus blesses.

- Where do you feel the strain of scarcity right now? Are there places you see God’s abundance?
- How can we be honest about real need and struggle while also questioning some of our scarcity narratives? How does this discernment work?

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