
Wrestling in the Dark

**A sermon by the Rev. Julia Mitchener
Proper 13 – Year A**

I did a lot of running during my summers as a child, especially in the last ten minutes before the sun went down. This was when I had to stop whatever game I'd been playing over at a friend's house and hightail it home so I wouldn't need to take the shortcut to make curfew. You see, taking the shortcut meant going through the Joneses' yard. Mr. Jones had won the award for Yard of the Month more times than anyone else in the history of Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Daylilies, foxgloves, hydrangeas, hollyhocks, and his prized heirloom roses were all perfectly maintained in the studied, yet casual, style of an English cottage garden transported to an overgrown swampy pine forest in the Deep South. By day, that yard was a miracle, but, at dusk, it became a minefield, at least for neighborhood children racing home for supper. Mr. Jones sat on his back porch most evenings, listening for the sounds of careless, trespassing little feet that might, in the waning light, destroy the fruits of his labor. One noisy misstep, one ill-timed dash through the dahlias, and the floodlights would go on. Then would come the ominous creak of a screen door followed by a loud voice unleashing a spectacular string of profanity. If you didn't exit the premises right away, you got threatened with a garden hoe. Needless to say, every last kid on my street knew that nighttime was not the right time to be in the Joneses' backyard. And so I always ran as the sun went down, as fast as my legs would take me. I ran to avoid Mr. Jones. I ran to escape the darkness.

This morning's scripture readings both tell stories about people who find themselves in tough situations just as darkness is descending—situations that would cause most folks to want to run away and run away fast. For Jacob, the problem is an anticipated reunion with his brother Esau, the one with whom he has been at enmity since he stole his birthright when the two were young. Jacob has been fleeing the darkness of this relationship for many years; to escape Esau's wrath, he first ran, quite literally, to his uncle's house. Now, he is running in a more figurative sense—trying to appease Esau by basically buying his forgiveness. But now Jacob must wait—he must wait a long agonizing evening to see if his offer will be accepted. Not only that, he must spend this whole night wrestling with a stranger.

Many years later, Jesus' disciples find themselves in a similarly tight spot. They have been at their teacher's side all day, listening to him preach to the multitudes. All has gone well, until, as darkness begins to fall, the realization hits: It is time for supper, but there is no food to eat. So the disciples come up with a plan—send everyone running off to the local 7-11 for beef jerky, cheese puffs, overripe bananas, and Big Gulps. The only problem is, Jesus says no. Jesus says no. In a sentence that surely fills the disciples with both hope and dread, Jesus tells them, “[The people] need not go away.” *They need not go away. Instead, have them sit down—have them sit down right here, right now, amidst the growing darkness—have them sit down and we'll find a way to feed them.*

Well, do you see what's going on in both these stories? Do you see what's happening? Against the conventional wisdom, which would be to get out of these dark and desperate situations lickety-split—against the conventional wisdom urging them to get the heck out of Dodge by any means possible, the challenge issued to the characters in these stories is to stay in the place of darkness and uncertainty for a bit. Not to race off like they're being chased by some angry neighbor with a garden hoe, but, rather, to sit for a while in the midst of that which threatens them. To engage with that which unsettles them. To wait and see what God may yet do in this unnerving space and time.

Well, what God does, of course, is nothing short of stupendous. The multitudes sit down and they and the disciples get treated to an All You Can Eat Buffet, after which they still have twelve “To Go” boxes left over.

God appears to Jacob in the form of a stranger and he struggles with him, but then he blesses him and gives him a fresh new identity. Wondrous things take place in both these stories, and these wondrous things occur, at least in part, because people resist the temptation to take off running. They occur because people decide to trust that God will still meet them even in the places and situations that are very hard for them, the places and situations where they would rather not be.

Of course, none of this is particularly surprising. After all, the consistent testimony of Holy Scripture is that God does God's best work in the dark. That's right—God does God's best work in the shadowy, barren, fearful, and famished places of our world—the places everyone is desperate to avoid or to escape. This is where God invariably shows up and shows off. In the middle of nowhere at supertime when there isn't enough food. At the home of a little girl who quite clearly is already dead. Among fisherman who haven't had a catch all day. In the garden beside an empty tomb where a group of women stand weeping. At a wedding where the host has run out of wine. On a dusty road where two grieving men have abandoned all hope.

God does God's most spectacular work in places of darkness and at times of scarcity and loss. If only we would trust this and live as if it were true! This summer has been a summer of running. It has been a summer of running, and understandably so. We are going through an incredibly difficult time right now. We are living our lives against a backdrop of seemingly relentless darkness. The impulse, in the midst of this, is to do whatever it takes to try to escape. Whether it's ignoring, belittling, or denying the ongoing scourge of racism in our country, obsessing over relatively minor details of our lives in an attempt to gain some sense of control, self-medicating with alcohol or drugs, or spending our days and nights bashing people we don't even know on social media, the temptation to try to run away from the challenge of this time is strong.

I wonder what might happen if we simply stopped for a moment. I wonder what might happen if, instead of frantically running from the darkness, we leaned into it a little, trusting that God will meet us there. I wonder what might happen if, like the disciples and Jacob, we sat down in the darkness and wrestled a bit.

What if, for example, the next time we read another horrifying account of a Black man running in fear not from a neighbor with a garden hoe but from a stranger with a rifle—what if we, as a society, instead of immediately retreating into defensiveness and denial, wondering what this man must have done wrong or quoting more statistics about Black on Black crime—what if, instead of doing this, we simply sat for a while with the pain and horror of systemic racism in this country? What if we sat for a while with the immense suffering of Black families for whom living in fear of having a child murdered in broad daylight by a white person with a gun is a constant reality? What if we sat for a while with this pain and this horror, letting it sink in and taking it seriously? What if we did this? Or what if, the next time we woke up in the middle of the night, anxious and sweaty after yet another COVID nightmare, our hearts pounding over whether we or our loved ones are going to get sick, whether we will still have a job at the end of the year, whether our children will indeed return to school this fall and stay there—what if, the next time we woke up in this kind of panic, instead of going downstairs to pour ourselves a drink and take yet another mental inventory of all the ways in which we are failing as a parent, spouse, child, or co-worker—what, if instead of doing this, we tried being gentle with ourselves, admitting to ourselves what a scary time this is and reminding ourselves that we are doing our best and that that is enough? What if, the next time we were tempted to post another angry monologue on Facebook or Twitter, instead we called up a friend with whom we disagree politically. What if we called up that friend and said, *You know, I don't always see things the same way you do, but I love you and I care about what concerns you. So talk to me about your hopes and fears. Talk to me about how you are feeling these days. I won't say a word—for 5 minutes, or maybe 10, if I can stand it. I won't say a word. I'll just listen, because you are important to me.* What if we tried something like this? What if we tried something like this, trusting that just as God showed up for an all-night wrestling match with Jacob and sat down in the desolate darkness of a hungry, restless crowd, so, too, God will come to keep us company in our own empty, uncertain, and frightened places?

What if we tried something like this? I wonder what might happen. Who knows? Maybe nothing. Maybe something. Maybe quite a lot. As Barbara Brown Taylor once confessed, "I have learned things in the dark I could never have learned in the light . . . things that have saved my life over and over again." She is not the only one. Five months from now, as we celebrate once more the great mystery of the Incarnation, God with us—five months from now, we will hear once again the words of the prophet Isaiah: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who dwelled in a land of deep darkness, on them light has shined." On those who dwelled. On those who dwelled in darkness. On them. On us. Amen.