

## **Struggling Alone, Together**

Sermon 58 | Greystone Baptist Church | May 3, 2020

Genesis 32: 22-33

A few weeks ago I noticed a strange thing happening to the plant that sits in my home office. It is a Christmas cactus that came from my mother. For 11 months out of the year, it looks the same. Green plant, spidery segmented branches, flowing outward from a few central stems. It is a simple and yet beautiful plant that brings some of the colors and textures of nature into the office space, without demanding too much attention or providing too much distraction. Once a year, around Christmas time, it transforms into something totally new, bursting forth with the most beautiful flowers. Dozens of them, one popping out of each arm of the plant to produce a magnificent display of pale pink flowers.

It really puts on a show, once a year. The blooms last a few days, then they pour sap all over the floor. At that point, we know the show is over and the cactus will go back into relative dormancy until holiday season rolls around the next year.

A few weeks ago, just before Easter Sunday, I looked over and realized that my Christmas cactus had one single bud, proudly sprouting from the end of one segmented branch. I searched the rest of the plant to see if, perhaps, the whole thing might be confused about the fact that it was nearly Easter, not Christmas. But low and behold, there was just the one stubborn little bloom, struggling to emerge at exactly the wrong time.

Nature, it seems, is always eager to offer up examples of resurrection, rebirth, new creation... From perennial plants that wither and disappear in the winter to caterpillars who form a cocoon to undergo their miraculous transformation into butterflies, the natural world seems to understand one of the most central truths to the nature of life. Transformation happens. Things change, and more often than not, with change comes great struggle. But with its ebb and flow, nature also reminds us that after the season of letting go... there comes a season of renewal. Where dormant stems break forth with vibrant flowers... where empty ground fills with the colors of spring.

The scripture reading today comes from the book of Genesis, chapter 32. In this short reading, we encounter Jacob, patriarch of the faith, father of the 12 sons whose children would become the 12 tribes. Jacob is on his way home with his two wives, his servants, livestock, and children. This will be the first time Jacob has been home since he tricked his father into giving him the inheritance that was supposed to go to his older brother. This will be the first time in more than 14 years that the two brothers will see one another. Jacob, fully aware of his past, must have been a little scared to face his brother. He must have been nervous about how this encounter would unfold. Was Esau still mad? Had he come with an army?

We know he is worried because just a few verses before today's reading picks up, Jacob sends hundreds of goats, sheep, cows, and camels as a peace offering to his brother.

“Perhaps,” Jacob says, “I might appease him with these gifts...” “Perhaps [after receiving them] he might accept me.”

The magnitude of all the unknowns were working on Jacob as he travelled toward home.

The night before he encounters his brother, Jacob has sent all his family (wives, maids, and children) ahead of him, and he stayed back, alone in the wilderness. A stranger wrestles with him throughout the night. The two seem to be evenly matched until dawn is near and the stranger strikes him on the hip, displacing the joint. Even as he is reeling in pain, Jacob clings to the stranger demanding a blessing.

I wonder if he knew what he was asking, as he and the stranger locked arms? I wonder because I hear a little bit of myself, of ourselves, in that question as we are also in the midst of struggle.

As a church we have sort of been struggling for a while. And we’re not unlike every other church as we wrestle with scripture and tradition and culture, waiting for God’s blessings to pour out over us and restore the church to the role it once had in society. Even still, we have our individual struggles, as a church and as the people who make up this church. We are struggling with relevance and mission. We are struggling to learn the languages of the new world that is growing and changing around us. We are struggling to reconcile the church of the past with the church of the future; and each of us is struggling to find our place within it.

It is so hard to let go of the way things were. So we hold on, even though it hurts, and demand a blessing. Perhaps we have held on too long?

This pandemic has all of us struggling. Trapped in our individual spheres of work and rest, with loneliness and grief, with worry and fear. Each of us is stuck, trying to find some sense of balance in this new world. It’s tempting to tighten our grip and refuse to let go until God offers a blessing (probably one that in our minds looks like a return to normalcy). But I wonder if we really know what we are asking for?

When struggle is forced upon us, when the mysterious divine stranger grabs hold of us in the middle of the night and refuses to let us go, when change comes, when the foundations of our world begin to shake – so does our ability to move forward. We, like Jacob, cling to that which is disturbing us and refuse to let it go.

We obsess over statistics and projected timelines, we grieve all that is lost, we get stuck in futile arguments about small details, and we forget the blessing that is already trying to burst forth.

I wonder if Jacob knew what he was asking for as he demanded a blessing from the holy stranger who wrestled him all night and left him with a dislocated hip...

The blessing comes in the form of transformation. Jacob, who was strong and smart. Jacob who had striven with his dad and brother and always seemed to come out on top had finally met his match. This wrestling match changed him.

As daybreak arrived and the sun began to shine over the wilderness, Jacob is no longer the man he used to be. As he looks ahead to see his brother, he is not coming home the same man he was when he left. He's limping... and he's got a new name.

We are now, in the midst of a world-wide struggle to understand Coronavirus. It has, for five months now, held us all in its grip, shaking the foundations of the world we knew. It has challenged our healthcare systems, it has taken so many lives, it has broken our economic systems, and pushed us all to the limits of our sanity and creativity. As time goes on, I wonder if it isn't also threatening our souls.

Our current struggles may have been instigated by the Coronavirus, but they also help us to see all the struggles we were facing before...

Because of the virus we now see how different communities are disproportionately impacted. We see the disparities within our housing, education, healthcare, and economic systems.

Because of the virus we now see that none of us can ignore our digital realities.

Because of the virus we now see that our lives are woven together, creating one inseparable tapestry of human life that cannot be divided up into categories of rich and poor, strong and weak, old and young, male and female, black and white, republican or democrat, righteous and unrighteous... we are all one.

"We're all in this together" the slogan says.

Sooner or later, we will emerge from this particular struggle. Sooner or later we will be released from the grip of the stay-home order, we will come to terms with the existence of this virus and its novelty will begin to wear off. But like Jacob, it's beginning to look like we will emerge from this struggle with a limp and a new name.

As a church, I wonder how God is shaping us, working on us in our personal spiritual lives and transforming us together so that we might become something totally new. Something transformed by the grace of God and something that is able to serve the world around us, one neighbor at a time?

Like you, I grieve as the struggle forces my grip to release the things of the past.

Like you, I long for an end to this incredibly difficult season.

Like you, I am begging for a blessing even though there's no telling what that blessing might look like on the other side of this dawn.

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And I wonder if together, we might cling to the story of Jacob and in it find great hope that on the other side of struggle awaits a new day, a new promise, and perhaps even a new name.

We are indeed struggling alone.

But the good news is this... we are struggling alone... together.

And together, we are being made new.