

Luke 18:1-8
Jeremiah 31:27-34+
October 16, 2022

Sacred Words

Among the great texts in the bible, we find in the readings for the day several worthy of our attention. There is the Passage from Genesis that is the alternate Old Testament text, in which Jacob wrestles with an angel and receives a new name, "Israel," which means, "someone who struggles with God," or if God is the subject then, "the God who contends," that is an interesting idea, God and human beings contending with each other.

Some may be uncomfortable with the notion of God as an adversary, rather than a friend, yet in the same way that teachers and coaches and even parents sometimes seem like adversaries, the concept of God in that kind of role should not be dismissed easily, at least not until it is mined a little.

Associated with that is the alternate reading from the Psalms, the 121st, and sometimes the language is such that only the poetry of the King James Version can convey its grandeur, it begins;

"I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.
2 My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth . . ." and then it ends,
7 *"The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil: he shall preserve thy soul.*

8 The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore."

And then the first Old Testament reading from Jeremiah, in which God makes the following promise,

The days are coming," declares the Lord,
"when I will make a new covenant
with the people of Israel
and with the people of Judah . . .

*"I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.
I will be their God,
and they will be my people. . .
For I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more."*

The epistle reading is again from 2nd Timothy, and in it Paul exhorts Timothy to a higher life and warns him of many dangers, and then he says, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work," which is to say that these are sacred words, because they have it in their power to give life.

The mere reading of these sacred words is sermon enough sometimes, like sometimes the singing of a single hymn is worship enough to sustain a person for a week. The idea of a God who contends with, but does not destroy the human adversary, but rather preserves them, builds them up and teaches them

though it seems like a long struggle; and in so doing internalizes goodness and mercy so that it pierces their lives beyond the surface and into the inner places, is enough to stop us in our tracks, and consider the meaning of our lives, and to do so with a sense of reverence as if we are on a high mountain in a storm, overwhelmed but not annihilated, rather invigorated and encouraged.

And then we come to this simple parable found only in the Gospel of Luke, in which God is compared to an irreverent and unjust judge who has no idea of helping the poor widow in her contention an opponent that treats her unfairly, but who comes at last to her aid because she pesters him to death.

What are we to make of this presentation of God as an unjust judge? Some have focused on the woman and made it a parable about prayer and concluded that it means that we should remain vigilant in our prayers, never giving up when the answers are a long time coming or not what we envisioned.

In our contention with God, we should last long into the proverbial night and like Jacob with the angel hold on with the fierceness of desperation, "*I will not let you go unless you bless me.*" Never stop asking, even if we find ourselves ashamed at the selfishness of our requests; keep on until we can pray better prayers and be ready to hear better answers.

We are reminded of other parables, like the man who knocks on the door at midnight and receives the help

he needs only after knocking to the point of annoyance. It is accompanied by these words:

"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened." That is the way some approach this parable and its presentation of the Importunate Widow.

Others note that the word, "prayer," is never mentioned in the parable and focus more on the way God is presented. God is seen as a down-to-earth nitty-gritty lawyer who is in it for little more than himself and even so can sometimes exact justice in this world if the noisy pestering is loud enough.

Dare we say that Jesus used a little sarcasm here? Are we not meant to see that if evil human beings can do right sometimes, how much more will it be true for God, who is not bound by the excessive selfishness and arrogance and pride that plague human beings.

The parable about the man who knocks at midnight is also accompanied by these sacred words, "Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

There is some truth in both of these answers. They speak like the rest of scripture about God, and about us. What causes people to pray in such a way? People are attached . . . can I say even addicted . . . to what makes them feel good; a pleasing experience, a beautiful sight or sound, taste or smell, anxiety relieved, victory - when their side wins, or even when they have done something good. None of these experiences last, and so we chase after them.

Time and again, both in our personal lives and as a part of the life of the world, we are confronted with experiences that do not make us feel good. Sometimes, “sadness can prevail,” and sometimes anger, (I stole that line from an Eric Clapton song). We can’t seem to escape the tendencies of our nature that lead to conflict and injustice, and exacerbate poverty, and disease, the threat of self-destruction, the outcomes of greed and desire.

In our longing for peace and wholeness, justice and beauty and even mere sustenance, let us remember all these sacred words about the God we serve, who is not at all an unjust judge - nor unmerciful in any way, but who contends with us not to destroy but to make us truly human, and who has promised at last to put the divine law in our minds, to etch it like on a stone into our hearts, and to care for us along the way, with strength like a mountain; and who sent his Christ to us, to give us life, like these sacred words.

[Back](#)[Home](#)