

Ordinary 18-22

by Jennifer Stiles-Williams

August 3 - August 31, 2008

August 3

Genesis 32:22-31, Psalm 17: 1-7:15,
Romans 9:1-5, Matthew 14: 13-21

I do my best spiritual work late at night. But it's not work I do; it's a battle I wage. Those are the nights I wake up with a heart racing, and sweat pouring down my face. Someone seems to be repeatedly whispering to my soul, urgently trying to get my attention. I find myself alone with my thoughts and very much alone with my soul, my fears, my memories, my guilt. As I force myself to face God and myself, I recall another historic struggle.

Jacob's wrestling takes place the night before he is to meet Esau. Jacob is sure his brother wants him dead. Tomorrow, Jacob will have to face up to the consequences of his actions for wanting blessing and birthright. Jacob sends his family and possessions on ahead of him knowing this will leave him vulnerable and alone. Maybe he realizes being alone with himself and God will be a bigger challenge than any revenge his brother might choose to take.

This is when we are often most shaped and formed, when we give into our vulnerability, devoid of all the "stuff" we collect to insulate us. When we lay down our armor and come out of hiding to truly face God we can finally be shaped and formed. When we look God in the face and ask "who are you" and "why can't I reconcile you with all I seek for my life" we often will leave limping. But those moments open our eyes. We begin to see the things we strive for in our lives: honor, success, power, what we think should be "rightfully ours" are not the true blessings for which our hearts

truly hunger. We long for blessings more significant, more purposeful, more life changing.

The blessing we find is a God willing to fight with us in order to fight for us. We meet a God willing to hold on and not let go. God is willing to struggle and fight with us so we don't settle for less than God longs to offer us. God wrestled with Jacob until daybreak. However, God always had Jacob's best interest at heart. God tried to leave before daybreak out of concern for Jacob, because for Jacob to see God face to face meant death. God wanted Jacob to live, but not for mere earthly blessings, materials things and family birthrights. God was willing to fight and struggle with Jacob so his son might receive real blessing - a changed name, a new calling, an eternal promise, a renewed and reformed relationship with his God.

August 10

Genesis 37: 1-5; 21-28, Psalm 105: 1-6;
16-22; 45b, Romans 10:5-15,
Matthew 14:22-33

Recently our family went to the beach. Our girls were playing pretty far out from the shore, and our three-year-old son was frustrated. He wanted to get to where they were, but he knew he wouldn't make it with just his arm floats. I watched him for a while as he stood on the shore, longing to be with his older sisters out in the deeper water. Finally, quick as lightening, he came running towards me. "Mommy," he said, "would you teach me how to walk on water?"

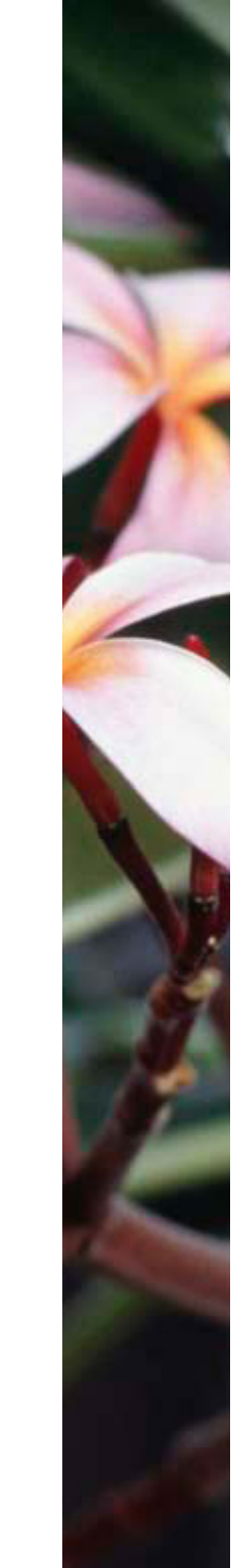
I asked him, "Sam, who do you know that can walk on water?" He looked at me like I was crazy. "You know mommy. Jesus! Can you teach me to walk on water like Jesus?"

So often we stand on the shore of life seeing something in the distance beckoning us. In the distance is something we want to become, something we feel called to do, someone we feel moved to be near. It looks so tempting, so inviting, and yet, so far from the safety of the shore. We know we can't get there on our own strength, realizing the flotation devices we banked on in our lives are not strong enough to take us to our destination. If only someone could teach us to walk on water.

Peter saw Jesus walking on the water. After a night on the boat with waves overwhelming him, Peter longed to be by Jesus' side. Swept up in the seeing his destination, Peter stepped out with boldness. But the moment he took his eyes off Jesus—the moment he began to wonder how his own resources were conquering the waves—he began to sink.

Sam was right. Our own resources and "floaties" will only get us so far in life. Psalm 105 reminds us where to look for lessons on walking on water. "Seek the Lord and his strength; seek his presence continually. Remember the wonderful works he has done, his miracles..." (Psalm 105: 4-5) Jesus' miracles, teachings, death, and resurrection show us again and again that God can be trusted to provide us power beyond our own. We have to take the steps to put our belief and our faith into action.

I know I can't teach my son to actually walk on water, but I can teach him what belief,



faith, and trust in God looks like. I can teach my son that when you see something you are being drawn to, called to, it is worth taking a risk for that God will carry you where your own resources will not.

August 17

Genesis 45:1-5; 22-28, Psalm 133,
Romans 11:1-2a; 29-32,
Matthew 15:10-20; 21-28

In the movie “P.S. I Love You”, Hilary Swank plays a newly widowed young woman whose husband has written her letters to help her deal with her grief. In the wake of his death, she feels she wasted their precious time together with doubt, stemming from her own childhood baggage of her father leaving. She had refused to have children and continually questioned his commitment to stay with her. There is a poignant scene between Hilary Swank’s character and her mother. As they are walking through a park, the mother remembers when her husband made her laugh. The daughter remarks that she cannot remember her mother laughing. “That makes me sad, because I did.” Swank asks “Will we ever see dad again?” The mother replies, “No, Never. So you have to stop waiting.”

How often do we find ourselves not being able to live fully in the present and the future because of something we are waiting to be resolved from the past? This one moment between a mother and her daughter allowed a long overdue conversation to bring healing and reconciliation to both of their lives. This one moment gave them the power to redefine their past and the blessing of restoring their future.

It is reconciliation and restoration we find in Genesis 45. The brothers who sold Joseph into slavery out of their own jealousy and envy, now find themselves at his mercy. Joseph

could have easily had them put away or turned them out with nothing. He could easily have chosen to refuse them a future as they had tried to do to him so long ago. Joseph had a choice to make—continue to allow himself and his family to be held hostage by the past or show mercy and grace to give them all a new future.

Joseph refused to let their jealous, hateful actions dictate the full story of his life and theirs. God had been with Joseph every step of the way. Joseph knew God had worked in and through such a tragedy for a greater good. “And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.” (Genesis 45: 5) Joseph chose to continue God’s good work in him by offering his brothers reconciliation and restoring his family to the fullness of life. Joseph forgives and then restores their family with clothes, food, and provisions. Joseph redefined their past and restored their future.

In Romans, Paul reminds us that God does not reject us or revoke the promise made to us. Even in our disobedience, we can receive the reconciliation and redemption of Christ to redefine our past and restore our life. Like Joseph, will we see God’s good work in us and continue it through offering others such a gift? Who in your life needs your help to redefine a past and restore a future?

August 24

Exodus 1:8-2:10, Psalm 124, Romans
12:1-8, Matthew 16:13-20

Never underestimate the power of a midwife! After having three children under the care of midwives, I recognize the gift they are to the laboring parents. A midwife can help you stay objective as the pain becomes too much to bear. The goal of a midwife is to help

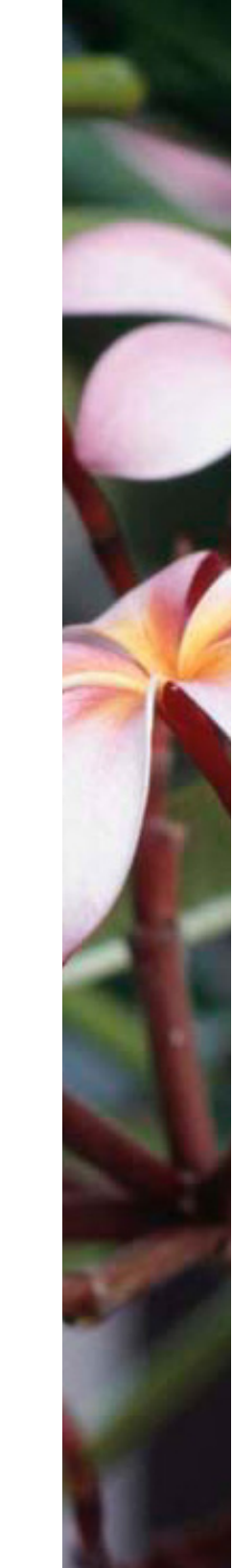
the laboring parents have the best experience possible in bringing new life into the world. When I was ready to bite my husband’s head off or run for the hills because of the pain, it was the midwife who I could look in the eye and trust completely to take the next breath or push one more time. It was my midwife who stayed with me during the 20 hours of labor, who coached me with patience and kindness, and did whatever was needed to help me bring my child into the world.

This is why I understand the beauty of comparing the work of the Church to the work of a midwife. It is the privilege of the Church to help bring God’s life and creation into the world through the ways we worship, reach

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out, and serve the communities we live in. Like a midwife, the Church is called to continue the goal and mission of Christ to help birth the Kingdom of God in this world. We have the opportunity to witness the birth of hope where there is need, grace where there is condemnation, love where there is violence, justice where there is oppression. Like the midwives in Exodus 1, the Church today has an opportunity to keep people focused on God’s beautiful plan for creation and God’s people, instead of being overwhelmed by the suffering in the world and the earthly powers bent on destruction.

We fulfill this call to midwifery as the body of Christ by using the variety of gifts given to us by the Holy Spirit (Romans 12:6). Each of us has been given gifts by the Holy Spirit to work with others through the life of the church to birth Kingdom of Heaven moments. As we lead



and teach and give and serve, holy moments are born. People begin to experience generosity, justice, mercy, compassion, diligence, cheerfulness, grace, and love. Others find support, patience, encouragement, focus, and purpose as they are born into new life. Whenever a meal is served, a home is built, a class is taught, communion is offered, a follower is baptized—God’s family grows.

When was the last time you took the role of a midwife with someone? How can you make a choice like the midwives of Exodus, to help God continue the work of growing the Kingdom of God on earth? God is looking for the Church to make a choice to be patient and kind, to commit to laboring together, side by side as the body of Christ to grow the family of God.

August 31

Exodus 3: 1-15, Psalm 105: 1-6; 23-26; 45, Romans 12: 9-21, Matthew 16: 21-28

Following God’s call is not always easy. Just look at the scriptures for this week. Moses is asked to deliver God’s children from the hardship of Egypt and the oppression of Pharaoh (Exodus 3). Jesus shares his destination of Jerusalem and suffering with his disciples. He shares with them the call to take up a cross and follow where he goes (Matthew 16). Even Paul shares with the Church rules for the road which remind us there will be evil, suffering, persecution, weeping and enemies along the way (Romans 12).

Sometimes we wonder why God chooses us. Like Moses, we wonder “Who am I that I should go?” (Exodus 3:11) We question if we have the stamina, the perseverance, the gifts, or the heart for the work God calls us to do. Jesus, who knew our struggles, must have had doubts as well. He too must have wondered if he was prepared to face what Jerusalem had

to offer. Could this be why he called Peter to task for attempting to keep him from such a fate? (Matthew 16:22) Like us, was he faced with the temptation to walk the opposite way of Jerusalem and spare himself? True, our cross bearing seems to pale in comparison to Jesus’, but reality is, very rarely is God’s call for the faint of heart.

On Facebook last month, I chatted online with a former youth member. She was about to begin her residency as an Emergency Room doctor. Years of schooling and training had led to this moment. She was panicked. What if she did something wrong? What if someone received improper care on her watch? People’s lives were going to be in her hands—what if she wasn’t prepared? In that moment, I knew just what to say (just goes to show how quickly God prepares us for what we are called to do). I reminded her God had used each moment in her life—successes and failures, the joys and the heartbreaks—to prepare her. I helped her remember she had made this career choice at a young age when she felt God calling her to be an agent of God’s hope, health, and healing. Her job was not to be perfect and never make a mistake, but to do the best she could with every tool and resource she had been given in her education, her faith, and her life, and to trust God with the rest. I reminded her, if God calls us to such a purpose, God doesn’t want us to fail. It doesn’t mean perfection, but it does mean God will be with us helping us, recreating us, and picking us up with grace and love when we fall.

She already knew those things. Like Moses, she just needed to hear God’s voice saying, “I will be with you” (Exodus 3:12).

Key Scriptures this Month

“As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness.” (Psalm 17:15)

“Seek the Lord and his strength; seek his presence continually. Remember the wonderful works he has done, his miracles...” (Psalm 105: 4-5)

“And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you preserve life.” (Genesis 45: 5)

“So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong.” (Exodus 1:20)

“Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.” (Romans 12:11-12)

Please Note: Sermon Starters is now an exclusively online feature. Sermon Starters for September 7 – October 12 will be posted to www.circuitrider.com by August 29.

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