

Sermon for Lent II Reminiscere – Matthew 15:21-28

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

The year is somewhere around 1900 BC. The patriarch Jacob, who was the son of Isaac and the grandson of Abraham was moving his family and all his earthly possessions from the land of his livestock-swindling father-in-law to pass through the land where lived Esau, his angry brother whom Jacob had cheated out of his inheritance. Jacob was jumping out of the frying pan and into the fire.

He experienced much hardship; some came from others taking advantage of him; some of it he brought on by himself. Jacob's greedy father-in-law Laban cheated him out of his flocks 10 times over, not to mention tricking him into marrying his other daughter.

But Jacob also knew the game. As a young man, he cheated his brother Esau out of his birthright and inheritance from their father Isaac. As you can imagine, that didn't make big brother very happy. And Jacob's journey was taking him back to what looked to be a not-so-pleasant family reunion.

But now on top of all this, a new storm arises. It was a challenge so severe that Jacob had never encountered anything like it in all his days. In the darkness of night, a stranger seized him and wrestled him violently. This unknown foe wrestled him so fiercely that he thought he was going to die. He dislocated his hip, the joint of his thigh. This injury plagued Jacob for the rest of his life as he was said to have walked with a limp.

Jacob starts to think big picture. He reasoned that God did not want him to enter the land promised to him – God must have forgotten His Word – God must be angry with him. His hopes were shattered. Yet, Jacob came to realize something: God had called him to take this road; God called him back to this land. Fresh courage was ignited against his powerful enemy: "You cannot kill me, for I walk in God's way. God is my shield and stay; you cannot overpower me. I will pin you down, so help me God. Whoever you are, you will bless me, for God cannot fail!" And it was as Jacob believed: he was blessed and named Israel, "ruler and conqueror of God and men."

Fast forward about 1900 years. She was in a sad and sorry state. There is no mention of a man in her life. He is not in the picture, if he ever was there at all as a husband to her or as a father to their daughter. And now her daughter is severely oppressed by a demon. She has seen unspeakable misery in her own child's suffering. She hears of a great miracle worker, a healer, who has done many miracles in Judea, such as casting out demons. He is on the fringe of her country, in the coastal towns of Tyre and Sidon, out in her neck of the woods. She knew of God's mercy. Could he help her? Would this man of God show God's grace to her? She must seek him out and ask!

She calls out to him and tells him her plight: "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon." And just when she thought her troubles might be over, she must run the gauntlet. She came for comfort and help, but her hardship is only made worse. Christ ignores her. He acts like He would not even dignify her with a response. On top of that, the disciples want no part of helping her. "Send her away!" Then, when the Lord did speak, His words cut like daggers. He said that she did not concern Him; He was a helper only for the Jews. She was unworthy of His help; she was a stray dog. Her heart was squeezed into a vice. It may as well burst into a thousand pieces. The Heavenly Wrestler slammed her down.

But she remembered – she knew God's promise: "God delights not in the death of a sinner." God's mercy extended to all people, even Gentiles like her. So no uppity and arrogant Judean rabbi would get the last word on her: "Yes, Lord, even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table." And it was done for her as she believed. Christ proclaimed her faith to be great and her daughter was healed instantly.

400 years later. A small town on the British Isles is sacked and pillaged by Irish raiders. Among those captured is a teenage boy whom they enslave back on their island. For six years the boy served his master amid bodily hardships and bondage, keeping the flocks day and night out in the open fields. By chance, he was able to escape from his cruel master and after a month of travel and near starvation, he made it back to his home and family. He was so grateful to God for his escape and homecoming that he dedicated his life to serving God as a minister and missionary. The bishop of Rome gave him his orders and sent him on his assignment: to Ireland, the very land of his captivity as a slave. Impossible! He just escaped from slavery there! He knew that country was overrun by pagans, magicians, and Druids. How would he serve there?

Then he remembered that God had freed him from slavery and that God could free a whole nation from the idolatry that enslaved them. He started a church that quickly became a respected center of education. Through careful integration of the Christian faith through simple, sincere, Biblical preaching many hearts and minds were turned to Christ. But even in the midst of so many conversions, his enemies still very much abounded. Daily he would expect to be robbed. Daily he would expect to be enslaved again. Daily he would expect a violent death to be not far away. Yet daily he prayed the Psalm: "Cast thy cares upon the Lord, and He Himself will sustain thee." In thirty years almost the entire nation of Ireland, who had known nothing but idol worship, were now called sons of God. Through the Holy Spirit's work in his heroic labors, thousands were baptized and became Christians. And the name "St. Patrick" will never be forgotten in Ireland and most of Western Christianity.

1600 years later, here we are. We are pilgrims in this world. We wander in a strange land. We long to be with Christ. We want to see God face to face. But we've also had a rough go at it. Some of it we've brought upon ourselves. Some of it is a cross God has us bear. Jacob's dislocated hip likely affected him the rest of his life. It was a bodily sign of his trial as long as he lived. We have our battle scares, too. Some physical. Some mental and emotional. How often has an impatient or careless word slipped from our mouths to plague us in a relationship for the rest of our days here on earth? Or when we did something that we regret the rest of our life? Where is God for us in all this?

He seems absent. Why does God deal with us the way He does? Has He forgotten to be gracious? With the psalmist we pray, "Why standest Thou afar off, O Lord? Why hidest Thou Thyself in times of trouble? Arise, O Lord; O God, lift up Thine hand; forget not the humble!" For loving God, for holding to His Word, we are afflicted by this faithless world. We contend with our own flesh and blood. Then come the trials and tests of the devil. On top of all this comes the greatest misery of all: we must struggle with God Himself. Is God our friend or our enemy?

When Jacob thought that God was farthest away, He was closer than He had ever been before in his life. When he imagined himself forsaken by God, he was held in God's embrace. In truth, the greater the trouble, the nearer God is. In Tyre and Sidon, through Christ's insult the Canaanite woman was closer to God's promise and help than she'd ever been. Christ's humility made her great. St. Patrick was never closer to God's promised kingdom than when he served former pagans, baptizing them into eternal life.

And what of you? God is nowhere better seen, God is nowhere better discerned than from beneath the blessed cross. "Where abundant cross is found, Light and comfort there abound." We too are Israelites. Our Lord has not only struggled with us, but also for us. He gives us His blessing and receives us, His children whom He desires. Christ has struggled with both God and man and prevailed. So shall we. Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠