

*Getting Into It*  
**Rev. James Van Schaick**  
**Pound Ridge Community Church**  
**Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost**  
**October 20, 2019**  
**Genesis 32-22-31**  
**Romans 5:1-5**

Author Parker Palmer once wrote about his time attending one of the rugged Outward Bound wilderness programs you may have heard of. There, Palmer had a mountaintop experience that points us to a very important lesson. Palmer said:

In the middle of the last week, I faced the challenge I feared most. One of our instructors backed me up to the edge of a cliff 110 feet above solid ground. He tied a very thin rope to my waist - a rope that looked ill-kempt to me and seemed to be starting to unravel - and told me to start "rappelling" down that cliff.

"Do what? I said.

"Just go!" the instructor explained, in typical Outward Bound fashion.

So I went - and immediately slammed into a ledge, some four feet down from the edge of the cliff, with bone-jarring brain-jarring force.

Palmer goes on to tell about how he slowly begins to overcome his terror and make his way down the cliff face the way the instructor is yelling for him to do it – leaning back so his entire body is at a right angle to the cliff, with his weight on his feet. He is feeling more and more confident, but the worst is not over. He continues:

I was about halfway down when the second instructor called up from below: "Parker, I think you'd better stop and see what's just below your feet." I lowered my eyes very slowly - so as not to shift my weight - and saw that I was approaching a deep hole in the face of the rock.

To get down, I would have to get around that hole, which meant I could not maintain the straight line of descent I had started to get comfortable with. I would need to change course and swing myself around that hole, to the left or to the right. I knew for a certainty that attempting to do so would lead directly to my death - so I froze, paralyzed with fear.

The second instructor let me hang there, trembling, in silence, for seemed like a very long time. Finally, she shouted up these helpful words: "Parker, is anything wrong?"

To this day, I do not know where my words came from, though I have twelve witnesses to the fact that I spoke them. In a high, squeaky voice, I said, "I don't want to talk about it."

"Then," said the second instructor, "it's time that you learned the Outward Bound motto."

"Oh, keen," I thought. "I'm about to die, and she's going to give me a motto!"

But then she shouted ten words I hope never to forget, words whose impact and meaning I can still feel: "If you can't get out of it, get into it!"

I had long believed in the concept of "the word become flesh," but until that moment, I had not experienced it. My teacher spoke words so compelling that they bypassed my mind, went into my flesh, and animated my legs and feet.... There was no way out of my dilemma except to get into it - so, my feet started to move, and in a few minutes I made it safely down. <sup>i</sup>

I'm sure that many of us could quite readily find ourselves identifying with Palmer's situation – if not with actually hanging off a 110-foot cliff by a fraying rope, then at least with the emotional or spiritual equivalent. It's not hard to see Palmer's story for what it is: a metaphor for life's problems, and how we choose to respond to them. We've all probably had times when we've looked down in fear at the black hole that seemed to gape beneath us, and have realized that neither continuing on our present course, or standing pat and saying, "I don't want to talk about it" was going to serve us well.

The fact of the matter is that life is always going to present us with difficulties. Living life is hard. And what molds and forms us into mature, capable people, whether physically, emotionally, or spiritually, is not the successes and trouble-free times in our lives. It is our struggles that shape who we will be and what kind of life we will have. And when difficulties beset us, it's best to get into them, because we're usually kidding ourselves if we think we can get out of them.

This is really what Paul is saying in our reading from Romans today. Paul starts us off with a little hyperbole: we should rejoice in our suffering. Rejoice! Because "... we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us..." (Romans 5:3-5) We might find this advice of Paul's to be more than a little gratuitous, particularly if we happen to be suffering. But I think that after making it down a 110-foot cliff, Parker Palmer might have acknowledged the truth of Paul's words in his own experience. For what Palmer really found was that, even if he could not exactly rejoice in his

suffering, by at least embracing it he did in fact find perseverance and character that led to hope. And hope did not disappoint.

Our reading from Genesis today is all about struggle, too. It presents the archetypical human struggle. Today we encounter Jacob, a name you will all be familiar with. Jacob is the son of Isaac, and he has a long and kind of checkered past. Jacob is a study in contrasts. Jacob has shown himself to be a man of questionable virtue, and yet God has promised him that he will be the heir to God's covenant with Abraham. Jacob fled his home in fear for his life after he cheated his brother Esau out of his inheritance and his blessing as head of the family. For 20 years he has been living with the people of his uncle, Laban. And for 20 years, Jacob and his uncle have been trying to trick and take advantage of each other, with Jacob eventually getting the better of Laban.

But in today's reading, we find Jacob traveling. He has had a dream telling him to return to the land of his father, the land that God has promised him. The dream seems to have clued Jacob in to the fact that, through his own actions, his life has gone seriously wrong. And he must return home and make things right.

Jacob is fearful and he is suffering. He has sent word ahead to his brother Esau that he is coming, but he has no idea what kind of reception he is going to get. Esau might forgive him, or kill him. But he can no longer get out of it. It is time for Jacob, who has spent his entire life trying to get the upper hand on those around him, to discover what kind of person he is going to be.

So now, Jacob has sent those traveling with him, his family, friends, and servants, on ahead, across the Jabbok River. He remains, alone for the night. There, he wrestles until daybreak with a man – but no ordinary man. It becomes apparent as the match progresses that Jacob is wrestling with God Himself. Jacob is actually getting the better of his opponent, when the man reaches out and touches Jacob's hip, crippling him.

Jacob probably knows that he cannot continue, yet he finds himself unwilling to let go of God. He holds onto the man like a bulldog, refusing to let him depart until he blesses Jacob. But what Jacob does not know is that he has already received a blessing. He has been changed by his encounter with God. When the man asks, "What is your name?" Jacob answers him. But the man tells him he is wrong. He is no longer Jacob, the one born holding onto the heel of his older brother as if he would pull Esau back in so he could get out first. He is no longer the man whose name means "supplanter." He is no longer the trickster – the man who was committed in his life only to seeing what he could finagle from those around him. The man tells him that he is now "Israel," the one who has struggled with God, and has persevered. And, as Israel, he leaves with a new perspective on himself, and on his relationship with his brother. Instead of trying to get out of it, Jacob got into it, and he was made new by the experience.

The crises, the roadblocks, and the tragedies of our lives can end up just being things that beat us down. But as our most reflective selves, we can see them as something different – opportunities for transformation. They can be chances to deepen our knowledge and understanding of ourselves – and not just of ourselves, of God, too. For people of faith, wrestling with life’s difficulties must inevitably involve wrestling with God, just as it did for Jacob. The struggle with God is both a natural and an essential part of the process that leads us to acceptance – acceptance of our own reality, our limitations, and our wounded-ness; acceptance of the truth of God’s limitless love and of what God has in mind for us; and ultimately to acceptance of the hope that can only come as a gift from God.

Probably many of us can witness from our own lives that our greatest blessings and our deepest scars came from one and the same experience. Whether it was the death of a loved one, becoming hopelessly estranged from our spouses or families, losing a job, or having a life-threatening illness, the events that leave us limping for the rest of our lives have at times been the events that have most positively shaped who we are. If we have held tight to God, as Jacob did, we might eventually be blessed with the understanding that in those terrible times God was, and is, powerfully present – not in causing our problems, or even fixing them for us, but in the fruits of God’s grace that are evident in our lives when we have gotten into the struggle, and persevered.

Hanging by a rope, alone, on the side of a cliff, author Parker Palmer learned that those times that feel to us like a descent into a bottomless pit are in reality essential steps on a journey toward self-hood. Hanging by the tattered threads of his misused life, alone, by the side of a river, Jacob learned they are also steps on a journey toward God.

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<sup>i</sup> Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000) 82.