

# Happenings



SUNDAY, DECEMBER 5<sup>TH</sup> | GENESIS 32:22–32

I used to suffer from nighttime panic attacks. As the sun set and I grew tired, I had less energy to ward off the doubts, anxiety and fear that plagued me during the day. My emotions would build so high and grip me so tight, I ended up crying out, *Why, God? Why this? Why now? Why me?* Our fears can quickly turn catastrophic at night. When you are tired, overwhelmed and lonely, everything feels as if the world is coming to an end.

Jacob's nighttime wrestling match is an apt metaphor for our prayer struggles with God. The setup to this biblical scene is dramatic. Esau is hunting Jacob down with 400 men, ready to kill his brother for stealing his birthright. Jacob enters this night with a very real fear. He has sent gifts ahead by messenger to soften Esau's anger. But those messengers haven't returned. Jacob is in the dark. He is alone. He's afraid he's not going to be able to talk or bribe his way out of this mess.

Although the text says only that a mysterious man appeared to wrestle with Jacob that night, Jacob's sure it was God (v. 30). The mysterious man departs before the sun rises, before his identity can be clearly known

and seen. "No one can see God and live" according to Exodus 33:19, but it seems Jacob has seen and wrestled with God, shadowed by the night.

Jacob prevails in this hours-long wrestling match, but his struggle with God is so physical, so violent, that his hip is knocked out of joint. He limps away from his experience wounded and, also, blessed. He's given the new name "Israel," meaning "the one who strives with God." That day, Jacob and Esau reconcile their relationship.

This season of Advent is not quite like the last. The pandemic conditions have improved for some of us, but not all. Every individual of the more than 700,000 who have died from COVID-19 in this country was loved by someone. They were grandparents, parents, siblings, sons or daughters. There will be empty seats at the table this Christmas, stockings no longer needing to be filled, gifts no longer needing to be given. We are struggling with so much loss in what still feels like darkness. We cry out, *Why, God? Why this? Why now? Why me?* We don't know the full extent of the damage this pandemic has wrought. Yet, here in Advent, we commit ourselves to continue the struggle.

Jacob's story bears witness to the ways God is present with us in the darkness of struggle and late-night panic attacks. Advent returns us to this expectation, reminding us of God's promise to be with us in the flesh, even in our anger, doubt and fear. Our God is not distant and aloof. Our God does not simply placate our anxiety. Our God accompanies us. And sometimes this looks like wrestling with us through the night, then releasing us into a new day.

*Loving God, thank you for being with us, for struggling with us, for never leaving us alone. Amen.*

MONDAY, DECEMBER 6<sup>TH</sup> | PSALM 30:4–5

Weeping happens at night. A rising tide of emotion, our problems escalating when we have limited energy for reason and rationalizations — all these things can lead to evening meltdowns. I've often turned to this passage when I find myself weeping at night and quoted it to my children when worry or fear seizes them at bedtime. It's a comforting reminder that there are seasons and stages to our grief. Weeping may linger for the night, but it's not our constant state. Nighttime breaks into a new day. Weeping breaks into joy. In these Advent nights, as we weep with grief over the loss this pandemic has wrought, let us look with hope toward a new morning of joy.

*Holy God, linger with us when the night leads us to weep. Turn us to the hope of your promised son and your kingdom come and the joy we can find in this new day. Amen.*

## TUESDAY, DECEMBER 7<sup>TH</sup> | ACTS 5:17-21

The imprisoned apostles are freed at night. As the apostles preached and healed the sick, the Sadducees grew angry. They had the authority to direct the Temple's happenings — how dare these apostles tread on their turf? The High Priest ordered the apostles' arrest, thinking that would be the end of them. But an angel of the Lord visited during the night, setting them free to teach again in the Temple.

This Advent, contemplate who or what imprisons you. Who has arrested, paused or delayed your spiritual growth and development? What has locked you into addiction, despair, fear or temptation? What angels has God sent your way to break you out of prison?

*Savior God, you appear when we are imprisoned. You provide wisdom, resources and conviction to find our way free. This Advent, help us recognize your offerings of help and hope. Lead us to the liberation we need to grow in faith and service. Amen.*

## WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 8<sup>TH</sup> | ACTS 18: 9-11

Paul had been teaching in the synagogues of Corinth, convincing both Jews and Gentiles that Jesus was the Messiah. But some did not receive his message well. They opposed and reviled Paul, forcing him to leave. God encouraged Paul in a nighttime vision: *Don't be afraid. Don't stop preaching and teaching. I am with you and will protect you.*

God often chooses nighttime to speak or reveal visions. Perhaps, because God knows we will be quieter, more still, more able to hear and discern without the day's distractions. Have you ever experienced God speaking to you? What time of day was it? How can we position ourselves this Advent to hear and receive God's encouragement?

*God of grace, help us set time this Advent to listen for your voice and receive your visions. Encourage us to be still and undistracted. Encourage us to spend some time tonight focused on you. Amen.*

## THURSDAY, DECEMBER 9<sup>TH</sup> | JOHN 3:1-10

Nicodemus, a Pharisee, comes to Jesus at night. Nicodemus acknowledges that Jesus comes from God and that he can learn something from Jesus. But as a Pharisee, he's supposed to be the teacher, not the student. The night provides Nicodemus cover to approach Jesus and ask his questions. This Advent, consider what questions you might ask of God when no one else is around to hear you. What would you

like to know? What don't you understand? Position yourself humbly as a student before the Teacher. Use God's gift of night as your cover.

*God of Wisdom, there are many things we do not understand. Yet we let our questions go, embarrassed to ask, embarrassed to reveal how much we don't know. Be with us in this humbling moment, O God. Under the cover of this Advent night, we seek you and your wisdom honestly and faithfully. Amen.*

## FRIDAY, DECEMBER 10<sup>TH</sup> | LUKE 2:8-14

The shepherds hear the good news of Jesus' birth at night. They were terrified when the angel of the Lord first appeared, the nighttime darkness shining with the glory of the Lord. These herdsmen would never have expected a messenger of God to privilege them with time and attention. They weren't high class. They weren't respectable. They lived with and tended to the sheep. They worked the night shift. This Advent, consider who in your community might be most surprised by a nighttime herald of good news? How might you or your church shine the light of Christ into these people's lives?

*God of Glory, as we prepare for the birth of Christ, help us discern who might most need to receive this good news. Empower and encourage us, God, to surprise the shepherds with our time and attention. May we bear witness to your glory and your love. Amen.*

## SATURDAY, DECEMBER 11<sup>TH</sup> | MATTHEW 2:13-15

When the angel appears in Joseph's dream, Jesus is a newborn. Parents are already filled with anxiety about their new baby's health and safety. The first diapering, first feeding, first bath and more are done in fear of breaking this tiny, new, fragile, human. Now, Joseph and Mary must protect Jesus from Herod on top of all their other fears. The night serves as a welcome cover for their flight to Egypt. This Advent, contemplate the worldly dangers haunting us by day. As the sun sets into darkness, contemplate the ways Christ's coming is of comfort and protection.

*Faithful God, before you we are all tiny, fragile, fearful humans. As we prepare ourselves spiritually to welcome Christ this Christmas, we are mindful of the ways you care for and cover us. May the dark nights of Advent remind us of how you protected Mary, Joseph and Jesus in their flight, and how you protect us. Amen.*