

"Life's a Beach!?" Gen. 32:22-31; Psalm 17:1-7, 15; Matt. 14:13-21
Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church
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When we lived on the East Coast, "Life's a Beach!" was a popular phrase. So popular, in fact, that when we attended the national Presbyterian youth Triennium one of the groups from New Jersey had tee-shirts that read: "Life's a beach at the Jersey shore!"

"Life's a Beach" could have been heard a lot this past week with the Vacation Bible School and its Beach Party theme. It was a great week filled with fun and new friends and learning and stories and music and games and science experiments and arts and crafts. We had a great time and thanks again to Chrissy and to all who participated in leading and teaching and "snacking" and "gaming" and "sciencing" and all.

"Life's a Beach!" We wish that were true all of the time, but we know life often gives us more than we bargained for. Today's Scripture stories from *Genesis* and *Matthew* highlight a different aspect of this familiar saying. In *Genesis*, the trickster Jacob is on his way back home. He is unsure of the reception he'll receive from his brother Esau. The last time they were together Jacob had tricked Esau out of the birthright and the blessing from their father Isaac. Jacob had fled for his life.

And now, the question is: what kind of memory does Esau have and is he willing to let bygones be bygones. Unsure and afraid, Jacob has an elaborate plan to win over Esau by sending herds and flocks as gifts.

But the night before his encounter with Esau, Jacob is on the beach beside the River Jabbok and a wrestling match ensues. As the story unfolds we learn that Jacob isn't wrestling with just anyone. He is wrestling with God.

They wrestle all night until the morning. It's a draw until Jacob's hip is put out of joint. Their struggle comes to an end, but not before Jacob walks with a limp to remind him of his encounter and also receives a blessing and a new name: Israel.

The one who was afraid to see his brother Esau, winds up seeing God and living to tell about it!

We might like to think that Jacob's wrestling match gave him courage and boldness to face his brother, but as the morning light dispels the darkness, Jacob is still the same conniving schemer he always was.

The good news is that God is still the same too - willing to bless Jacob, to give him a new name and a new understanding of himself, and watching over him in all that he does.

We often face hardships and difficulties. It is good to know that God is there, even on the beach beside the Jabbok and even in the struggles of life.

Jesus was no stranger to hardship and difficulty. Matthew's story takes place right after Jesus has been given the news that John the Baptist is dead, beheaded by King Herod at one of his dinner parties.

In response to the news, Jesus heads off to be by himself. But the crowd follows. When his boat comes to rest there are

thousands waiting. He steps onto the beach and back into the thick of things.

What happens next shows us what a different king Jesus is from Herod. Herod rules with fear and exercises power to stay in control and people around him get hurt.

Jesus, by contrast, is the king who uses the power he has to heal and to save. The hungry ones around him get fed, simply because they are hungry. Herod's dinner party and Jesus' Table have nothing in common.

Jesus' actions of healing the sick and inviting his followers to be part of his plan for meeting the needs of a needy world, point to a different way of viewing life and a new way of being in God's kingdom.

There, beside the Sea of Galilee, on the beach, life took on new meaning. There was nothing easy about receiving the news about John, and there was nothing easy about trying to meet the needs of the crowd, especially as far as the disciples were concerned. But Jesus was unwilling to put them off, unwilling to be deterred by the realities of the situation. He was willing to take whatever there was and make it enough.

This is the glory of the miracle recorded by Matthew. In the face of our limitations, Jesus provides abundance. In the face of our fears of what is impossible, Jesus again reminds us that nothing is impossible for God.

Thom Shuman, a pastor friend of mine from the Cincinnati area has written a poem about this event titled "Enough".

- > There was more than enough grief for Jesus,
- > hearing the news that beloved John
- > had lost his head to Herod;
- >
- > There was more than enough people
- > when all those folks,
- > men, women, children
- > (the press reported more than 5000)
- > crowded after him;
- > There was more than enough hunger following each person,
- > gnawing away at their hopes and dreams;
- >
- > There was more than enough doubt
- > feeding the fears of his disciples,
- > whining for Jesus to send everyone packing;
- >
- > but what they did have was more than enough for Jesus -
- > taking,
- > blessing,
- > breaking,
- > transforming their paltry panic
- > into manna's joy.
- >
- > When we look into our picnic basket of scarcity, murmuring,
- > 'not enough money,
- > not enough people,
- > not enough time,
- > not enough energy,
- > notenoughnotenoughnotenough'
- >
- > Remind us, *Overflowing Grace*, that it is all Jesus needs.
- >
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"Life's a Beach" upon which we are often confronted with our fears and our failures, our pains and our panic. But it can also be that place where God shows up to bless us and to journey with us, to feed us with holy manna and to challenge us to be part of the answer to the world's overflowing needs.

Today, Jesus invites us to gather at this Table and allow him to be a part of our lives, to bless us and to strengthen us and to remind us that we are not alone, we are brothers and sisters, sons and daughters of a gracious and loving Lord who will not let us go.

Thanks be to God!