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

Wrestling Match

There’s a joke about a couple who were marooned on a desert island for many years.

* When a passing ship spots them and stops to investigate, the couple proudly shows them what they have done. Their hut is tidy and comfortable. They have dug a well and planted flowers and vegetables. They are in good health.
* One of the crew members notices that there are two churches, and asks why.
* The couple answers, “Well, the church closest to our hut is the one we used to go to, and the church down the path is the one we go to now.”

Church splits are painful … and even scandalous …

* After all, we are supposed to be “one in the spirit” or “Christian soldiers … all one body, we; one in hope and doctrine, one on charity”
* We Presbyterians are among the descendants of the Protestant Reformation, which means that we have schism in our blood …
* This tendency goes back to the beginning … when the church and the synagogue went their separate ways …

The first followers of Jesus were descendants of Sarah and Abraham’s grandson Jacob …

* In this morning’s reading from Genesis, Jacob wrestles with a stranger who turns out to be God … from whom he receives a new name: Israel (which means “God-Wrestler”)
* Jacob’s descendants take Israel as their name
* God chooses the Israel as partners in a bold strategy to lead the world to peace and well-being.

In the Letter to the Romans, Paul, an Israelite descended from Jacob, and a follower of the risen Messiah, wrestles with his identity as an Israelite …

* He is writing to Christ-following Gentiles, who have been invited to worship of the One God and participate in covenant life without becoming Jews; and who need to know how to interact with the Jewish community, because …
* But they are being rejected by most of the Jewish community.

In the passage from Romans, Paul is wrestling with his disappointment that most of his people had not welcomed this new development … He names their assets:

* 4They are Israelites, and to them belong
* the adoption, (primacy/precedence)
* the glory, (God’s presence)
* the covenants, (or covenant)
* the giving of the law, (Torah)
* the worship, (in the Temple) and
* the promises;
* to them belong the patriarchs, (physical descent)
* and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever.

Now, religious breakups usually turn into name-calling and belittling.

* In the case of the church and the synagogue, Christians claimed that God had rejected Israel in favor of the church, and that Christians were now the chosen people.
* Presbyterian pastor Cynthia Jarvis puts it this way: “The relationship of the church to Israel and of Christians to Jews has the character of a sibling rivalry gone disastrously awry. The belief that Christians have “superseded” Israel as the chosen of God—that we have replaced the Jews as the apple of God’s eye, that we are the singular recipients of God’s election—has led, in the extreme, to the Holocaust. It has also kept the church from an honest examination of its flawed relationship with God.”
* She continues: “God does not go back on God’s promises. The first covenant holds forever, giving us the common hope that in the fullness of God’s time we will all be branches growing out of the one root of faith—gentiles as the wild olive shoot grafted on through Christ, and Israel as a natural branch.”

She is saying that we should focus instead on God’s faithfulness, as contained in God’s promise to Israel:

You can find it in Deuteronomy 4:31 – *Because the Lord your God is a merciful God, he will neither abandon you nor destroy you; he will not forget the covenant with your ancestors that he swore to them.*

Thirty years ago, in 1987, the PCUSA General Assembly recognized God’s faithfulness to the Jews. Here’s what they said:

*“We affirm that the church, elected by Jesus Christ, has been engrafted into the people of God established by the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Therefore, Christians have not replaced Jews.”*

Our own Westminster Confession of Faith speaks of one covenant of grace …

* This covenant of grace was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the gospel:
* Under the law it was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews … (6.041)
* Under the gospel, when Christ the substance was exhibited, the ordinances in which this covenant is dispensed, are the preaching of the Word, and the administration of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper … There are not, therefore, two covenants of grace differing in substance, but one and the same under various dispensations. (6.042)

Paul’s wrestling with the question of the status of his people ends with the affirmation:

* And so all Israel will be saved … as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their ancestors; for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. (11:26, 28b-29)

Amy B. Hunter concludes, “Paul claims that no one is ‘out,’ neither the people of Israel for not accepting the Christian story nor the non-Jewish people for not being part of Israel’s story. God’s story is a far greater story, one able to hold all the stories and characters.”

We Christians must therefore maintain “humble and respectful attitude toward that Jewish community.”

4They are Israelites, and to them belong

* the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises;
* to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever.

Amen!