

8-6-17 Sermon – “Wrestling With God” – Genesis 32:22-31

Why is Jacob wrestling with God?

Or perhaps, an even better question, why is God wrestling with Jacob? Have you ever wondered about that?

I remember this story from my first Children’s Bible growing up. The Children’s Bible was beautifully illustrated, and illustration for our Old Testament reading this morning was as dark and ominous as the story itself. It depicted two human figures wrestling in the woods. You could see the face of one of them, Jacob, but the other figure – God, or the angel, as some interpreters prefer – was much more mysterious. Arms, legs, and even part of a torso were visible – but the face was hidden by the darkness of night.

I was a pretty curious child growing up – sometimes to a fault, my parents might tell you. But for whatever reason, it never occurred to me to ask *why* Jacob and God were having this midnight wrestling match in the first place. I was used to getting into fights with my two younger brothers; maybe I just figured God and Jacob were going at it the same as we always did.

But as I’ve read this text over the years, it’s begun to puzzle me more and more. *Why are* they having a wrestling match in the middle of the night? And for crying out loud, why doesn’t God *win*? What makes Jacob think it’s a good idea to pin God to the ground and ask for a blessing? And what are we to make of the fact that God actually grants his request?

Friends this is a strange little story, and I’m not sure either Jacob or God comes out of it looking particularly ‘holy.’ Perhaps we even find ourselves a little scandalized, a little embarrassed, by this tale. What on earth could such a story have to teach us? Where in this story do we hear the Word of God, for the people of God...thanks be to God?

Ironically, in order to hear a Word from God of this story, we may have to do a little wrestling ourselves. Now please, don’t grab ahold of your neighbor, because I’m not talking about wrestling with a woman or man, as Jacob does. I’m talking about wrestling with Scripture, with the Bible and the story itself. Wrestling with the living Word of a living God, and not letting it go until it blesses us.

This practice of ‘wrestling with Scripture’ is a discipline I learned in from my friend, mentor, and beloved professor, the Rev. Dr. Frances Taylor Gench. She is an incredibly gifted teacher, author, and New Testament scholar, and at least one of you has had the chance to meet her – or at least meet her on the phone – because she was one of the references I offered to the Pastoral Nominating Committee about a year ago when you all were ‘getting the dirt’ on me.

Studying under Frances has deepened the way I read Scripture, particularly those parts of Scripture that I find difficult. Frances encouraged me – encouraged all her students – when we find ourselves face to face with a puzzling or troubling text, to wrestle with it, argue with it. To twist it and tackle it and let it flip *us* on our backs a time or two. She taught us that wrestling with Scripture is neither scandalous or irreverent, that it is in reality an act of prayer and faithfulness. A commitment to be engaged with God’s Word, and to take the Bible seriously.

Frances taught me to wrestle especially with those parts of the Bible that don’t seem to square up with the God of love that we meet in Jesus Christ. For example, Biblical passages that say things like, “Slaves, obey your masters,” or “Women must be silent in church.” Often, we twenty-first century Christians prefer to ignore these passages, to pretend they’re not there. And to be sure, these texts have caused a great deal of pain and damage. When I read them, I *don’t* hear a description of God’s vision for us, God’s people.

But, Frances says, ignoring these texts is not the answer, either. Rather, it is our responsibility as Christians who take the Bible seriously – who claim that that that book reveals to us the very Word of God – to *wrestle* with these troubling texts, and to not let them go until they bless us.

For example, let's take that passage about women being silent in church to the wrestling mat. When we read that text, we learn that there were people in the early church who believed that women should be silent, and thus should not preach, teach, or prophesy. But what we also hear, if we lean in a little closer, is a pretty solid historical testimony that women were in fact preaching, teaching, and prophesying in the early church. After all, "You don't tell the women to shut up unless they are talking!"

Where is the Word from God, then? In the writer who said, "Don't preach?" Or in the women who preached anyway?

There's much more that can be said about this practice of wrestling with Scripture – ask me about it sometime, if you're curious. But what I think is important for us to hear this morning – along with the simple statement that we *can* wrestle with God in Scripture – is that people like Frances who encourage Christians to wrestle with Scripture, point to this story of Jacob wrestling with God as their paradigm. "God is present whenever we wrestle with Scripture," Frances says, "So don't let go of it. It is holy wrestling. Hang on to that text, like Jacob wrestling at the river Jabbok, and do not let it go until it has a chance to bless you."

So, what blessing might we find if we wrestle this morning's text? What do we learn when we step a bit closer to Jacob and God during their midnight showdown at the River Jabbok?

To start with, we meet a God who initiates the struggle. For some reason, the Almighty Creator of Heaven and Earth has decided it is worth his time to get down and dirty and wrestle with a human. It's not that hard to imagine Jacob, the one who tricks his brother Esau out of his birthright and steals his blessing, trying to pick a fight. But this one's God's idea. Jacob is minding his own business. And then God begins to wrestle.

And what's more, God does not wrestle with Jacob to prove a point, to show him who's boss. On the contrary, the wrestling match actually ends in a strange sort of tie. Jacob does get the blessing he asks for. He gets a new name from God that he didn't ask for. What's important to the God who initiates this wrestling match is not the victory, but the process of wrestling itself.

Friends, if I understand this text, I think it's teaching us is that it's *ok* to wrestle with God. That God, in fact, seeks us out: invites our questions and challenges. And not so that God can teach us a lesson, smack us down, mystify us with shock and awe. But rather so that God can engage with us in the struggle. That we might be blessed by our encounter with the divine, even if that encounter begins with anger, or doubt, or frustration, hurt, or antagonism.

It turns out that wrestling with God is actually a holy thing, a spiritual discipline of sorts. A part of our life of faith so important that God is willing to initiate it.

Perhaps that's what Frances is getting at when she encourages her students to wrestle with God in Scripture. Maybe that's what the psalmists are trying to do when they shake their fists at the sky and cry out to God, "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?"

I wonder...could it be that this story presents a model for us, even an *invitation*, to wrestle with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? With the God who we know in Jesus Christ?

We may not meet God as a strange man in the woods. But I imagine most of us know a thing or two about wrestling with God. Have you ever looked at the world around you and asked,

“Where could God be in all of this?” Or felt despair and anger in the face of suffering and cried out that universal human prayer: “Why, God? Why?” Perhaps our wrestling has been met with criticism from well-intentioned Christians who have told us, “Shh, don’t say that! Just trust God. Trust, and everything will be ok.”

And yet, the God who meets us in this story *invites* us to lift up our honest, heartfelt, gut-wrenching prayers. To engage with God in the struggle. The God who wrestles Jacob invites us to hang on to him. To claim as our own the God who promised to be faithful.

“Wrestle with me,” says God. “Invite me into the struggle with you. Wrestle with me in Scripture. Wrestle with me in prayer.”

Which means, friends, that when we feel anger, or despair, we can look this Wrestling God in the eye and say, “What about that faithfulness, God? Where are you now? You said you’d be with us always, until the end of the age. Well, show me. Show us. We want to see your goodness, your Kingdom, your blessing. So come, Lord Jesus. Come!”

The story of Jacob wrestling with God reminds us that we worship a God who can handle it. Who is willing to enter the messiness of human life, to get those holy hands dirty.

And finally, this story offers us a promise: When we wrestle with God, we will walk away as changed people.

That doesn’t mean that we will receive everything we ask for. It doesn’t mean we will come away with the answers we want – or with answers at all. We, like Jacob, may walk away limping, a little worse for wear. But when we wrestle with God, we too, like Jacob, will come away known, and blessed.

When Jacob tells God, “I will not let you go unless you bless me,” God does not respond to his request right away, but instead asks Jacob, “What is your name?” And unlike when he tricked his father Isaac and stole the blessing of his brother Esau, this time Jacob answers honestly, “I am Jacob.” For to wrestle with God is to be fully honest, to be fully known.

And before he leaves, God *does* bless Jacob. God blesses him with his presence. His constancy. His faithfulness. God’s companionship on the journey. God’s willingness to walk through the muddle of human life.

Friends, when we wrestle with God, we too can trust that we will be fully known and blessed. Which means that if we haven’t received that blessing, then it’s not yet time to let go.

Why is Jacob wrestling with God? Why is God wrestling with Jacob? To be honest, I’m not sure we every really get an answer. But we do get an invitation. “Join me,” God says. “In the messiness of Scripture, and in the messiness of life. Wrestle with me. I created you for relationship. So stay in the struggle with me. Because I’ll stay in it with you. Always. Even until the end of the age.”

Thanks be to that God.