

Wrestling with God

Genesis 32:22-31
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First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson

A first-grade teacher had her students sit in a circle. She asked them what they wanted to be when they grew up. One by one, each child got up and announced, “I’d like to be a nurse like my mother,” or “I want to be a banker like my father,” or “I want to be a teacher like you, Miss Smith.”

The last child to speak was the most shy and timid little boy in the class. He said, “When I get big, I’m going to be a lion tamer in the circus. I’m going to face those animals with my whip and chair and make them leap through hoops of fire and obey all of my commands.”

Seeing disbelief on their faces that he could ever be so brave, the boy was quick to say, “Well, of course, I’ll have my mother with me.”

When you feel vulnerable and all alone, who do you hope is there with you?

As we enter into today’s Bible lesson, Jacob is vulnerable and alone; Jacob has just returned from Mesopotamia, where he had been hiding from his brother Esau. You remember Esau – the one Jacob tricked into giving up his birthright. Esau was fighting mad to see Jacob approaching, and he had an army of people to back him up.

So instead of crossing the Jabbok Stream where he would meet Esau face-to-face, Jacob stays behind all alone. And Genesis tells us “a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.”

We later learn that the man was God personified. And I mean truly personified. God withheld or backed off on his almighty power so that his battle with Jacob would be as real as it gets, with both Jacob and God struggling for the upper hand.

We don’t often think of God struggling with anything. There’s not many places in the Bible that say God did not prevail against someone. And yet, here he is struggling with Jacob.

That kind of puts into perspective a lot of what we experience in life, doesn’t it? It kind of sheds light on why we struggle so much to become the person God wants us to be, because God struggles with us to make us that.

God struggles with us throughout our lives to shape us into a better person, a vessel for his love and compassion, an instrument for his divine will.

Maybe we shouldn't be struggling so much with God; something to think about. And yet, such is our lot in life, as children of God and children of the Fall, the original sin of Adam and Eve. Turns out we're more like Jacob the deceiver and fighter than we might like to think.

How many of us have had a sleepless night struggling with our conscience, or trying to justify ourselves for some hurt we caused? How many times have we felt God calling us to something we're resisting, don't want to do it, not sure we're the one to do it?

And how many of us have sought God's blessing, and been given it, only to move ahead with a little doubt and fear, no real certainty of what's next, and is it safe, will we be happy? We all have our struggles with God.

In Jacob's struggle with God, God strikes him on the hip, saying, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob says, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."

Jacob is in it to win it. And God is in it to win him, to prevail upon him just how important Jacob is, just how much God loves him and needs him in this world. It's a reflection of how much God loves and needs each of us.

We see God's love and concern for Jacob when God warns him that it's getting light out. To see the face of God in the light of day – well that means certain death. We know that from Moses, who had to shield his face from gazing upon the fullness of God's glory.

As day breaks, Jacob's life truly is in danger. And still, he won't let go of God. In Jacob, God has someone who will not give up easily, someone willing to go the distance with God.

Think back to the greatest struggles of your life. Did any of them involve a divine wake-up call like Jacob got, getting struck on the hip? Sometimes we need to be reminded that God is God and we are not. And sometimes – particularly when we're struggling against God – sometimes it can be a painful reminder that God will never give up on us.

Like Jacob, we all have battle scars and tender spots that remind us that God will prevail, and that God knows what's best. When Jacob limps away toward his destiny as the leader of Israel, that limp is not a mark of defeat, but a reminder of his strength, and God's even greater strength. Jacob will never forget his struggle with God, never forget that God loves him enough to fight for him, even if it means fighting against him, if that makes sense.

As you consider that, think back again to that great struggle you went through. How did that go for you? Did you prevail, or did you give up?

Or maybe there's something you're struggling with right now that just about has you beat. Fear not, because God is with you in that struggle, and God will see you through.

You see, sometimes in our struggles, whether we know it or not, it's actually God who keeps needling us to change, or pushing us out of our comfort zone. It's God who sometimes has to bully his way through our defenses, hounding us to surrender to him?

God is not one to sit quietly on the sidelines just waiting for us to notice him. When it suits his purpose, God is in-our-face confronting us through our conscience, through other people, through Scripture, through worship, through gut-wrenching situations, through whatever it takes for us to finally listen to him, follow his lead.

We just keep wrestling and struggling our way through life, inching ever closer to what God has already prepared for us. Sometimes it's even two steps forward and one step back, isn't it? And that makes it hard to keep going, hard to hang in there for the blessing to come.

When Jacob hangs in there with God, he's given a new name, a new identity. God says, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Jacob is no longer "Jacob the deceiver;" he is now Israel, the one who strives with God.

Part of being human is striving and struggling to know and follow God's will, and to acknowledge that it is God who makes us the best we can be, not us – to know that left to our own devices, we will not win, things will not go well for us.

That's something Jacob had to learn in his struggle with God. Jacob receives God's assurance and blessing, and then he pushes it too far. Jacob seeks to set God aside and take over, saying to God, "Please tell me your name."

In asking God's name, Jacob is wanting to know and understand the mysteries of heaven and earth, which God alone knows. And that is something God will not do.

God says to Jacob, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there, says Genesis, "he blessed him."

God does not give his name – does not give that divine knowledge only God knows – but God does give his blessing. And in that blessing, God speaks volumes about all that we need to know about God – God is a God of blessing. That's mystery enough for us.

Look, we will never have all the certainty we seek. But we do and will have God's blessing, as long as we continue to follow in faith, continue to struggle to know God's will for us, and continue to open ourselves up to receive God's direction, protection, provision, and blessing. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Let us pray:

Lord, give us courage to confront ourselves honestly, to set aside any pretense and to be real with you; to act justly with those close to us, and advocate justice for those distant from us, to work to heal what is injured in our lives, and to celebrate the guidance and blessing you provide.

O God, lead us in the narrow way of trust, and accompany us into the struggle of sorting out what matters. Transform us by your grace that we will be confident of your blessing upon our lives, and in that, inspired and equipped to bless others. We pray your blessing and healing touch upon those struggling with illness, disease and injury. We give you thanks for your Holy Spirit who guides us today. The Spirit serves as an assurance that you do not leave us alone, but are with us from generation to generation.

Keep us mindful of those who have gone before us, help us to live into your plan and purpose.

In the name of Jesus Christ we pray, using the words that he taught us, saying together:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;

and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.