

God-Wrestlers

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Texts: Genesis 32:22-31; Matthew 14:13-21

We've been following Jacob for a couple of weeks now, and thus far he's had an interesting life. Remember, Jacob was the second born of twin sons, Esau and Jacob. Their father was Isaac, son of Abraham, and their mother was Rebekah. Jacob is kind of a scoundrel, and tricked both his brother and his father into giving him the blessing that was due to the eldest son. Esau was so furious that he threatened to kill Jacob, at which point Jacob fled to his uncle Laban's home. When he arrived there, he fell in love with Laban's second daughter and asked to marry her, but Laban tricked Jacob, and once the marriage was accomplished, he discovered that Laban had given him his eldest daughter, Leah. Eventually, Jacob took Rachel as a second wife. Between the two wives, and their two slaves, Jacob had fathered 11 sons (one more would be born later), and a daughter. And after he had been away from home for 20 years, he began to yearn to return. In the course of arranging his departure, Jacob managed to repay Laban for his trickery around the brides with his own trickery and ended up with a large number of the best livestock from Laban's flocks as he headed toward home. So when Jacob began his journey homeward, with 2 wives, 12 children, and considerable wealth, he was in a far different situation than he had been when he had left 20 years earlier, running scared and alone.

But as he headed home with his wives, his servants and slaves, his livestock and all his wealth, he heard that his brother Esau was headed to meet him with 400 men, and again he feared for his life and the lives of his wives and children. So he sent some of his servants ahead with a portion of his wealth as gifts for Esau. He sent: 200 female goats, and 20 male goats; 200 ewes and 20 rams; 30 nursing camels with their young; 40 cows, 10 bulls; 20 female donkeys and 10 male donkeys. He hoped that these gifts would pacify Esau. And then we come to today's reading:

Genesis 32:22-31 [NRSV]: *The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³ He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. ²⁴ Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. ²⁵ 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. ²⁶ Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." ²⁷ So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." ²⁸ Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." ²⁹ Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. ³⁰ So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." ³¹ The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.*

Jacob found himself on the bank of the Jabbok, wrestling through the night with a man whom we sometimes understand to be an angel, and other times understand to be God. The Jewish Biblical scholar Richard Elliott Friedman says that angels are physical manifestations of God, so it makes sense that the text sometimes describes the person as a man, but also says that he wrestled with God.

How many of us have wrestled in the night with God! It one of the more challenging dimensions of our faith – those struggles we have with God. Sometimes the struggles are intellectual as we wrestle with our understanding of who God is and how God works in the world. And sometimes the struggles are a matter of the will as we try to submit to what we understand be God’s way. And sometimes the struggles are spiritual as we do battle with our sense of disconnection from God; or our wondering why circumstances have turned in a certain way – we may feel that as persons of faith, things should have gone differently for us; or we may be wrestling with our own desire for transformation and our wondering why God isn’t working change in us. And as it was emblematic of Jacob’s life, it is also, often, emblematic of the life of discipleship that we should be wrestling with God in the night – or in a longer period of a night of the soul.

This wrestling is real, and it is at the heart of our lives if God is truly God for us. Jacob was wrestling for his life – it was not an illusion – it was hard, sweaty work that took everything he had. And for us, too – these questions, these issues matter, and are integral to how we understand God, the world and our place in it. The wrestling is also a healthy willingness to let go of certitude – for it is hard to be open to new ideas, or necessary growth, when we are unwilling to engage questions, doubts, or ambiguity.

And, the wrestling leaves its mark on us – Jacob was touched in the socket of his hip and forever after walked with a limp. When we are serious about our faith, we continue to be marked by our questions about life, about God, about what is right and wrong, about justice. Like Jacob, our lives are shaped by the wrestling.

The wrestling changes our identity – Jacob’s name was changed to Israel – I want us to notice that God named the nation he chose for a special role in history after the one who wrestled through the night with God. Doubting, questioning, searching – these are not unwelcome to God. God honors our questions, and I hope that we will always be reminded, whenever we hear of Israel, that God honored the wrestling by naming the nation after the one who wrestled. Our belief becomes faith – which is really a matter of the heart more than the mind: faith is trust more than belief – and we get to trust by our not settling for easy answers, by facing and wrestling with the questions that haunt us in the dark.

Let’s consider our other story for a moment [Matthew 14:13-21 – The Feeding of the Five Thousand], because there are some similar issues going on there, although it’s not as obvious. As is often the case in the lectionary, the story told is only a fraction of a story. In this case the chapter begins with some background information about how the cousin of Jesus, John the Baptist, had been challenging King Herod about some immoral relationships that the king had: he had married the wife of his brother Philip. Herod had John imprisoned, and then had him executed. Our episode begins by saying, “When Jesus heard

this” – referring back to the execution of John – “he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself.” Jesus went to grieve the death of his cousin, but the crowds followed him, and so he ended up teaching the people there.

As the day became evening, the disciples were concerned and frustrated because they saw that people were hungry. Perhaps the disciples were struggling a bit themselves, with doubt and a sense of inadequacy. They were sure that they didn’t have enough resources for this situation. Surely Jacob felt that at times during the night, but he gave it all he had and it was enough. Jesus asked for what they had, and they gave it, and it was enough.

All we can bring to any situation is who we are and what we have. And that is all we are expected to give – just what we have. We aren’t expected to exercise gifts we don’t have. We just are called to offer who we are in each situation, and do our best, trusting that when we offer ourselves and our efforts to God, God is able to make more of them than we might expect. Imagine – Jacob was wrestling with God! But he gave it all, and he was marked by it, and blessed by it. The disciples didn’t think they had anything worth giving, but they gave what they had, and Jesus saw possibilities instead of limitations, and brought more out of their willing generosity than they thought possible – an astonishing abundance that nourished a crowd of close to 20,000 – 5,000 men, plus women and children.

What can come from our wrestling with God? What can come from our offering ourselves and our gifts to challenging situations. More can come from these than we might expect, though we will be marked by the struggle. And the God of possibilities is always ready to bless us, and lead us deeper into who we were created to become – as Jacob was becoming Israel; as the followers of Jesus were becoming disciples who would eventually change the world as they shared what Jesus taught them. And they were changed in the process, as Jacob was, too.

Are we willing to be changed? Are we willing to struggle with our discipleship, and if needed, to wrestle with God? Are we willing to let the fruits of our questions nourish our souls? Are we willing to live without certainty, to engage possibility? Serious discipleship requires us to be able to live with mystery, as do all genuine relationships, and the degree to which we can live with mystery is the degree to which we can receive God’s abundant blessings, and become our deepest authentic selves.

Amen, and God bless you.