

*“Wrestling with God”**

Genesis 32:22-33; I Timothy 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8

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*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our rock and our salvation.
Amen.*

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Jacob was born wrestling. Scripture tells how he was “grasping Esau’s heel” as his firstborn twin brother was emerged from their mother’s womb. It was his first wrestling match he engaged in his lifetime of grappling with others. Later he wrestles the birthright from Esau as their father Isaac goes blind and their mother, Rebecca, takes her younger son’s side. In a move of

ultimate deception, he steals what belongs to Esau. Once he has stolen Isaac's blessing from his brother, Jacob runs away and spends most of his life running and wrestling with his conscience as he hides from his brother's wrath.

When we meet Jacob at Peniel which translates from the Hebrew, "The Face of God," his lifelong battle with himself, his brother, his parents and his God come together in this culminating moment of his life story. This calculating man of God has been dishonestly carrying the promise of God for the Chosen People of God. He is a real mess.

He has left his family behind. We find him alone in the desert. And here the life-long wrestler has his ultimate match as he grapples in the darkness, yet "face-to-face" with his "Hidden Opponent."

The Actual face of God is hidden, but the might of God meets his opponent and will not let him go. Through the night Jacob and his Hidden Opponent exchange blows, gain advantage, lose advantage and utterly exhaust themselves in striving with one another. The Hidden One has the power to injure Jacob by breaking his hip in the battle even though he does not finally defeat him. At daybreak, the stranger wants to leave so that his identity is not revealed in the light of day. Will he lose his power if seen? Or will he simply lose his hiddenness? We don't know. But Jacob and his opponent come to a draw.

What kind of God could be pressed to a draw by this man?
What kind of man is the father of his people who can wrestle the

forces of heaven and earth to a draw? Although he is a great deceiver of people, this is no ordinary man. And this is no ordinary God! And this is no ordinary story.

Like a Marathon runner, falling forward to the finish line in utter exhaustion, Jacob breathlessly encounters the one who has striven with him through the night. Jacob seeks a blessing AND he seeks the name of his nocturnal wrestling opponent.

The Hidden One does not give his name. Rather, he gives Jacob a new name - calling him, "Israel," which means, "I have contended with God." As mentioned before, he also gives Israel a broken hip – and Israel (formerly known as Jacob) walks with a limp the rest of his life. But, in the midst of all this, the Hidden One also offers Israel his blessing. Then he departs.

Jacob is no longer Jacob. He is Israel. He has wrestled with God and he is changed forever. The wrestler has met his match. He limps forward and embodies the effects of wrestling with God.

Wrestling with God did not yield for Jacob reconciliation, forgiveness and healing. It resulted in his crippling. These are the marks of Israel. The new name cannot be separated from the new crippling for the crippling is the very essence of the name. Jacob has penetrated the mystery of God like no one before him. He has prevailed and yet he has failed. It is, in the words of Frederick Beuchner, a *Magnificent Defeat*. It is a defeat because he is forever limping. It is magnificent because, in a near Promethean battle, he has prevailed. Another a way of saying it is this: Israel wins a "crippling victory." In this magnificent

defeat, we see there is power in weakness and weakness in power.

Can you identify at all with this Deceiver, this man who has used his cunning to steal from his brother, side with his mother against his father, and then take advantage of his blind father to receive a blessing that is not his? Do you bear any of these qualities of the Deceiver? Have you ever found yourself presenting yourself as someone you are not to people close to you or those with whom you work and relate every day? Do you keep secrets from those close to and then hold them at bay through your deceptive actions or inactions? Let's be honest - are you at all like Jacob? If we are honest, each one of us carries traits of the Deceiver. Each one of us has a Hiddenness we keep from others and try to keep from God.

Like Jacob, have you ever wrestled with God? Have you ever confronted Hidden Ones in the night that challenge you and cause you to struggle mightily? Have you ever found yourself tossing and turning in the night trying to figure out who God is and what God wants of you? Have you found yourself confronting your Hidden Wrestling Adversary screaming aloud because of something done to you, something done to someone you love or simply something done against defenseless children or vulnerable adults that leaves you conflicted and angry?

When you confront and wrestle with God, like Jacob, have you found that you have come out changed at all? Truthfully, when

you wrestle with God (and/or face the Deceiver in yourself) you will never be the same again.

The change you experience may be a hurtful change. It may be a painful change because it means you leave something behind and move forward. You may not see yourself the same way again. Others may see you differently, too. When you wrestle with God, and come out the other side, you may walk with a limp the rest of your life.

In the Hebrew Midrash it says that Jacob (now Israel) asked for a blessing because of the injuries God had caused during the night. We see a clear connection between the pain and the suffering and the moral right to ask for a blessing. The relationship Israel has is so close, so intimate, so vulnerable that to receive a blessing is not just a request made by an engaged opponent but a demand made by a wounded warrior. It is worker's compensation for one who carries the mantle of humanity.

In the midst of this wrestling and the exchange that follows as daylight breaks, our wounded warrior becomes a wounded healer. Israel emerges from his combat with the Hidden One and limps to his brother Esau asking for forgiveness and making amends for all the years of deception, pain, dishonesty, and veiled reality he has created between his brother and himself and their families – who have been separated because of Jacob's dishonesty. But, Esau, seeing the new Israel coming, runs out to meet his broken twin brother – embracing him and being the

first to reconcile what the Deceiver has broken. The old passes away and new creation emerges in the daylight of Genesis 33.

Through the years, interesting commentaries have been written about this twin relationship between Esau and Jacob. Some say, Jacob was simply wrestling with his own demons in the night. Others say he was wrestling with his identical twin. Still others acknowledge that he and God had some things to work alone before he could move forward and reconcile with all the descendants of Isaac and Rebecca.

I believe all of this and more is true. And I believe you and I need to face the truths of deception in our lives of faith. We need to wrestle with God in working out our salvation just as Jacob did so long ago. We need to come to grips with the things that we carry around and give them to God, trusting that God will receive them and not crush us in the exchange – but rather wrestle through the things we carry to leave them in a desert place at daybreak so we can limp forward and start over.

When we truly wrestle with the Hidden One in our lives, we will discover that we are actually in the embrace of One who Loves Us and not one who is angry with us. We will discover when the dawn breaks that the Hidden One with whom we have been wrestling wishes only for us to be true, to be transparent, to be transformed, to be Loved, to be blessed and to be a blessing.

It is in this daybreak after the night of wrestling that we discover that the Love of God has been holding us close all through the night of our painful struggle. We discover that Redemption and

restoration come in the morning after we have faced ourselves and been honest – perhaps, like Jacob, for the very first time.

So, engage God and know that in your wrestling and striving, you will be changed for the better. Amen.

- * I thank Walter Brueggemann and Robert Alter for their biblical commentaries on Genesis and thank Bill Moyers for Genesis: A Living Conversation, first viewed on PBS and then turned into a beautiful book in 1996.