

A Holy Wrestling Match

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Genesis 32:22-31

If you're looking for a good read, pull out a Bible, go to the very first book of Genesis, and read the whole story of Jacob. It begins in Chapter 29 and goes all the way through chapter 35. It's a Biblical soap opera full of intrigue, deception, twists, turns, and complicated relationships. If you were eavesdropping during this morning's children's sermon, you heard a brief paraphrase of the larger narrative from Ralph Milton's Lectionary Story Bible.

Today's particular sermon text picks up the story at a crisis point. Jacob is all alone. At night. In the dark. Waiting for what will happen the next day. Maybe even dreading it, because he is on his way to meet his twin brother Esau.

Jacob hasn't seen him for years and years – not since long before he got married several times over, thanks in part to his uncle's deception; not since before he had all of his children.

Jacob hasn't seen him since he duped Esau out of the inheritance that was to go to the firstborn son, and robbed him of his customary blessing. He hasn't seen his brother since all those years ago when he made Esau angry enough to want to kill him out of revenge.

So now it's only prudent that Jacob be very, very cautious going back to see him, because you don't want to surprise a bloodthirsty man. He sends his messengers on ahead, to give Esau advance notice, and beg for kindness. They in turn come back with an ominous sounding message that Esau will come to meet him, all right – along with 400 of his closest friends.

Now what do you do? You can pray for deliverance. Jacob does that, and fervently. You can also buy yourself a little insurance. Jacob does that, too. He sends over lots and lots of gifts to smooth the way and hopefully soothe Esau's anger.

And you can create a buffer zone between you and the one you fear. So Jacob sends his whole household across

the Jabbok River ahead of him, and puts them in between himself and Esau.

And he stays back for one more night, as if he can avoid the conflict that surely is to come.

Have you ever done that? Have you ever tried to put off facing the one big thing you need to face? Have you ever tried to put off talking to the one person you needed to talk to? Have you ever tried to avoid the thing you dreaded, in hopes that it'd somehow magically disappear?

How'd that work out for you? If your experience is anything at all like mine, it rarely resolves anything, and it results in some very anxious nights.

So it is with Jacob. There's to be no rest for him this night, for in putting off the face-to-face meeting with his estranged brother, he finds himself in a different conflict, wrestling with a mysterious, unknown man until daybreak.

I'm not a wrestler. I don't even play one on TV, but I've certainly watched it, as most of you no doubt have. So you know the very nature of wrestling is utterly physical.

Bodies sweat in hand-to-hand combat. Opponents try to outwit and outmaneuver one another.

They use their shoulders, their elbows, knees and hands to twist and turn their rivals' bodies into submission.

Leg lock. Wrist lock. Head lock. They will do whatever it takes to pin their adversaries underneath them. They will do whatever it takes to render their opponents powerless in their grip.

Jacob has spent his whole life outwitting and outmaneuvering others in order to get what he wants. He's a pro at besting his opponent. But this is different. Now he doesn't know who he's fighting, and he has to do it with all the physical strength he can muster.

This match lasts all night long. From dusk to dawn they struggle as the clock ticks and ticks. Finally, when the two wrestlers are at a stalemate, Jacob's rival strikes him hard, puts his hip out of joint, and asks Jacob to let him go.

But Jacob must sense something about his adversary that is holy and divine. And always looking for the advantage, despite being wounded, Jacob says he won't let go until the man blesses him. Only then does he learn that it's not just anyone he's fighting; only then does he learn that he's grappling with God.

Has that ever happened to you? Have you ever struggled with something so hard, that all you could do was just gut it out and hang on for dear life like Jacob did?

Maybe something happened that's led you to wonder

whether God has abandoned you. That huge loss that makes no sense. The rejection you experienced when you were vulnerable. The betrayal by the one you trusted.

Maybe, like Jacob, you've found yourself in a quandary of your own making, and now you don't know how to get out of it.

Maybe you found yourself in a situation when something you always believed was ripped to shreds, and now you don't know if you can put it all back together again.

(There's a term for this when it happens to people in seminary – it's called "Bible meltdown.")

Maybe you've even said to yourself, "I guess just don't have enough faith. Because if I did, I surely wouldn't have all these questions."

Or maybe you've questioned whether religion in general or this Christian faith in particular that we claim has any meaning at all. Does it even matter? Maybe you recite the words of the Apostles' Creed, or of the Brief Statement of Faith, yet you're not sure you buy into it 100%, or even 50%.

And what are these scriptures we read anyway? If they're not a how-to instruction manual, what are they? Why are there stories of violence in Scripture? How come there are contradictions? How do faith and reason and intellect go together? Why not just be a good person? It would surely free up a whole lot of Sunday mornings!

These are the ambiguities of our human existence—where things aren't the way you think they're supposed to be, but the best you can do is hold on as tight as you can. How can you even fathom the possibility that God could be found in the middle of it?

This ancient story is a timeless text because I think it speaks to the reality of the nature of faith – that at times we struggle desperately for clarity and resolution. Much as we hold dear the words of Hebrews 11:1, that "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen," it is also true that living a life of faith is like participating in one big wrestling match. And when our faith is on the mat, we're threatened. The struggle seems to be our enemy.

Yet Jacob's story offers up the possibility that these struggles that marry questions of faith with the vicissitudes of life aren't so much threats to be avoided, but encounters with God to be embraced.

We run the risk of totally missing out meeting God face-to-face if we run away from those uncertainties, those things

that challenge what we always thought faith was about.

We have to entertain the possibility that it's not in the resolution of the struggle that we first meet up with the Holy One, but it's in the very struggle itself.

Given that, this age-old story strikes me not only as timeless, but as a text precisely for our time, this particular time, for I believe it presents us a faithful way to be the church in the world as it is today.

Robert P. Jones uses the term "White Christian America" as a metaphor for the cultural and political and demographic dominance historically enjoyed by most of us in this sanctuary. That dominance has ended in the past decade. He offers reasons that include declining birth rates, demographics from immigration, disaffiliation from religious institutions, clashes over science and evolution, climate change and LGBT inclusion. There's also evidence that as a country becomes more affluent, the rates of religious affiliation decline.

Listen closely to what's underneath that litany of reasons, and we hear a whole lot of questioning going on. So what would it look like for us to struggle alongside people around us who are asking those questions?

In a keynote I heard this summer at the Chautauqua Institution, entitled "Why I Am Christian," conservative political writer Andrew Sullivan shared his surprising and very personal struggles with faith and loss as a gay Roman Catholic, and why in spite of some of his arguments with the tradition he chooses to remain in it.

And as he offered his thoughts on what the current state of religious disaffiliation and decline means, he observed, "The great mistake of contemporary religion and throughout history has been certainty about things with which there can be no certainty."

In essence, he asserted that when it comes to faith in the Christian tradition, the idea that your only choice is limited to 1) an unambiguous faith that constrains or 2) a benign spirituality without any moorings is false.

"What you think is constraining isn't," he said. "Christianity has always been about questioning the established religion. Religion is not something you can think yourself into. You have to practice, practice, practice."

(Or in light of today's text, I would say, wrestle, wrestle, wrestle)

It's fascinating to me that even in this Old Testament text, God appears to Jacob in human form. It might just offer us a model for being a people who are willing to engage with others who wrestle with their own tough questions of

faith and life, not counting on our own sure and certain answers, but on the blessing of struggling together.

In Jacob's story, his opponent blessed him with a new name and the revelation that he had somehow wrestled with God face to face. Jacob was renamed Israel – meaning struggle with God. This a new identity would remain with his descendants forever.

Celia Brewer Marshall wrote: "In Scripture danger and opportunity are flip sides of the same coin. This is a crisis situation and Jacob must fight for his life, but when it is over, he has more life than he could imagine."

And in case he should need a reminder of that blessing as he left to reconcile with the brother he'd cheated, all Jacob had to do was look down and watch himself limp as he walked.

Michael Coffey wrote this reflection on Jacob's story:

*Because I journeyed too close to the event horizon
because I dreamed deeper than REM and hallucination
because I half-nelsoned the mystery into self-revelation
because I knew silent stillness is not the only holy way*

*I limp with a hip socket struck by marvelous pain
I limp with an ego wounded and the wound a blessing
I limp a survivor from a close encounter with the other
I limp slower and wiser, purple hearted from the battle
I could have walked briskly away from the one hiding
among us*

*I could have danced on with a smooth sliding stroll
I could have run tremulous from the infinite unknowable
I could have feigned my gait as if I were free of divine
wrestling*

*Do you walk hiding all your out-of-joint questions and
doubts*

*Do you slip away from the ring when the bell sounds three
Do you hide from the God who would rather have a
wrangle*

than let you walk on without knowing you are known

People of God, consider the possibility that when you are in the middle of a knock-down drag-out fight with matters of body and spirit, of life and faith, that God is right there on the mat with you. And if it's God you're wrestling with, it might take all night. It might even end in a draw.

Yet if it's really God who's face to face with you, the struggle that seems to be your enemy just may be your friend. It may even be your blessing. And if you're not sure, just look and see if you're limping. It's very possible it's a sign that God's been at work on you. Amen.

