

October 16, 2016, 22nd Sunday after Pentecost

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Focus: God blesses those who wrestle with him.

Do you ever have one of those nights where you just can't get to sleep? For me, lately that's been happening a lot. Mainly because I'm afraid that the dog's going to tear something apart or Thursday night because of the youth lock-in. But usually, when I can't sleep it's because I'm wrestling with my thoughts: thinking through a tough decision or feeling guilty about something or worried about what's going to come in the morning.

That's where we find Jacob in our story from Genesis, which starts out with the words: "That same night." Immediately, we might start asking questions. Why is Jacob awake? It's not like he's got flashlights or electricity. What is he up to? What's going on? Why has he left his tent? From the very first words, we suspect that something strange is going to happen.

What about that *same* night? Earlier in the story, Jacob has received news that his older brother Esau is nearby and is coming to meet him. That should be great news, right? Well, not really. If you remember the story, several chapters ago, Jacob whose name means "trickster or usurper," has acted in a rather "unbiblical" way. He dressed up as his brother Esau and tricked his blind and dying father Isaac into giving him the firstborn's blessing and birthright. All the property and divine favor that should have belonged to the older brother Esau? Jacob has taken it from him for himself. Esau understandably gets mad and the last thing we hear until our story today is that he is planning to kill Jacob. Several years and chapters later in our story today, Jacob hears that Esau is on his way, and what's more, Esau is bringing with him 400 of his best friends. Jacob is in deep trouble. On the night of our story, he sends ahead an appeasement offer of livestock and goodwill to try to buy Esau off before the next morning when this worst possible sort of family reunion is going to take place. *That* is what's going on in Jacob's head when our story takes place.

And on that same night, we find Jacob is alone in the darkness. Left alone in the darkness to his guilty conscience and his fearful thoughts. I think we can safely say Jacob has a little insomnia, a little nighttime wrestling of his own. Wrestling with guilt: "what have I done? How could I lie to my dad? How could I treat Esau that way?" Wrestling with what the next morning will bring: "what's going to happen to me? Man, when he gets here, my brother's *going to kill me.*" We might even say that Jacob is wrestling with God.

And then the strangest thing of all happens. With Jacob all alone in the darkness, this man shows up. Well they don't waste any time with introductions or manners. The man just walks up and immediately attacks him. He doesn't stop until daybreak. I think we need to take a moment to appreciate just how utterly strange this story is. What would you say about another person who acted this way?

And yet, here it is, the strangest thing of all: it's not just that Jacob wrestles with God, but God attacks: God wrestles with Jacob.

Why? Why does God wrestle with Jacob? Why does God come to Jacob in the middle of the night and terrify him? Why does God attack him? Why does God leave Jacob the mark of dislocating his hip? Why doesn't God say what he's up to? Or even who he is?

In this strange story, we don't get any of those answers. After this wrestling with God, the narrative simply picks up with the morning. Jacob looks up and sees Esau coming. Nowhere does the book of Genesis answer the most basic question of "Why is all of this happening?"

And maybe, in a way, that makes this story a little less strange. Because there are times in our lives when we can feel just like Jacob. Whether it's because we're guilty of what we've done. Or maybe we're scared of what's going to come next. Or maybe like Jacob: it really does feel like God's attacking us, like God's wrestling with us.

When we are in these moments of darkness, these moments of wrestling, we can't really see what's going on. We might not be able to see where God is or what he's doing. We might not even be sure God is involved in this fight at all. We might feel terribly alone.

We probably all have stories of this wrestling. I don't remember much about my first interview to begin the candidacy process, the first step before seminary for following a call to ordained ministry. But what I do remember was the night before the interview. I remember that dark basement apartment in Washington, DC. It seemed like one of the longest nights of my life. Throughout my head, I was thinking of sins known and unknown, of every little thing and especially the big ones that I had done since I was little. Things that disqualified me from ever being a pastor. I was thinking of the most terrible things I had said. And I was afraid. I was afraid that the next morning I would go in and everything would get dissected at the interview, and I would never have a chance. At the time, whether aloud or in my head, I really did feel like I could *hear* all those accusations against me. I don't know who it was that was wrestling with me that night: A guilty conscience? Fear? The devil? God? But I can tell you that it's one time where I felt like I was with Jacob, wrestling with God on "that same night."

There are many of you who have met "that same night" in even scarier ways. Serious illnesses, a mom or dad's concern over a child, losing your spouse or your parents, problems in marriages. Sometimes it seems like we're just all being attacked at once and that wrestling can seem awfully lonely. And to those who say, "God never gives you more than you can handle," maybe we can say that even Jacob came away with a limp.

The truth is that if you're coming to church or to me or to the Bible looking for answers of why sometimes God seems to be wrestling with us, you're not going to get it. After all that's happened in those years since that night before the interview, if I went back in time, I couldn't tell myself what was happening. And if any of you feel like you're in a time of night right now, I can't tell you what God's up to either.

But I can say this: don't give up the struggle. So often we think that when things are going wrong, God is punishing us. Or God is angry at us. Or I did something wrong. Or I'm not good enough. If I'm going through all this, how could God really love me?

But maybe that's exactly why we need this strange story of God wrestling with Jacob. Because in the end, we know that God really does love Jacob. In the end, he blesses him, he sends him on his way, and when we read on, we see that the story has a happy ending. Esau and Jacob embrace, not as enemies, but as reconciled brothers.

In a way, this strange story is about Jacob. It's about his determination, how he struggles with God and with men. It's about how he refuses to give up. It's about how he believes he will be blessed even wrestling with God in the middle of the night.

But the story is even more about God. A God who encourages us to fight, who encourages us to struggle. It's about God who enters into people's wrestling: enters into our guilt, worries, and fears. Those with questions for God, questions about God, even those who fight against God are never out of God's reach. In fact, strangely enough, it's often those people: people like Jacob whom God is determined to bless.

All alone in the night, Jacob couldn't see God's face. It wasn't until later that he realized what had happened.

But as Christians, we do see God's face. We see God's face in Jesus. If anyone knows what it's like to have a prayer go unanswered, it's Jesus in the garden. If anyone knows what it's like to feel forsaken by God, it's Jesus on Calvary. If anyone knows what it's like to feel attacked, it's Jesus being nailed to the cross. If anyone knows what it's like even to feel cursed, it's Jesus hanging on the tree. And if anyone knows what it's like to come through the long night, it's Jesus lying dead in the tomb. Wrestling. With sin, with death, with the devil, and, yes, with God. Jesus wrestled through that same night.

And when morning came, like Jacob, Jesus received the blessing of new life. For Jacob, that blessing meant the hope of a new day. It meant forgiveness from his brother. It meant reconciliation. And it meant hope as he entered the Promised Land.

New life, hope, forgiveness, reconciliation, and the Promised Land. When Jesus received these blessings, he received them for all of us together. When we look into his eyes, we see the face of God. We see the face of God that wept for his friend Lazarus, smiled on children, sweated and bled on Good Friday, the face that illumined the world on Easter morning, and breathed the Holy Spirit into his apostles. Because of him we can trust in God. Even in the wrestling of the night, we can trust the God who raised Jesus will keep his promises to us, too. He keeps his promise because nothing in life or death is stronger than the hold of his love.

And so, with Jacob and with all those who have wrestled before us, *with Jesus*, we rise. We rise to face the new morning. We rise to reconcile with our neighbors and to embrace new brothers and sisters. We rise to finish our journey to the Promised Land. And we rise trusting that the one who sees us even when we are in darkness will call us into his marvelous light. **Amen.**