What Disciples Do

Disciples Wrestle With God

OT 29C-22

Genesis 32: 22-31

10/13/22

**Prayer for Illumination**

**Genesis 32: 22-31**

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.

He took them and sent them across the stream,

and likewise everything that he had.

Jacob was left alone;

and 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.

Then he said, “Let me go, for the day is breaking.”

But Jacob said, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.”

So he said to him, “What is your name?”

And he said, “Jacob.”

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.”

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.

So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying,

“For I have seen God face to face,

and yet my life is preserved.”

The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel,

limping because of his hip.

What Disciples Do

“Disciples Wrestle With God”

Brothers fight. At least that’s what my brother and I told our folks growing up. We tried to explain that we weren’t mad at each other (even if sometimes we were). We just genuinely wanted to fight. And did so a heckuvalot growing up.

As much as we tried to hide our fights from our parents, though… our family dog would always give us away. She hated it when we fought, so she’d hear a noise and run find us… and immediately start barking her head off until a parent yelled, “Boys, cut it out.”

But Thursday nights… that was a different story. Once my brother was in 6th or 7th grade, we were allowed to stay home while my parents had church choir. So every Thursday evening around 6:45, my brother and I knew: fight time was on.

Then again… maybe “fight” isn’t the best word to describe it. Really, it was more wrestling than anything else. There were unspoken rules we never mentioned… but understood just the same. There were never any punches above the shoulder or below the waste. And no cheap stuff like biting or clawing. We were more interested in things like headlocks and armbars and leglocks and the infamous camel clutch. Anybody remember that one?

Another way of describing it is that, while pain was certainly involved… the goal was never to harm the other. The goal as far as we both knew was simply to wrestle.

It wasn’t until many years later that we could see how this wrestling wasn’t just fun or not… it was also, in a very real way, formative. We both needed the chance to be challenged… but with someone who could help us navigate some growing edges safely… even lovingly.

It might sound a bit strange, I realize, but today… as I look back… I’m grateful for our fights… as I see just how much trust and intimacy was involved in those formational bouts.

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Certainly, our bond was nothing like that of, perhaps, the most storied siblings in all of Scripture—Jacob and his slightly older twin brother, Esau… who have one heckuva tale.

Because Esau had exited the womb just before his twin brother, he was the rightful heir of his family’s birthright. But Jacob and their mother, Rebekah, contrived a plan by which Jacob tricked their father, Isaac, into giving the family’s birthright to him rather than Esau.

When Esau uncovered his brother treachery, he grew so furious Jacob had to flee for his life. So he ran away to his uncle Laban’s property in a land called Paddan-aram, where he made a good life for himself. He married two of his uncle’s daughters—yes, his cousins—Leah and Rachel… was blessed with many children… and was also blessed with significant wealth—some of which he obtained by honest means… and some of which came by not-so-honest means.

Eventually… God called Jacob to leave Paddan-aram and return home—to the family he disgraced… and the brother he betrayed.

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This is where our lesson this morning picks up. With Jacob about to face his brother for the first time in 20 years. And he’s scared. He has no idea what’s about to happen—if Esau would still try to kill him… or take all his possessions… or what.

So, as we has certainly known to do, Jacob devised plans by which to either appease or trick his older brother. First, he divided all his property into two separate camps… He sent one ahead of the other, so if Esau and his men attacked the first one, there would still be something left over in the other. Then he took the gift—or tribute—he’d prepared for Esau and divided *it* into three different groups, sending them out to Esau to make his tribute seem like three gifts rather than just one.

So as scholars point out, even in his return home to Esau, Jacob is *still* up to his manipulative ways[[1]](#footnote-1)… dividing up his property and even his family until… as our lesson begins this morning… he found himself all by himself. His property… his servants… his family had all been sent out in front of him. And he was forced to face the night alone.

* Alone with the guilt and shame he’d been carrying the past 20 years.
* Alone with his fears of his brother’s wrath.
* Alone with his questions of how to make things right and how to move on.
* Alone with the memories and regrets, if also the hopes.

He was alone with all of that, until… until he wasn’t. We don’t know when, but at some point in the night… Jacob encountered a man. That’s what Genesis calls him—“a man”—who seems to have come out of nowhere.

Now… different scholars have different theories about this man who confronted Jacob. Some suggest he wasn’t a man at all, but a metaphor for Jacob’s biggest fears. Others suggest the man was none other than Esau himself who came to confront his brother person-to-person. But in v. 31, the text seems to suggest this “man” is either God in human form… or a divine being sent from God.

And they wrestled. We don’t know why… just that Jacob and the man wrestled. And they wrestled all… night… long.

It had to be exhausting… challenging… even painful. But because it kept going… clearly… it was also, clearly, important. The wrestling match… this struggle… this engagement… it was clearly important to both men.

Eventually, the man realized that the sun would soon come up… and because he either wanted to protect himself from being identified… or perhaps to spare Jacob from actually seeing the face of God… the man struck Jacob on the hip… dislocating it… seeking to end the fight.

But even then… Jacob wouldn’t let the man go. Jacob clung to him… revealing a connection… an intimacy… a need that Jacob hadn’t known before.

Jacob cried out, “I won’t let you go until you bless me.” He knew the struggle couldn’t end without anything to show for it.

It’s then… it’s there… that God changed Jacob’s name. No more was he to be Jacob—the manipulative conniver only out for himself. No longer would Jacob’s legacy be that of one who ran away in shame. From that point on, he would be known as Israel… one who strives… or wrestles… with God.

This is where the people Israel draw their identity… and their name. As a people who strive with God.

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This is such an epic story, is it not? It says so much. About Jacob. About God. And about you and me, too.

I mean, what does it say about Jacob that he could wrestle with God—or the divine—all night long… and still make it to morning’s light? What does it say that it was in that struggle that Jacob finally found his own, rightful blessing—that it was only when we learned to confront his struggles rather than running from them that he found formation.

Clearly… Jacob was far, far stronger than he ever gave himself credit for.

And more than that, what might all this say about our God?

Clearly… taking God head-on isn’t a death match. Whoever that man was—God or a man sent from God—he didn’t desire Jacob’s death. God wasn’t interested in God’s own victory.

Rather, it seems to me that the goal was the wrestling itself. As if God sought out Jacob explicitly to engage him. To challenge him. To help push Jacob to the growing edges he needed to explore in order to bless him with new understandings of who he was and the life he was to live… seen in the blessing of an entirely new name—Israel.

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Friends, God wants to engage you, too.

It may not happen on the edge of a river in the middle of Canaan… but just like Jacob, God wants to help you wrestle with your biggest fears and shames… because God doesn’t want them naming you.

Just as God wants to challenge and push you to see life through the lens of grace and love… because that’s God’s name for you—“beloved.”

That’s how much God loves you. To seek you out you when you feel all alone. To join you when you’re staring down struggles you don’t know how to handle. To challenge you to see life from a completely new perspective based on the values and priorities that lead to *real* life.

So bring it on, says God. Bring on the fears you rather not face and the questions you’re not sure you want answered. Bring on the angers and griefs that weigh you down and the insecurities that keep you at night.

For the path of discipleship reveals… it’s when we finally engage God with brutal transparency and radical authenticity that we find ourselves blessed and touched by a God who is always seeking to engage us… and challenge us… in order to lead us into fuller life than we previously knew.

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So wrestle, dear disciples. Life is too challenging not to. Wrestle with your values… your priorities… your fears… Wrestle with what doesn’t make sense and doesn’t seem right. Wrestle with your relationship with God… and the space between who you were and who you’re still becoming… trusting that… while the wrestling can be uncomfortable… while the wrestling can be exhausting and even painful at times… it is worth it. It is worth it. Transformation always is.

Amen.

1. Callie Plunket-Brewton, workingpreacher.org, “Commentary on Genesis 32:22-31,” 2019 (https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-29-3/commentary-on-genesis-3222-31-9). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)