

Disciples Wrestle with God

October 20, 2019

Theme: Grapple with God and faith.

Scripture: Genesis 32: 22-31

²² 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.



Today's text comes from early in the story of the Jewish people. It comes after Adam and Eve and the garden, after Noah and the flood, after Abram has followed God to a new homeland, after God's covenant with Abraham, after the birth of Isaac, and after the marriage of Isaac to Rebekah. It is in that marriage that first Esau is born and then Jacob is born. In Genesis 27 Jacob steals Esau's birthright as an aging Isaac mistakenly blesses the younger son. Here we begin to see the

wheeler and dealer that Jacob is. But Jacob is the weaker brother – Esau is the warrior, the hunter. Jacob is the home-body, the mama’s boy. In fear, Jacob flees for his life. While living far away with his uncle Laban, Jacob marries not once but twice and begins a family. Through some more dishonest wheeling and dealing he prospers and becomes wealthy. This creates friction with Uncle Laban and leads Jacob to decide to go back home. But Esau is still there. Gulp.

As our story begins today, Jacob is still the wheeler and dealer. That is simply who he is. Jacob sends his wives and all of his children, his flocks and everything else that he owns across the river ahead of him. He even divides them into two companies – just in case Esau attacks the one in a fit of rage, then the other can maybe escape. All the while Jacob stays on the other side of the river – safe and alone. It is there that Jacob begins to wrestle with God and with who he is as a person. Today, as we continue in our “What Disciples Do” sermon series, we look at our call to wrestle with God, seeking to refine ourselves to become more like his son. Let us pray...

If you are not already there, I invite you to open to Genesis 32 in your Bible. Before we get to today’s passage, which starts on verse 22, we are going to step back a few verses to look at the prayer that Jacob offers in verses nine through twelve. Is anyone willing to read these verses aloud?

⁹ And Jacob said, "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O LORD who said to me, 'Return to your country and to your kindred, and I will do you good,' ¹⁰ I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the

faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan; and now I have become two companies.

¹¹ Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children. ¹² Yet you have said, 'I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted because of their number.'"

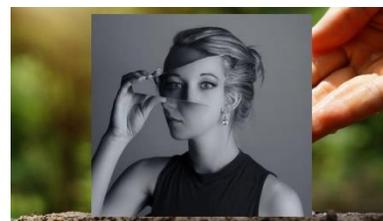
What is Jacob doing here with this prayer? First, Jacob is reminding God that it is God who sent him here. Second, Jacob is bowing before God and thanking God for all the blessings that he has received. After stealing Isaac's blessing, he fled from the land as an unworthy servant, with only his staff in hand. Now he returns with a large family and bountiful flocks. Third, Jacob prays for protection. He knows in his heart that he wronged his brother. He knows that he deserves whatever he gets from Esau. And yet he asks for God's protection. Lastly, he reminds God of the covenant. The promise that was made to Abraham and passed down to Isaac, is now claimed by Jacob. It became his with the blessing that he stole from Esau. Jacob is again reminding God that God has a stake in this whole thing too.

Have you ever prayed a prayer like this one? Have you ever been in a situation that was growing more and more uncomfortable by the minute, in a place that God had led you, and reminded God if God wasn't the one who got you there? The implication is that God needs to intervene. It was God's plan after all. Have

you ever reminded God of how richly you've been blessed and then asked God to protect what God gave you? If God blessed you with so much, then it seems logical that God would have an interest in protecting it, right? Have you ever claimed any of the promises of God when you feel like you are between a rock and a hard place and really need God to intervene? Maybe you have not, but I have certainly reminded both God and myself of the promise to be with me when I have felt alone or of the promise to always love me when I have been hurting. We can all relate to being where Jacob is at least. We have all felt stress or difficulty or have been worried about what lays ahead and then raised a prayer to God.

Just by the simple fact that Jacob is turning to God, we see a new humility in him. For Jacob, life has been just about as good as it could be. Other than a mad brother and, more recently, an upset uncle, Jacob has led a charmed life. He has been very self-reliant. But now, as he looks uneasily towards this encounter with his older and more powerful brother, he feels powerless himself. He feels unable to control the situation. He is just now humble enough to recognize that his circumstances are precarious at best and he realizes that he needs some help. So, he turns to God.

But before we look at how Jacob turned to God, let us pause and look in the mirror for a moment or two. We too have this part of Jacob in us – the wheeler and the dealer. Sometimes this part of us reveals itself when we cry out to God and pray the “if you'll just” prayers. God, if you'll just save dear grandma Polly then I'll



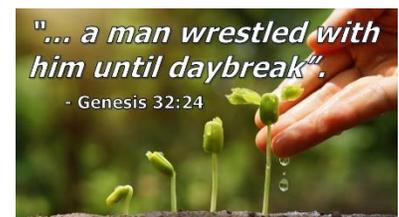
never miss church again. God, if you'll just get me this promotion, then I'll tithe to the church. God, if you get me out of this jam then I'll never be dishonest again. And sometimes this side of us comes out in another way. We compare ourselves to others to minimize our faults, our sins, our shortcomings. Did you hear what Anthony did? Thank God I've never done anything like that. Do you believe that Clarence said... I know I've made mistakes, but... When we take the time to honestly look deep within, we see this part of Jacob in ourselves.



As Jacob is working his way towards turning to God, we know that God has been at work too. Jacob is not really aware that God has been orchestrating things for a long

time. Growing up with Isaac and Rebekah for parents, God was a part of the family home. Jacob knew who God was. He just did not choose to have much of a relationship with God. Life seemed to be working out just fine without God. Perhaps you know a person or two who looks at life and God this way. Perhaps you were once that person. Maybe that is your part-time reality now. Jacob had lived up to this point with no great need for God, so he never got to know God, never invested in having a relationship with God. Until this moment.

Jacob is still part schemer. As Jacob had revealed in his prayer to God, he sends his family and all his flocks across the river, dividing them into two companies as insurance to escape with at least something if Esau turns violent. Still a man trying to hedge his own bets. But there, all alone, we read, *"a man wrestled with him until daybreak"*.



God had been at work to bring him to this moment – to a time of wrestling. God was at work in the little moments when Jacob escaped by the skin of his teeth, in the little breaks that somehow fell his way when he really did not deserve them. These were little nudges that there may be something more at work than his own skill and luck. And then in this moment when he is all alone, God shows up. The physical wrestling match is symbolic of the struggle in Jacob's heart. He knows of his own need for God but is not willing to surrender without a bit of a fight. Just as God grabs a hold of Jacob and will not let go, Jacob also grabs a hold and will not be subdued. The wrestling match goes on all night. Back and forth, neither giving even a little ground. God will not let Jacob go any longer and Jacob will not surrender his life to God. Does this sound familiar? It sure does to me.

At daybreak, after a night of wrestling, God touches Jacob's hip and the hip comes out of joint. God says to him, in verse 26, "*Let me go, for the day is breaking*". But even then, Jacob will not let go. Jacob insists first on a blessing. After changing his name from Jacob to Israel, God blesses him. The name change is significant – "Israel" translates to God rules, God protects, God preserves, God strives. As he prepares to move forward, there is an assurance that God goes with him, that God will watch over and guide him. The sun rises and Israel heads off to meet Esau, limping from his encounter with God, changed forever. Israel now walks as a child of God, unsure of what will happen but assured that he does not go alone.



In the Bible I was reading in preparation for this morning, there is a commentary in the footnotes that speaks of the significance of this event and of this name change. I'd like to share that with you now. The author

writes, *"The faith community of Israel begins in an intense wrestling match with God, allaying any notion that communal life with God is easily maneuvered. Filled with mystery, this encounter with God is also characterized by remarkable intimacy. Notice that the wrestling stranger refuses to be named. God comes so close that we cannot see exactly who or what has gotten hold of us. However, after such an encounter we go forward blessed – wounded perhaps, but always changed"*.

Our God remains this same God of Israel the man. God cannot be easily maneuvered. When we encounter God it is part mystery, part intimacy. God continues to work in and through our lives and, yes, sometimes we fail to see that it was God at work. When we realize that God has been present to us, we find we have been blessed. Blessed and changed. Because of that, as we consider our walk as a disciple of Christ, we too should be willing to wrestle with God at times. More than that, though, we should seek to wrestle with God.

If one surveys the scope of the Biblical record, it is filled with individuals and communities wrestling with God. After years of praying for a child and remaining barren, Abraham and Sarah wrestled with God. Frustrated by trying to lead the people and by years of endless wandering in the desert, Moses wrestled with God. Crying out to God in anger and anguish, the prophet Jeremiah wrestled

with God. In the garden of Gethsemane, knowing what lay ahead, Jesus wrestled with God. Struggling with his own ability to believe that Jesus was alive, Thomas wrestled with God. These are but a handful of examples of the Biblical characters that wrestled with God. Each of these men and women who wrestled with God were like Jacob. They engaged God and went through the struggle, holding onto faith in spite of their circumstances or doubts or questions, and emerged assured, confident, soothed, bolstered, empowered. They did not always emerge unscathed, but they emerged stronger and with a stronger relationship with God.

Just as it was with each of these, wrestling with God is an essential and crucial activity for true disciples. Sometimes we need to wrestle with God about our theological beliefs. God's word is active and alive. We can wrestle with God in our own quiet time, in a small group, and even here on Sunday morning. When we wrestle with God theologically, we are seeking to discern what the passage or sermon or devotional is trying to say into our lives and into our faith. We certainly need to wrestle with God concerning the implications of the gospel on our personal lives, on the life of the church, and on society as a whole.

At times, we need to wrestle with God concerning our relationships – our relationships with God, with our families, with our co-workers, with those we encounter each day. We ask questions such as: where can we invest more? Where do we need to offer grace and forgiveness? Where do we need to seek these things? When we wrestle with God, we improve all of our relationships.

My friends, discipleship, when done well, is hard and complex work. We are never quite what God has made us to be. We always have “growing edges” as we walk out our faith journey. Sometimes our growing edges are a little painful, like they were for Jacob. Sometimes our growing edges are joyful and fruitful. In either case, our wrestling match with God is never done.

As I conclude today, I encourage you to wrestle with God. Do not be afraid to engage in the grappling. Yes, Jacob’s wrestling match did result in a limp. But it also brought a great blessing. And that limp forever reminded him of the first night that he wrestled with God that first night when he conceded that he truly needed God. In the struggle, remember Jacob saw God “*face to face*”. In the wrestling, we too will often see God up close and personal. Such is the mystery, pain, and beauty of wrestling with God. May you be blessed this week as you wrestle with God. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve

- 1) Grow. What area(s) of your life do you sense God wanting to wrestle with?
How can you willingly engage God in the wrestling?
- 2) Pray. To change or to grow can be challenging. What sin or habit are you clinging to that you need to surrender to God? Pray for strength.
- 3) Serve. We walk as a community of faith. Who in our community needs you to come alongside them as their “coach”?