



“Wrestling With Angels”

a sermon by

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Our Scripture lesson comes from Genesis 32:22-32. It is that of Jacob wrestling with what most scholars believe is a messenger from God, a human form with divine power- like an angel- and yet it is also God's very own self. The passage we read here cannot be divorced from the context, so a little history is in order. You will recall that Jacob and his brother Esau were born locked in conflict with each other, with Jacob clinging to Esau's heel straight from the womb. God had told their mother that Esau, though he was older, would serve Jacob, and up until this point in the story Jacob had talked Esau out of his birthright, and out of their father's blessing. After this Jacob fled his brother, who it perhaps comes as no surprise vowed to kill him, but was told by the Lord to return to his father's land to claim it for future generations. Jacob was terrified of Esau, and petitioned God for blessing and protection for he and his family for he had heard that as he approached his home, Esau was heading out to meet him with 400 men, and he feared for his life. "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 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 the man 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 Peniel, limping because of his hip. Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob at the hip socket at the thigh muscle."

I would venture to guess that this text does not make any top ten lists when we are thinking on comfortable images of the relationship between disciple and God. When we are sifting through meaningful metaphors to visualize when we are trying to get through the day, we are more likely to imagine the panting deer by flowing streams or the shepherd leading with a staff of light through a dark valley than we are to picture a scene that looks more like something out of the WCW archives- two beings locked in an epoch battle. One whose face is hidden by the mask of darkness. And yet that is what the scripture gives us. Though not as obscure as the talking snake at the beginning of Genesis, this text is more likely to cause us to shift uncomfortably in our seats than it is to bring peace. It is certainly apt to raise more questions than it is to offer answers. Glance through the commentaries and you will find in the varied interpretations a hundred different reasons for why this text couldn't possibly be a story about Jacob wrestling with God. In one, the man who comes in the night is a demon. In another, a fallen angel. In one it is a dream. In another the man is a messenger of Esau, in yet another Jacob does not actually wrestle with a real person- despite the dislocated hip, he is actually just wrestling with his psyche, between two identities, between the forces of good and evil within him. In yet another, it is Jacob wrestling with his prayer life- if you can figure out that connection, do let me know. Anything, it seems, to keep Jacob's relationship and our sensibilities about God intact and sanitized. After all, the image presented here by our ancient author doesn't exactly help me fall asleep at night. Jacob is terrified for his life. He is located 20 miles north of the Dead Sea, literally on the other side of the river from the land that is to be his inheritance- the land he has just sent his whole family into,

the land he is waiting to claim- and the land where he suspects his enraged brother awaits to take his life. He is alone. He is vulnerable. He has asked God to protect him from his brother, and a man comes in the night. God comes in the night. The author gives no clues as to the objective of this man, but it seems clear that it wasn't Jacob provoking this fight, rather it was the other guy who starts it. They wrestle until dawn and the author deliberately builds the intrigue by delaying the revelation of the identity of Jacob's sparring partner. The mystery is a fearful and intentional element of the story as two shadowy figures thrash about until the fight cedes to dialogue and there is a sort of verbal match that takes place. Though the man has dislocated Jacob's hip, it is Jacob who refuses to release his nemesis until he is given a blessing. Rather than grant a blessing, the opponent changes his name from Jacob, 'the trickster', to Israel, which means 'one who struggles with God, or, 'God provides.' and again refuses Jacob's request for his name but does not hold back the blessing. Though the author does not say exactly when Jacob realizes who he is dealing with, his request for the blessing, his renaming as Israel as 'one who has struggled with God and with humans and has prevailed' and Jacob's statement in the end, "I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved" all give us a pretty good idea that it was indeed God who sought Jacob in the night.

No, this may not be an image of God that makes it into our hymn books or praise songs, but in this battle there is a grace disguised. In this very human disciple of Jacob, who steals blessings, and fears retribution, and asks for protection, and goes to the land into which he is called despite the threat on his life, who has the audacity to demand a blessing from God, in this visceral, human, unexpected antagonism and its physically crippling effects, there is a Word of hope. Because the God who picks a fight in the night is also the one who provides blessing at dawn and all for the sake of his people whom he loves. The God who could have leveled Jacob with one glance hides his face from the coming daylight because the purpose of his coming is not to kill Jacob, as his purpose is to meet Jacob where he is in his vulnerability, to hone Jacob's strength for the task at hand and to equip him with a blessing that will carry him into the future. This is a God who is not afraid to engage with those who are not content to be passive in their quest for relationship and blessing and sticks with them in their wrestling so that, once again, their struggle might become an opportunity for God's faithfulness to be demonstrated and promises realized. This is a God who sets aside the power with which he hewed Creation so that he could engage with us on our level – grapple with us as a fellow human being; and exercises his power not for our destruction, but for our strengthening and blessing, so that he might be intimately linked with us and we might become his people. God's power is not the issue here, the way he chose to exercise his power is the issue.¹

The text is, in short, a literal embodiment of the lengths to which God is willing to go to heal us, to break us, to bless us, and to restore us. God takes on the very thing that Jacob feared so that by wrestling with God he might be blessed to carry out his work. And the people Israel are born out of a struggle that is of God's initiative, born out of an imposed grace that was not asked for but that would lead to the salvation of all of humankind.

We don't bring our wrestlings with God to his doorstep so that he might be transformed,

¹ Neil M. Alexander, *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, vol. 1, Nashville, Abingdon, 1994, p. 568.

he brings them to us so that he can perform a work of grace in our lives. Jacob was crippled by what it took to receive God's blessing upon him. He limped as he approached his brother Esau and his 400 men and in the very next verses after this event, fearing for his life, disarmed by pain before the battle he had dreaded, he arrived at that moment with fear and trembling only to have Esau run to meet him with open arms, and embrace him and kiss him having longed only for his return into his life. And we glimpse for the first time what it truly means that the lowly will be exalted, and the meek lifted up, that power will be made perfect in weakness. That we see the blessing that can be birthed through struggle. That we receive the promise that blessing will come in our struggles.

The Hebrew dietary laws do not allow the muscle of the hip of an animal to be eaten so that this act of grace might remain in the memory of the people forever. In our own memorial we eat the bread and drink of the cup to recall another act of a gracious God- who became flesh and wrestled with the world, leaving his mark upon us for the sake of our salvation. Who named us and formed us into a people of Christ. Who transformed us from sin to righteousness in a blessing we did not ask for. Who did not promise an easy walk, but as we limp along the pathway of discipleship enables us by the Spirit to take bold strides for the Kingdom of God in the love we share and community we share. What are we trying to protect our Lord from? Jacob was not wrestling with angels alone, he was wrestling with God. And so do we. Hallelujah.