

Becoming God Wrestlers

Genesis 32:22-32 & 2 Corinthians 12: 8-10

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time/ 31st July 2005

I'll come clean right at the start this morning and expose my bias regarding this text. This is one of my favorite stories in the Bible. I never tire returning to it and each time I discover something new. Every time I come away with a profound sense of awe and astonishment over what is disclosed in this amazing story. This is one of my life-texts. You have your favorite verses or stories, right? The ones you return to you time and again, the ones in which you feel the presence of God. Texts that shape you, inform your decisions and outlook upon the world. Texts that disturb you and trouble you, yet they will not let you go or you won't let them go in the struggle hoping to get a blessing. This is one of my life-texts. I'm not going to hide it or run from it in this sermon. Sermons are not supposed be about the preacher, but about what God is speaking to us through the text. But I want to share with you a little of what I have gleaned from this story and how it continues to shape me. Perhaps you might discern the movement of God in your own life or what God might be asking of you.

Recall that Jacob the trickster, the over-reacher, the supplanter, Jacob the manipulator, the cheater stole his father's blessing that belonged to his brother Esau. Jacob betrayed both father and brother and left home. But now he is on the way back to his brother with two wives, two maids, and eleven children and property, seeking to entice his brother to forgive him and welcome him home. But will he? Jacob doesn't know. Jacob is scared, troubled. He goes off by himself after sending all of them across the Jabbok ahead of him. Jacob is completely alone. The night before his meeting with Jacob he sleeps along the River Jabbok and in the middle of the night encounters an unknown figure. In his loneliness he wrestles with what looks like a man, but with extraordinary strength. The struggle endures all night and when it was clear that dawn was approaching and that he could not prevail against Jacob, he struck Jacob's hip and knocked it out of joint. But Jacob still held the man and he begged Jacob to let him go. Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So the man said, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then he said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with human and have prevailed." Jacob wanted to know his name, but it was not given. But he was blessed. And so Jacob called that place Peniel, "For I have see God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." *Incredible.*

What's incredible about this story is that if you want to know what it's like to be human and if you what to know what kind of God created you and me, this is one of the best places to start in the Bible. Walter Brueggemann, the leading OT scholar of our age, notes that "this narrative reflects some of Israel's most sophisticated theology."¹ One of the reasons this text has spoken to me so profoundly is precisely for what it reveals – what it has taught me about what it means to be human and what it has shown me about God. The humanity and the divinity in this text have informed my reading of the New Testament, of discovering who Jesus is.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), p. 270.

At least for now, two words come to mind when reading this text: *Engage* and *Encounter*. The first, engage, says something about what it means to be human. Encounter refers to our experience of God.

What do I mean by engage? I grew up learning that truth is objective, meaning that the only way we can come to pure truth was to remain objective, be distant, aloof, uninvolved. I grew up learning – whether it was good science or not, it’s what I was taught – that scientific analysis required objectivity. If you become too involved, too identified, too emotionally attached to things, you won’t discover the truth. We gain knowledge through detachment, so I learned, by not getting involved. Truth is discovered through the cold eye of the scientist’s gaze.

Now, there is some place for objectivity in the world. But in my journey I discovered that this assumption was leading astray and taking me far from the world of scripture, in fact it prevented me from understanding my relationship with God. I also discovered later that what I learned was really bad science. Einstein (1879-1955), Heisenberg (1901-1976) and others knew that the self must be *included* in what is known, our knowledge of the world is informed by what we bring to it.² Pure objectivity is an illusion. When I was in seminary I was struck by Søren Kierkegaard’s (1813-1855) bold claim, a claim that was intentionally directed against the scientific materialism of his day, which said, “Truth is subjectivity.”³ Truth is not objectivity, but subjectivity. Not subjective – in that you have your truth and I have mine. Truth is subjectivity. What he meant by this is if you want to know anything in this world you must first care about it.⁴ In other words, *you will never discover the truth about anything or anyone (including God) without considerable amount of care*. Connected with this is passion – *if you want to discover truth then become engaged, not aloof*. Don’t hold yourself back, but throw yourself at the world, immerse yourself in the world. “Live the questions,” as the poet Rilke (1875-1926) put it.⁵ Get mixed up the world, get dirty and messy and roll around in it – all the things we Presbyterians don’t like to do. Don’t just accept things as being the way they are, engage, confront, wrestle, face the world, and face everything and everyone, including God, which assaults you, not unlike this stranger Jacob engages at night. Truth comes in the struggle, in the wrestling. And in the wrestling, something else happens: we begin to feel more alive, more authentically human. A transformation takes place in the struggle.

The well-known writer and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel also loved this Jacob story for these reasons. This is how Wiesel describes this engagement: “At Peniel [Jacob] was attacked, at Peniel he responded. Jacob, the nonviolent, the timorous, Jacob the weak, the resigned, the coward who always succeeding in avoiding confrontation, particularly violent ones, suddenly

² See the script for the play, “Copenhagen,” by Michael Frayn (New York: Anchor Books, 2000). Also see the recent movie, “What the Bleep Do We Know,” www.whatthebleep.com

³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*[1844], Edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong with Introduction and Notes, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

⁴This is James E. Loder’s (1930-2002) rendering of Kierkegaard’s idea. See also Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul). Also, Parker J. Palmer, *To Know as We Are Known: A Spirituality of Education* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983).

⁵Rainer Maria Rilke, “...be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the *questions themselves* like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. *Live the questions now.*” *Letters to a Young Poet* (1908-1910)

resisted the aggressor, plunged into the fight and returned blow for blow. And there was nobody around to come to his rescue, or even to give him moral support, or even to admire him.” He was all alone – some of the greatest struggles we face when we live this way, we must face alone. After years of inner strife, Jacob finds in himself strength to overcome his shame, his alienation, and his fears: his fear of confrontation, his fear of independence, and his overriding fear of Esau. His victory was not over the aggressor, but, as Wiesel put it, a “Victory over himself.”⁶ Jacob stood his ground, resisted the force, and faced what he had to face – alone. He looked into his own darkness and battled with it. At the break of day he felt that he had seen the face of God. In his stubbornness he demanded a blessing. Jacob discovered who he was in the wrestling. That’s why he needed a new name, a name to capture his new identity.

Encounter. This is what it is like to encounter the Living God. *Struggle mixed with blessings and almost always a limp.* Jacob probably limped for the rest of his life. This pain wasn’t treated with Bengay and lots of Advil. It was a constant reminder of his encounter with God. It’s the limping part, the threat of what Frederick Buechner once called, “A magnificent defeat,” that very often hinders us from getting close to God, that prevents us from going off on the journey God is calling us to take because we know we will be changed.⁷ We run the risk of meeting God, an encounter that will inevitably change us, affect our families, our relationships, and affect our career plans. It’s because of the limp we fail to wrestle with our faith and with God, fail to ask the pertinent theological questions demanded of us by our age. The ego detests this threat and will go to extraordinary lengths to prevent us, or more correctly, “protect” us from God. But the ego is no match for the divine guest who comes uninvited and contends with our resistance. Why does it have to be this way? Because the ego needs to be reminded it is not in control – *God is* – so there is a blow to the hip, a wounding that paves the way for blessing. There is a price that comes with blessing.

Nevertheless, God wants to be encountered and wrestled with. God wants us to take God on, as it were. *For in the encounter we discover who we are, but we also discover who God is.* This is something I didn’t learn growing up as Presbyterian in New Jersey. I saw God as distant, aloof, “up there” to be obeyed, not someone who encountered me in a relationship that was ongoing and life-giving. It was only in seminary that a more biblical view of God became clear for me. I say, biblical, because there are many images of God floating about in our society today that have absolutely nothing to do with the God of Abraham and Sarah, nothing to do with the God of Jesus Christ. In his recent book *Survival or Revival: Ten Keys to Church Vitality*, Sam Calian, former president at Pittsburgh Seminary, argues that a critical issue facing the church today is the need for the church to have a biblical view of God.⁸ I couldn’t agree more – that’s why I like to refer to God as Yahweh. And don’t assume the church is always biblical in its images of God.

⁶ Elie Wiesel, “And Jacob Fought the Angel,” *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Pocket Books, 1977), p. 125.

⁷ Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), pp. 10ff.

⁸ The session is reading through this book at the moment and will be passing it on to the trustees and the deacons, who will then share with any member of the congregation wishing to read it. Samuel Carnegie Calian, *Survival or Revival: Ten Key to Church Vitality* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998).

There's so much passing for Christianity in American society and churches these days that has very little to do with the message of the Bible and is very far from the kingdom of God. For example, I recently came across these startling statistics in an essay written by the environmentalist writer, Bill McKibben, in the recent issue of *Harper's Magazine*, entitled, "The Christian Paradox: How a faithful nation gets Jesus wrong." "Only 40 percent of Americans can name more than four of the Ten Commandments, and a scant half can cite any of the four authors of the Gospels. Twelve percent believe Joan of Arc was Noah's wife". This failure to recall the specifics of our Christian heritage may be further evidence of our nation's educational decline, but it probably doesn't matter all that much in spiritual or political terms. Here is a statistic that does matter: Three quarters of Americans believe the Bible teaches that "God helps those who help themselves." That is, three out of four Americans believe that this uber-American idea, a notion at the core of our current individualist politics and culture, which was in fact uttered by Ben Franklin, actually appears in Holy Scripture. The thing is, not only is Franklin's wisdom not biblical; it's counter-biblical. Few ideas could be further from the gospel message, with its radical summons to love of neighbor. On this essential matter, most Americans – most American Christians – are simply wrong, as if 75 percent of American scientists believe that Newton proved gravity causes apples to fly up."⁹

One of the images offered to us in scripture and one that needs to be reclaimed is of a God who doesn't wish to be aloof, but wants to show up in the middle of the night and wrestle with us in the dirt until morning. This is a God who wants to get mixed up in humanity. The image of a wrestling God is central within Judaism, it is what Israel means, but I don't know how we lost it in Christianity. We Christians need to become more Jewish and reclaim this. *To be authentically human is to be a God-wrestler.*

In his autobiography, Nikos Kazantzakis, who wrote *Zorba the Greek*, and the *Last Temptation of Christ*, was a man who struggled with God and tells of a meeting with an old monk who lived on Mount Athos, the holiest place within Greek Orthodoxy. He asked the monk, "Do you still struggle with the devil?" "Oh, no," the old man replied, "I used to struggle with him, when I was young, but now I've grown old and tired and the devil has grown old and tired with me. We leave each other alone!" "So it's easy for you now?" "Oh, no," replied the old man, "it's worse, far worse! Now I wrestle with God!" "You wrestle with God and hope to win?" "No," replied the old monk. "I wrestle with God and I hope to lose."¹⁰

Can you see why Buechner could talk about Jacob's encounter as a magnificent defeat?

All of which brings us to the cross and the epistle reading I picked from 2 Corinthians. Jacob is crippled with a blessing. But here is the paradox: *there is power in weakness and weakness in power.* Jacob exerts all his strength to discover all his strength is not strong enough to produce the blessing he seeks. Jacob is strong – really strong, he almost won against prevailed against God. But his strength took him only so far. What Jacob wanted and needed came only after the saving blow. The blessing comes only after he's been struck, only after being wounded, only then does he receive a new name, only then does he discover who he really is.

⁹ Bill McKibben, "The Christian Paradox: How a faithful nation gets Jesus wrong," *Harper's Magazine* (August, 2005), p. 31.

¹⁰ Cited by the Rev. Ron Rolheiser, www.the-tidings.com, 23 November 2001.

Maybe it is not our strengths but our weaknesses that provide the entrée to blessing, if only we embrace our weaknesses, our fears (like Jacob did), our neuroses, our brokenness, our sin. Instead of running from our hurts and woundedness, we discover that they can become the cause of our blessing. It is tough to get our minds around this because it is so counter-intuitive to the way we have come to live our lives. We tend to think of our weaknesses as a curse, not a blessing. Off in the distance beyond the Jabbok stands a cross in Calvary in which a man is strong *in* his weakness, who procures salvation by being defeated. We see Jesus wrestling with God in the Garden. We see the blessing that comes only after wrestling with the power of death, by becoming weak against death – and it was at first a defeat because Jesus really died. But he endured it and faced it in order to overcome it. Then the morning dawns with resurrection power.

All of this tells us something about what it means to be human and it tells us more about the biblical God and how God acts. God calls us to be wrestlers, to strive with the world and with God. In the striving we will discover our blessing. But don't forget about the limp – to come to such knowledge there is always a price, a wound, a cost to remind us that we are not God. **God is God.** All our strength matters very little. This invites us to be humble. What matters more are our weaknesses because it is in the weakness that we discover just how dependent we are upon God's redeeming grace. And there's no greater knowledge than that.

Rev. Dr. Kenneth E. Kovacs

*Catonsville Presbyterian Church
Catonsville, Maryland*