

“Wrestling with God”

Genesis 32: 22-30

As I shared in my Theology Tuesday post this week, I had a clear understanding of where I had planned to go with this sermon and this text. I had planned to focus on Jacob’s wrestling with God, thinking maybe Jacob was having some existential crisis in light of his past tricky deeds. Or maybe Jacob in this night time encounter with the Divine was struggling with the mystery that surrounds the presence we know as God. In doing so, he stays up all night trying to wrap his limited mind around the limitless possibilities of God. Or maybe he just ate something that didn’t agree with his digestive system and he was having some crazy dreams that night. All are possible explanations and illustrations for Jacob wrestling with God.

In my plans for the sermon regarding this text, I had it all figured out. I was going to talk about Jacob’s struggle, his late night wrestling with God and finish up by saying “It is okay for us mere mortals to struggle and wrestle with our God. Our God is big enough to handle our doubts, handle our fears. Our God is big enough to handle our struggles.

I was going to say something like “Struggling with God doesn’t make us any less faithful. In fact, struggling with God allows us to learn more about ourselves. It forces us to learn more about our God. Struggling with God, wrestling with God is good for our overall spiritual health, our overall spiritual development.”

All in all, I had planned on sharing an absolutely brilliant sermon on how Jacob’s encounter with God, how his very struggles with his God strengthened his faith.

And then following this brilliant sermon, everyone could go home happy, feeling like we had all experienced the Word of God. Our lives would be changed and I could say, “Mission Accomplished.”

Except...as I spent time with this text this past week, I noticed something obvious. It takes two to wrestle. God is wrestling with Jacob just as much as Jacob is wrestling with God. God is not silently sitting by, watching passively while Jacob has an identity crisis. God is right there in the mix. God is right there in the dirt, going toe to toe with Jacob.

God is wrestling with Jacob.

Now here is the choice we have before us. As people of faith, we need to decide what we mean when we say God is wrestling with Jacob, God is wrestling with us.

With these few words, we could easily be talking about the fact that when we are going through struggles, God is in the process. God is there in the darkness, walking with us, guiding us, leading us to the light once more. We could easily be saying “No matter what life throws our way, God is there with us, never leaving us alone.

Once again, still a relevant message, a message we all need to hear over and over again, especially when we think about what all is going on in the world around us. Sometimes it really does feel like the darkness is taking over and we are drowning in despair. Sometimes it really does feel like we are in a fight for lives and we just need to know we are not alone. Sometimes, we just need to hear that God is in the process, struggling with us, showing us we are not alone.

But what if...once again, what if we go with a more obvious choice with this text. What if, when we say, God wrestles with us, God struggles with us, we are literally saying, we are actually saying God is wrestling with us. God is going toe to toe with us, down in the dirt, rolling us, pinning us, flipping us in some epic cosmic battle.

I say this because maybe on some level we actually understand this concept, this belief. We understand that when we say God is working in this world, we actually realize that this work of God's, this task of bringing healing and

wholeness, this task of reconciling all creation is not actually easy work, given what all God has got to work with in the process. Maybe deep down, although we don't like to admit it, we know that when God is working in the world to bring healing and wholeness, when God is guiding us as the people of God, to an outside observer this hard, difficult work comes across and looks more like God is trying to herd a bunch of cats rather than bringing together all in peace and love.

Now for some, this image may not mean anything so let me enlighten you. Unfortunately or fortunately, I have lots of experience with herding cats. This experience has taken me years to cultivate and I'll be honest, I have not learned to do it well. In my household, the task of herding cats, usually begins when we plan to take our cats to the vet.

Going to the vet, all for the animal's own good, is a feat unto itself. As soon as that pet carrier comes out, the cat vanishes. Then we spend the next 45 minutes to an hour, crawling under beds, wriggling under the table, in and out of chairs. We spend the next 45 minutes to an hour performing feats of dare devil proportion just to try and do something that is really good and needed for that animal.

And let me tell you, we have learned that just because we were able to catch the cat, our job is not complete. The next piece of this struggle is getting the cat into the carrier. Claws come out. Legs extend. Forces of nature cannot get this

thing into the carrier. Now remember this all started because we have this animal's best interests at heart. We wanted to do something good for the health of this animal. We wanted to show this crazy animal that we cared about it.

Finally the last step, in this good versus demon cat struggle is to turn the cat carrier up on end and dump the cat in it. Struggle over except both person and cat sit back, glaring at each other, both exhausted, stressed and dirty. And you, for all your good intentions, regardless of all the love and care that you have shown over the years to this demon cat, are scratched up beyond belief and now need medical attention.

You see, After all the struggle, As you and the creature, glare at each other, both of you can't help but wonder: "Who won? Who would be declared the winner of this epic wrestling match? Sure the animal is going to the vet. It will get checked out. You'll be able to know you are taking good care of this demon animal. But in the process, both of you didn't exactly win. You've got the scratches and band-aids to prove it. Both of you are leaving this epic battle changed a little bit.

Honestly, that's the image that comes to my mind as I read about God wrestling with Jacob, when I thought about God wrestling with all of us.

In the midst of the struggle between Creator and creature, this struggle where neither side is giving in, I imagine God saying to Jacob, saying to us "I only

want what is best for you.” I imagine God saying, “Why won’t you listen to me?” I imagine God saying “Don’t you know I only have your best intentions at heart? Why do you keeping fighting me at every turn?”

As I kept reading this text this past week, given all we know about the Bible and its stories, given all we know about the craziness in the world, one question kept coming to mind—Why does God make so much of an effort in this struggle between man and Divine? Why does God struggle, wrestle at all with us? Why doesn’t God just let Jacob go? Why doesn’t God just let Jacob have his way?

God could have easily walked away and said, “I’m done”. Said “I’m tired”. God could have easily said, “Jacob, all you have been to me and for me is a big pain in the rear.” God could have easily thrown up God’s hands and said, “I just can’t do anything with Jacob. He is too stubborn. He is too tricky. He insists on getting his own way.” And I’m done with all that.

But God doesn’t do that. Instead, God wrestles with Jacob, holding on until the break of day. God struggles with Jacob. God gets down in the dirt with Jacob. God goes toe to toe with Jacob. In this struggle, in this cosmic wrestling match, God does not let go of Jacob.

And the same holds true for us. God continues to wrestle with us. God continues to struggle with us. God continues to get down in the dirt with us, go toe to toe with us. God doesn't let go of us.

Too much is at stake for God to do such a thing. All would be lost if God let go. God's very character would be worth nothing if God allowed Jacob to get his own way. Too much is at stake for God and yes even for us for God to let go.

All of us, as named and claimed children of God, are just too important to God and for God. God cannot and God will not let go. Instead, God wrestles with us. God embraces us and holds on tight. God does this in order to help us become the people God created us to be, the people God calls us to be.

Too much is at stake for God to simply let go and let us have our own way.

You see what I love about this text is that there are no clear winners. Jacob walks away but he is changed. He has a new name and yes, he has a new injury. He is walking with a limp now. I like to think God took him down a peg or two. God let Jacob know that he doesn't know everything that he thinks he knows.

But God is not unaffected by this struggle either. God walks away changed as well. I like to think that in this wrestling match, God realizes just how stubborn we as humankind can be. Now whether this is a good or bad trait, has still yet to be decided.

In this epic wrestling match, I like to think that God realizes that we will stop at nothing to encounter the Divine. Through this wrestling match, through our struggles, I like to think that God realizes that we will stop at nothing to experience the presence of God because we realize the alternative is just not acceptable. If God is not willing to go toe to toe with us, then we are left with nothing and that is not okay.

You see, the hope we cling to even when the darkest night seems too long is that the unique message of Christianity is that God is not an impersonal force, or a terrifying presence to whom we cannot relate in any meaningful way. God is not a person who expects only praise and sacrifices and groveling from us and has no further use for us. God is ready and willing and eager to get down and dirty with us."

We know God will not let go of us. We know that we are too important to God and for the work of God's Kingdom that God cannot and God will not let us go.

Now please don't think I am trying to say we are better than God or that we are the most important to God out of all creation. What I am saying is that each and every Sunday, we all hear me say that we are claimed and named as beloved children of God in form or another. Yes, I'm telling us this to make us see that we

are loved more than we can imagine. But I'm also telling us these things to remind ourselves of our connection to God and to each other.

It really is humbling to think that the God who created the heavens and the earth notices us. It also centers us and reminds us that this new identity, this new identity, that arises out of our struggles with God comes with some responsibilities to God and to all of God's creation.

No longer can we just walk away from God's creation. No longer can we just throw our hands up in the air as we look at the brokenness that fills our world and say "I'm done! No longer can we see the hurt and hate that fills our world and say "I have tried everything." No longer can we see the darkness that threatens to overtake our world and say-"No one is listening to me. They are just going to do want they want any way." As people of God, as one who wrestle with God, as ones with whom God wrestles, No longer can we just walk away from the struggle.

Knowing and Being a beloved child of God means we don't let go. Too much is at stake for us and for the Kingdom of God for us to loosen our grip on the love and grace that promises to bring healing and wholeness to all of God's creation.

We are called to struggle with this world. We are called to wrestle with this world because we know that through these difficult, sometimes frustrating

encounters, encounters where the brokenness is too much, where the hurt is too deep, where there seems no hope of reconciliation, there is always the promise that we will come face to face with our God. And that promise is not there just for those who have already experienced God in our lives. That promise holds true for all of God's children.

We struggle with this world. We wrestle with this world in the hopes that Through these encounters we will learn more about ourselves and each other. In the hopes that healing and wholeness will fill the world. In the hopes that love and grace lead the way.

Yes, I full admit, that Through these encounters with this stubborn difficult world, we may come away exhausted, bruised, and battered. And yes, I will not deny that even after the difficult experience is over, we may be sitting back, wondering who won these epic wrestling matches with the world....

But, But...as the people of God, who have experienced the life transforming, the life giving, the life-renewing grace and love of God, we know, we know that the alternative, us just walking away, us just letting go, is not acceptable. If we let go, the world will be left with nothing, no hope, no grace, no love. If we let go, the world will never be challenged to meet its Creator face to face.

So, knowing the alternative is not acceptable, as people of faith, May we always have the strength and the courage to wrestle with our God and engage this sometime stubborn, difficult world, as God works to transform us all into the people God created us and calls us to be. Amen.