

Wrestling with God

Menno Mennonite Church

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Purpose: To explore the traditions of interacting with YHWH God.

Message: As People of God's care, we are invited into the task of wrestling with who and what God is not as a failure of faith but a sign of faith.

Scriptures: Genesis 32:3-7, 24-31 [I will read]

Synopsis: We spend a lot of time considering how to get things right. We want to find the means and mechanism in our world to gain God's favor. We even go so far as to equate what we do with the circumstances in our lives, equating that which is good behavior with God's blessing. Jacob, here, is no hero. He is quivering in fear of his wronged brother Essau who he robbed of his birthright. He sends all his people out in front of him in the hopes to appease his brother's anticipated fury. On this point where he is about to encounter the consequences of his actions, he has this encounter with the angel, wrestling with God seeking a blessing, refusing to let go of God, despite the long struggle.

It is worth asking how we might too wrestle with God with similar righteousness. Are we quick to convince ourselves of God's lack of interest or our unworthy nature, letting go of God when God is present to us in our wrestling? We are invited to persist in our grappling with God and it is in the grappling that we are invited into blessing.

Genesis 32:3-7; 24-31

3Jacob sent messengers before him
to his brother Esau in the land of Seir,
the country of Edom, 4instructing them,

“Thus you shall say to my lord Esau:
Thus says your servant Jacob,
‘I have lived with Laban as an alien, and stayed until now;
5and I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, male and female slaves;
and I have sent to tell my lord
, in order that I may find favor in your sight.’”

6The messengers returned to Jacob, saying,

“We came to your brother Esau,
and he is coming to meet you,
and four hundred men are with him.”

7Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed;
and he divided the people that were with him,
and the flocks and herds and camels, into two companies,
8thinking,

“If Esau comes to the one company and destroys it, then the company that is left will escape.”
[in the hopes of appeasing his brother,
He set his flocks and people ahead of him as a present]
21So the present passed on ahead of him;
and he himself spent that night in the camp.

22The same night he got up
and took his two wives, his two maids,
and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok.

23He took them and sent them across the stream,
and likewise everything that he had.

24Jacob was left alone;
and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.

25When 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.

26Then 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 Peniel,
limping because of his hip.

Every now again I run across the proposition that we should just take this whole collection of information about the way of God that we call the Old Testament and throw it out the window. This history, it is argued, is too hard to understand, near impossible to apply to our current life and living, and that we are just better off without. But this is one of those stories that I run to when I am keen to hold up why we need these stories so desperately precisely because this doesn't make complete sense in the grand scheme of things if you are trying to construct a narrative history of God and the people who follow God. But it makes perfect sense if you are looking for insight on the way of following God in the midst of the ups and downs of life.

Because we need a story like this. We need a narrative about struggling with what is and wondering where God is in the midst of the messiness of life. This is a story about struggling to get things right when they are anything but. It's a familiar landscape in the human condition, one that most of us know all too well. Make that all of us. Because no matter how well we like to pretend to the contrary, rarely are our worlds the well designed and curated masterpieces of order and calm that we would like them to be from the outside looking in. No one's is. There is always something out of place, or we are given to think there is. Usually it is an ought that gives us trouble—something we think we should be, or would better understand control or comprehend. We think we ought to be more inclined to be spiritual in a certain way. We should be more organized, healthy, fashionable, punctual, economical, in control, or generally responsible, and we just for whatever reason we just know that we are not. For me it is my procrastination. Give me a deadline and I will find a way to work right up against it. It is just how I work. As a lot of my work consists of writing and getting thoughts down on paper, I spend a lot of time with the thoughts bouncing around in my head. It takes time for things to percolate. That leads me to the temptation of thinking that if I just allow the ideas more time to brew and bubble up inside this head of mine, it would be so much the better. Sometimes that turns out to be true, and sometimes it doesn't. But most of the time it puts me right on the edge between on time and too late, pushing through at the last minute. I am not particularly proud of this, and really it is just not how things SHOULD work. I should be well ahead of the game and have things well in order days ahead of time, but seldom does it work out that way. So I wrestle with it, sometimes making progress, sometimes not, but always struggling in the process.

But there is always shame in the struggle. We convince ourselves what ever it is we struggle with, it is ours alone. This is especially true spiritually. When have we been really

completely honest about that which we wrestle with? We convince that we dare not struggle with the stuff the nags at us, trading the appearance of certainty for the honesty of how things really are. Whether in the media or in person, we see the other and we see their outward appearance as the ideal—cool, calm, collected, and everything that we would ought to be. Over and over we have models held up to us reminding us of our great struggle, whatever shape and size ours happens to be. Most of the time, though, it is only us who are holding up the comparison, and we who think that it is only us who struggle. We take such pains to hide the messiness of the stuff that isn't quite right that we forget that God is in the mess with us every bit as much as not.

All of which is why we need Jacob and his wrestling match. It tells us something about life, about struggle, and most importantly, about God. It is even more important that we have this story all the way back here in the beginning of the story of God and God's people, in Genesis. From the very beginning, people have been struggling with issues of faith (albeit in not quite always this literal of a fashion), yet somehow we often seem surprised to see it when it happens with us, in our world, and our lives.

Let's start here with Jacob. He is one of the forefathers of the faith, the ones who start the whole story. But he doesn't hold up to the bathrobe-and-flip-flops, Sunday School notion that we give to biblical characters—the one where they kind of glow with doing no wrong. He is the son of Isaac, one generation removed from father Abraham himself. Isaac wife has twins, Esau, the oldest, and Jacob who came our grabbing at the heel, which is a Hebrew way of saying that he is deceiver, a trickster. Jacob tricks his way to the top. He bribes Esau to sell his birthright, his right to inherit all that was his, for a bowl of stew. He poses as his brother, impersonating Esau and stealing Isaac's blessing which had intended for Esau, making him Lord over all his land. Basically, he goes through life finding the way to make for himself by craft, lies and deceit all the way through. We fail to read it that way because we have so sanitized the scriptures so as to insist that everyone in the bible is perfect. That couldn't be further from the truth. If you want the juiciest, most twisted tale of hard living, deceitful behavior of every stripe, and unspeakable sexual exploits, one need not look much further than your nearest old testament for all the juicy details.

He does all of this despite being the one with all the advantages. Sure he had to do into hiding after what he pulled with Esau (the period of which is about to come to an end, which is

part of why he is wrestling). But in the text, time and time again he is assured by the very messengers of God that it is he is the one to bear the blessing of God forward; he just somehow seems to find that adequate to the task. He remains unconvinced and contrived all of this, I think, to make the lofty words of the YHWH God make sense in a way he could understand. So when he is confronted by this mysterious stranger who is God in disguise (gotta love a good mystery) he insists on being blessed yet again, even at the cost his own hip and wellness there. He will not let go until God blesses him, Jacob. So the whole name of Israel, for the nation who would come after him becomes one that speaks of the unwillingness to let go of God.

I was not a great Hebrew student. My single semester, having opted to concentrate mostly on the Greek, was, shall we say, not massively distinguished. I blame Emily as it was one of the first classes we had together, and she was distracting me, but that's a different story. But what our professor, Paul Keim, left with me was a was something I have never been able to shake. There is no doubt he loved this stuff—teaching a dead language to people who didn't quite know what to do with it. But he started his class with a particular comment; the point here is not to gain a skill to be able to dissect the text to uncover its secrets in the precision of our translation or our ability to critique the text. The point he was to learn the language to fall more deeply in love with the text and what it has to say to us about the nature of God and the nature of living a life after God. I think that is especially applicable here. Not many of us are particularly likely to encounter God in the flesh any time soon, let alone to spend time wrestling with the incarnation. But we do know how to wrestle. We do know all too well those things in our lives, especially our lives of faith that haunt us. We all have our whys and wonderings that we bring to God: why does so much of life hurt so much: why are the ways of God not easier to understand; how can we know that what we come to profess as real is real at all; how is it that we are even worthy of God's grace at all. We all have questions. We all have doubt. And we all struggle.

But perhaps we must be like Jacob—this imperfect, utterly human character who pushed so far and schemed so much. Perhaps the key to the struggle is not reproaching ourselves for having the struggle in the first place, but rather the lesson here is that the key to the questions that we have is in the wrestling itself, and our unwillingness to let go of the process of the struggle itself. Perhaps, it is in the wresting that we are ultimately blessed. Jacob encounters God on that night before he confronts his brother. He struggles mightily and he is changed by it, walking with a limp away from the scene. He is blessed not in spite of his struggle. He is

blessed because of his struggle. He continues to be his normal, scheming self from here on in; and as such the struggle continues. He refuses to let go of the struggle and that makes all the difference. And for his pains he is named Israel—he who struggles with God.

We are inclined to let go of that which perplexes us. We are told that there are no good answers for the big questions of the world on this side of heaven and we should just let it all go. We are told that it doesn't make sense to hold onto faith when our world has so many answers of science and living that it has found on its own. But here we have the invitation to struggle, to stay engaged, to keep working at that which comes to us. Because you know what? Here is the other take away from this for me: God doesn't let go in the struggle either. Ultimately, God engages us in the struggle too, and is engaged by it, and commits to it in all sorts of way. God promises that his love will not, and cannot leave us, even when we find ourselves wrestling with what all that means. God keeps engaged, even as we struggle with God. I don't know about you, but that is a relief for me to hear. I am not in my wrestling alone. God meets me there, and will not let me go, despite the damage, despite the ability to simply end it all. God keeps wrestling with us, so long as we wrestle with God. And that, my friends, is always a blessing.

May we each, no matter what our struggle might be, be given vigor to engage the wrestling anew, knowing that in the struggle, we so often meet the face of God who engages with us not to give us quick victory or easy answers, but the blessing of being engaged, held, known, and loved for all we are and as we are. May this be our promise in good times and bad, come what may. Amen.