

Disciples Wrestle with God
Genesis 32:22-31
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A little introduction to our passage today. Jacob, the protagonist of our story, may actually be the most important patriarch in the Bible. His name is mentioned more times than Adam and Abraham combined! Jacob was born to Isaac right after his twin Esau was born. The biblical account claims that Esau was born first and that Jacob came out right after grasping at his brother's heel. Jacob literally means heel and he acts as the literary heel, the character who is untrustworthy or unsympathetic, for much of his story.

He stole his brother's birthright through trickery and then used magic to get more sheep from his father-in-law, Laban. He has spent his whole life trying to trick and deceive his way to a better life. While the biblical account shows Esau as the stereotypical warrior type, strong, a good hunter, it shows Jacob as someone who uses his sharp wit to get out of work or to deceive others into giving him more.

Now after fleeing from his father-in-law Laban, he runs into Esau... with 400 men... who are all waiting for Jacob to cross the river. Jacob's stronger, warrior brother. The one who Jacob stole his birthright. Jacob reverts to his old tried and true patterns, by hiding much of his wealth, then sending over convoys slowly to try and placate his brother, finally sending his wives and children to hopefully soften him up.

Which brings us to our story today from Genesis chapter 32.

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 that 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 he 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 Penuel, limping because of his hip.

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

This is the first time in Jacob's story that he stands and fights instead of trying to weasel his way out of a problem. The text has pointed out again and again that Jacob is not strong. So the only thing that keeps Jacob wrestling this person and avoiding defeat is his stubbornness.

Jacob realized that this stranger was more powerful than he was, but still Jacob held on. Jacob figured that this stranger was more than he let on so Jacob demanded a blessing from this stranger. An odd request from the person who attacked and wrestled you all night finally knocking your hip out of joint. But Jacob's stubbornness and the stranger's blessing transform Jacob the heel, the trouble-maker, the deceiver into Israel the God-wrestler, one who wrestles with God and humans and has prevailed!

And something I find incredibly interesting about this story is that it is not just a story of a bygone ancestor that was a trouble-maker who amended his ways. No, this is the nation of Israel's founding story. Jacob who becomes Israel is the archetype for the whole nation! Their name, Israel, literally means one who wrestles with God. Because they are Jacob wrestling with God all night by the river refusing to let go and demanding a blessing of God. Israel is willing to be changed, even damaged in that exchange because they know the blessing is worth the price.

This is the story that ancient Israel turned to in order to see and understand themselves. When they went into exile, twice. When they lived in freedom under

both good and bad kings ruling over them. When they were conquered by the Romans and oppressed. This is their story. This is their faith. A stubborn and relentless faith that will hold on and demand a blessing of God no matter the cost.

One book we recently read at LPC's Book Club was called "Just Mercy" by Bryan Stevenson. Stevenson is a lawyer who works to help children who have received life sentences to be released especially for the non-homicidal crimes like stealing a bike or simply possessing marijuana. I recently read an article he wrote for the New York Times' 1619 project titled "Why American Prisons Owe Their Cruelty to Slavery." In it he connects the dots between slavery of the past to the mass incarceration of today. He recounts the story of Matthew, a 16 year old, sentenced to life in prison for a non-homicide offense, saying that Matthew is one of 62 children sentenced to life in prison in Louisiana. Some have spent nearly 50 years in the Angola prison in Louisiana. Angola is one of the most notoriously abusive prisons in America. Prisoners have to work on a plantation picking cotton as officers watch over them on horses. If they do not pick fast enough they have to go to the hole where they are fed very little food and given very little water.

Stevenson recounts wrestling to get Matthew out of prison after the Supreme Court ruled that life sentences for juveniles were unconstitutional. Like Jacob, he is stubborn in fighting for justice against staggering odds, demanding a blessing. He concluded the article with this call to hold on:

I recently went to New Orleans to celebrate the release of several of our Angola clients, including Matthew - men who survived the fields and the hole. I realized how important it is to stay hopeful: Hopelessness is the enemy of justice. There were moments of joy that night. But there was also heaviness; we all seemed keenly aware that we were not truly free from the burden of living in a nation that continues to deny and doubt this legacy, and how much work remains to be done.¹

¹ Stevenson, Bryan. "Why American Prisons Owe Their Cruelty to Slavery." The New York Times, The New York Times, 14 Aug. 2019, www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/prison-industrial-complex-slavery-racism.html.

The 1619 project looks at how 400 years after slavery came to America that justice in many ways has still not been served. And yet, people like Bryan Stevenson continues to wrestle and hold on demanding that justice be done, demanding that blessing be given despite the costs. How do people like Jacob and Bryan keep going, despite the odds stacked against them? They stubbornly refuses to lose heart, refuse to let go, and refuse to stop wrestling.

This is how we are to live as disciples. We must be stubborn. We must be relentless. We must hold onto our God and demand a blessing. It might not always look the way we want. It might not always come as quick as we would like. We may have to keep wrestling until dawn. But this heritage of our faith teaches us that only by holding on and not giving up can we make it through to the next day, to see the sun, and to see God's face. Some would have us passively believe in God and pretend that everything will be alright, never questioning or doubting or wrestling. They would have us avoid the hard things in life and sweep them under the rug, but it is in our DNA as Christians and as Bible believers to wrestle and fight with God for what is right! It is the origin story of our faith!

So I implore you that no matter where you are today, no matter what issues or people or situations you are wrestling with, I encourage you to hold onto God with the stubbornness of Israel and demand a blessing. Hold onto the hope of our faith because hopelessness is the enemy of justice. Hold onto God and through this we might just see the face of God. Amen.