

## **Wrestling With The Questions**

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Genesis 32:22-31

### **CHILDREN'S TIME**

One of the most interesting animals on earth is the zebra. The zebra's natural home is in the grasslands and desert areas of eastern and southern Africa. Maybe you have seen a zebra in a zoo or on TV.

Here are some interesting facts about the zebra.

The zebra is a member of the horse family and can run up to 35 miles per hour. They grow to be about four to five feet tall. And after only 20 minutes from being born, baby zebras can walk! Pretty amazing, right?

I have a question for you. Are zebras white with black stripes, or are they black with white stripes? Some people say that since they have a white belly, they are white with black stripes. Others say that if you shave all their hair off they have black skin, so they are black with white stripes. People have been asking this question for maybe hundreds of years. Most scientists today believe that they

are black with white stripes, but some people still like to argue about it. Who is right?

That is a tough question!

I want to talk with you today about tough questions. There is a story in the Bible about a man named Thomas. He was the only disciple to miss out on Jesus' first visit after he was raised from the dead. The other disciples wanted him to believe that Jesus was alive. But for whatever reason, Thomas didn't believe. He wanted to conduct a test before he'd believe.

Thomas wanted to see Jesus' wounds on his hands and feet and even touch the wounds before he would believe. A week later, Jesus was there with Thomas and went over to him and said here I am, you can touch my wounds. I am alive. Thomas then believed.

Jesus praised Thomas for asking the tough and honest questions. It turned out that there were many others who also had questions, but many of them never asked.

God wants us to be honest and ask the tough questions, and not to be embarrassed. You don't have to be afraid to ask God any question in prayer.

## SERMON

Before I get into the scripture and message for today, I wanted you to know that I received a bit of feedback regarding both the letter I sent out on Oct 4 and last week's sermon. I always appreciate feedback and see it as a healthy sign when I receive both positive and negative feedback. This was just such a case.

I'm not going to respond to it here, but I want you to know that I listen closely to all feedback and think and pray on it. When we differ in thought, theology, or expression, I feel strongly that it is an occasion to have further conversation to intently listen to one another. This is what healthy church congregations do. So, I take this feedback as a sign that we are a healthy community.

The feedback caused me to think more about some related issues and I have written another letter to continue that conversation, but what I am most interested in is face to face conversation.

I firmly believe that what we are up to as followers of Jesus is too important to allow differences of opinion to get in the way of the bigger calling to be the Church. So, let us, as a congregation, develop the muscle of healthy

respectful conversation about things that are dividing the church and this country. Having these kinds of conversations requires that we approach each other with both humility and curiosity, two things in which it is worthy to grow.

If you are interested in this longer letter, there are copies available at the entrance to the sanctuary. It is a bit longer, three pages, but I invite you to read it, think about it, pray about it, and then engage with me in conversation.

This is actually a good intro to the sermon for today, because we are talking about wrestling with tough questions.

There are two different kinds of questions I want to address today. First, you might be in conversation with other people and hear information that is unclear or has some gaps. You have questions related to that information.

This is a totally made up scenario, but you might be at a community forum organized by the Birmingham Advisory Parking Committee. They are talking about a proposed new parking structure on the south side of Birmingham. (Remember, this is made up.) After all of the information is presented, there is a Q & A time and you raise your hand. It wasn't mentioned in

the presentation, so you ask how the new proposed structure will impact the other proposed parking structure by our church. The presenter responds that in conversations with the city, this new structure is going to solve all of the parking problems in the city and the proposed structure by the church has been scraped as a result. Now, you have the answer to your question.

This kind of question is about information. It is helpful to ask information questions to get answers and then we can use the information in whatever way we want.

A second kind of question goes deeper than merely filling in gaps with new information. To get at these questions, let's listen to the story from Genesis about Jacob, who wrestled with God.

### **READ GENESIS 32:22-31**

This is one of those passages that doesn't give us enough information to understand fully what is going on. We might have some information-based questions about the story.

We could ask, why did Jacob ask this wrestling partner to bless him? It seems like a strange request.

And then, what kind of blessing was given to Jacob?

Jacob's wrestling partner gave Jacob a new name, Israel. Why? It seems an unlikely thing to do after a wrestling match.

Some have talked about the wrestling match as a metaphor, or symbolic, but it left Jacob with a physical ailment, a catch in his giddy-up. He ended up with a limp. What did that mean?

Can you imagine what sort of wrestling you might do that would leave you with a physical limp?

We also might ask, with whom is Jacob wrestling through the night? The story introduces this as a man, but then Jacob has the distinct understanding of it being God.

The story has us full of questions about how to understand it and what it means. But by the end, the story leaves us with the image of a person who has wrestled with God.

When we follow Jesus, we also can be straight up honest and wrestle with God, asking all kinds of questions — not just the softball questions, but the deeper heart-wrenching questions, the big why questions, and the soul searching questions.

As we ask God these questions, it is helpful to leave behind the pious religious platitudes and deal honestly with the nitty-gritty of life. This is what we see in so many of the stories in scripture.

Through years and years of longing for children, Abraham and Sarah wrestled, asking tough questions of God.

Moses wrestled with God, asking repeatedly what he must do to lead a disgruntled people for 40 years in the wilderness.

Through sickness of mind, body and spirit, Job wrestled with tough questions about life with God.

David wrestled with God in a cave with his enemies hot on his trail.

The prophet Jeremiah, who we heard from last week, questioned God and wrestled in anger and anguish over what was happening to God's people.

The psalmist asked God heart-wrenching questions while feeling completely abandoned.

The Apostle Paul suffered physically and prayed for God to heal him and struggled to understand why he received "No." for an answer.

Thomas questioned what became the center point of the whole Christian faith, whether or not Jesus had risen from the dead. And he was honored by Jesus for asking such a question.

God is interested in us using our minds, engaging with our hearts, and not retreating, but stepping into the mystery that is the life we live, and asking our questions.

Don't be afraid to wrestle with God, and ask those tough questions. I assure you that God can handle it.

If you had no fear and were not intimidated, what big troubling question would you ask God?

When you ask in this way, you join some of the greatest ancestors of the faith, like Abraham, Moses, Paul, Thomas, and Jacob.

Jacob did end up with a limp after his wrestling match with God, but he also received a great blessing, and in the struggle he saw God, received a new name, began a new chapter in his life, and had a renewed deeper relationship with God.

Such is the mystery, the pain, the messiness, and the beauty of following God and asking the tough questions.