“Wrestling with God”

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St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford MA

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Scripture Reference: Genesis 32:22-31

As you might have guessed from the cover art on our leaflet this morning, I’m going to take us back to our reading from Genesis for my experience of the Good News this morning….to our story with Jacob.

We have Jacob, on his way back from his long, self-imposed exile… Having fled to his Uncle Laban’s land, as we heard a few weeks ago, to escape his older brother Esau’s anger at his unfairly gaining the family’s birthright …In the years he has been with Laban, he has grown quite successful, producing a large family, and owning many servants and much livestock. Now, as an established adult with his own family, he has decided it is time to return home and face the music.

While on the journey home, he learns that his estranged brother, Esau, is coming towards him with a significant army of men. Jacob sends his servants ahead with gift after gift of livestock for Esau. He then sends his family ahead of him as well, and rests, alone for the night in Bethel—the very same spot where he met God in his dreams at the beginning of his exile. This is where our story from this morning takes up.

This night, while he anxiously anticipates his brother’s armed approach, God visits Jacob again. Rather than coming to him in a dream, God takes the form of a man, and wrestles with Jacob. They wrestle all night. God cannot seem to prevail, and so strikes Jacob in the hip. However, Jacob continues to hold God in such a powerful grip that God cannot get away, and so God asks for release…But, Jacob refuses to release God until God has blessed him. God does so—giving him a new name that affirms Jacob’s true identity—Israel— “contender”--one who has struggled with not only God, but also with humans, and has triumphed.

If there were ever a time to reclaim an understanding of the presence of God in our struggles, it would be now. We are in the midst of a very long night of wrestling…We are wrestling with the prolonged pandemic of COVID-19 and its myriad struggles, from profound loneliness to physical risk to parenting in uncharted territory. We continue to wrestle with our deep political divisions, with our suffering planet, and with the pain and injustice still being wrought by our culture of White Supremacy.

In reading and re-reading this story during this week in this context, I have fallen in love with this passage!! It paints a picture of God engaging with humanity in the most intense and insanely interactive experience. Not just a spiritual engagement, but an emotional engagement…even a physical engagement. God is so very present to Jacob that Jacob can actually wrestle with God.

In this, it raises incredible questions about the ways many of us have come to understand God…questions, that if pondered deeply, have the potential to transform our spiritual lives and equip us for the struggles we each face, so that we might claim the lives of radical, justice-seeking, love that so many of us deeply long to live.

What I love about this story is that it blows some of our most common assumptions about God right out of the water…

For example, many of us tend to go about our lives of faith as if God is emotionally static—full only of peaceful detachment…

But in Jacob’s story, not so! With Jacob, God is full of emotion—passion so deep that God is driven to relentlessly wrestle and wrestle—until Jacob has been pushed so far that he has finally come to know with clarity what it is he really desires and can ask for it--God’s blessing…

In this, we are left to question what might be lost of our experiences of God when we fail to expect the same, determined passion from God on *our* behalf? What is lost when we don’t wonder whether a deep and persistent struggle we may have is our own opportunity to wrestle and wrestle with God? What is lost when we lose attention or focus, or shut down in fear, before the struggle has broken us open far enough so that we can not only finally articulate what it is we most long for from God, but also receive the life-giving affirmation of God’s blessing?

Many of us also go about our lives of faith as if God is impersonal—out there, somewhere…Not so again! In this story, we learn that God is very capable of deeply personal enagement with us…and not jus that God is capable of it, but that God desires it!

It is God who intiated this encounter…God who sought Jacob…God who was so attune to Jacob’s hours and days, to Jacob’s strengths and growing edges, to Jacob’s most profound insecurities that, according to some commentators, God literally embodied the struggle Jacob anticipated with Esau to show Jacob the depths of Jacob’s own strength and courage.

Even in falling in love with this story I don’t subscribe to the belief that God causes our struggles…but I have definitely come to question with exuberant wonder whether God may enter into them with us in such a way as to reveal to us the presence already within us of the skill, or perspective, or character necessary to find our way out of them.

If so, then what are our current struggles teaching us about what we are capable of? In our own personal struggling, are we learning of our own immense capacity for emapthy? Or perhaps our ability to persevere? Or perhaps our ability to broker reconciliation?

And one final assumption so upended for me in the image of Jacob wrestling with God….many of us ascribe a physical power to God—when we say God is all-powerful, we so often mean that God is physically capable of initiating actions and reactions in our world, or of stopping them—not through us, but completely independently…and yet, again, not so!

Here, with Jacob, *God* is physically overpowered—Jacob has such a tight grasp on God that God must ask Jacob to let him go.

In this, we are left to question—is God’s power to change our world not physical intervention, but instead stahlwart presence… is God’s power pursuing love…is God’s power the willingness to wrestle and wrestle with us until we can develop clarity and vision…is God’s power divine blessing—the kind of blessing that so ultimately affirms our truest identity as God’s own beloved, that we, ourselves, can embody love?

My reaction to wrestling matches like the ones many of us face now has often been to shut down…to take a few small, safe actions, but generally to give the more frightening work of real engagement over to folks I see as more prepared or better suited for taking it on.

But not this time. In my own struggles of COVID-related isolation and parenting challenges, in my grief over the devastation of our natural world, in my uncertainty about how to not only be not racist, but be actively anti-racist, there is an urgency that feels like a new experience—an insistence that is compelling me to try to remain present with each struggle, and to keep attempting to actively engage. The story of the wrestling match between Jacob and God has me excitedly, and somewhat anxiously, wondering whether God has entered into each of these struggles *with* me now---whether God has come in this long, dark night and has taken hold of me so passionately that I feel I must struggle back.

Jacob’s wrestling match with God has been a powerful invitation to me to see how these struggles might feel less frightening, or how I might feel more empowered within them, to think of them as my chance—our chance-- to directly wrestle with God…My own and our collective struggles scare me and promise to take me very far outside of my comfort zone. But what if actively struggling—not shutting down or putting things off for another few months—is actually the opportunity for our very personal emotional, psychological, even physical experience of God?

What if, it is *especially* in wrestling with all of these scary things, that I—that we all-- like Jacob, will see God face to face?

I, for one, think that seems worth finding out…whatever the discomfort the wrestling may bring. I wonder who else thinks so, too!

\*\*This sermon was significantly informed by the New Interpreters Bible Commentary on the Book of Genesis, as well as by the Rev. Bruce Epperly’s commentary reflections on his blog, *Living a Holy Adventure* (https://www.patheos.com/blogs/livingaholyadventure/)