

## Jacob: Wrestling With God

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, August 1, 1993. Scripture Lessons: Genesis 32:22-31; Matthew 26:36-46.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

I have a friend who's last name is Maharg, M - A - H - A - R - G. I asked him once what kind of name that was and he told me this interesting story. He said, "My ancestors came from Scotland. Their name was originally, Graham. But one of my ancestors was caught stealing sheep. Part of his punishment was that he was given a new name, Maharg. Maharg is Graham spelled backwards. So people could tell, just by hearing our name, that one of our ancestors was a sheep stealer."

In a similar way, the story of Jacob wrestling on the banks of the Jabbok River explains why Jews are called Israelites. One of their distant ancestors, Jacob, wrestled with God and was given a new name, Israel, which means "The one who strives with God". The name, Israel, was later given to all of Jacob's descendants. Like Jacob, these were people who protested against God as often as they praised God. They did this, not as a sign of lack of faith, but as a sign of the depth of their faith and as an expression of their love. The apostle Paul called Christians, the New Israel. The Church is called to carry on the tradition begun with Jacob, that of striving with God, wrestling with God, struggling with God. So the story of Jacob wrestling with God does more than simply explain why Jews are called Israelites. It describes a struggle Jacob had with which many of us can identify and ~~which~~ <sup>be characteristic of</sup> which should characterize all Christians.

The story begins twenty years after Jacob had deceived his father and cheated

his brother. You will remember that, at that time, Esau had vowed to kill Jacob and Jacob had fled <sup>hundred of miles</sup> to Haran<sup>1</sup> where relatives lived. Now, Jacob is returning home. He's worried that Esau may still want to kill him. Jacob sends all of his possessions and family across the river.

And then we read, "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.'"

There are three points I want to make this morning.

1. We often encounter the living God in the darkness.
2. We're often closest to God when we're struggling with God.
3. God blesses those who persevere in this striving.

1. Like Jacob, we often encounter God, not in the sunshine, but in the darkness. In the daylight our minds, thoughts and feelings are directed towards day to day things; fixing meals, getting kids off to school, going to work, paying bills, watching television. Our days are filled with a million little details. In the busy daylight hours, we rarely look up to God.

It's in the darkness of the night when I'm apt to encounter God. I wake up, sometimes, in the middle of the night, unable to sleep. Thoughts trouble me concerning my children or wife or health or some decision that needs to be made or

some job related worry. I've done all I know how to deal with the situation. I feel there's nothing more I can do. I feel helpless. I want to sleep- I need to sleep- but I lie awake. And in the darkness, I sense a formless, sometimes foreboding, being who is the living God. I sense the presence of the living God in the darkness.

Like Jacob, we may not recognize God in the darkness. We may <sup>attribute our sleeplessness</sup> say, "I had too <sup>to too</sup> much caffeine." But it's God who is there with us in then night and in the darkness. It's in the darkness, sometimes the darkness of night, sometimes in the darkness of despair or guilt or helplessness that some people come face to face with God, the living God, for the first time in their lives.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, I urge you not to lose heart in the dark hour. You may be one of the fortunate people who have never gone through dark times in your life. Most of us, however, have gone or will gone through many a dark night. Take heart. Jacob met God face to face in his dark night. James Stewart writes, "...that night, that terrible night, became the most incomparably important in his life. He did not only get through the darkness: it turned the raw ordinary creature he was into what the Bible henceforth calls him - a prince with God." We often encounter the living God in the darkness.

2. We're often closest to God when we're struggling with God in the darkness. Wrestling, perhaps more than any other sport, requires close, constant contact with the opponent. Wrestling is also a strenuous sport. A wrestler must be in superb condition. So strenuous is a wrestling match that the grapplers go at one another for only a couple of minutes at a time before they stop for a rest. But

Jacob, with superhuman strength, wrestled <sup>at close quarters</sup> all night with his opponent. Jacob was, in fact, wrestling, face to face with God in the darkness. Never before had Jacob been so close to God as when he wrestled with God in the darkness all night. We're often closest to God when we wrestle with God in the darkness.

Let me explain what I mean by wrestling and striving with God. If we believe in the living God, if we really belong to the God who has come to us in Jesus Christ, <sup>if we really believe</sup> that God is love, we may find ourselves struggling with God from time to time. If we listen to the cries of our friends and our angry world, we may find ourselves arguing with God. ~~from time to time~~. We believe in a God of mercy and justice, yet we see so much injustice and cruelty in the world. We believe in a God who has promised wholeness and salvation, yet we see so much brokenness and suffering. We believe in a God of love, yet we see so much hatred in the world and in our own hearts.

We have faith in the God who has revealed himself in Christ, but we also struggle with this God. We wrestle and strive with God when we become frustrated and discouraged by the unkind and unloving things we say and do. Sinful thoughts and desires we hoped would go away when we trusted Christ come back to us and sometimes defeat us. We make progress so slowly and often we regress. The Christian alcoholic or drug addict struggles, sometimes victoriously, and sometimes in defeat. We cry out to God, "How long, O Lord?" This cry and these conflicts raise questions and to ask these questions, to agonize over these questions, and to cry out to God in this way is to wrestle with God. And yet, it's

often when we are wrestling with God in the darkness that we are closest to God.

3. God blesses those who persevere in this striving. Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." Jacob would rather die than to lose God's blessing. And God gave Jacob the blessing he wanted and needed. God blessed Jacob's perseverance because it's God's nature to bless. Jacob did nothing to deserve or earn that blessing. <sup>In fact,</sup> He had done just about everything a person could do to negate God's blessing.

What does it mean to be blessed by God? Maybe the best way to answer that question is to tell a story. A group of men were talking about their parents. One man said, "I can never remember my mom or dad saying to me, 'I love you'. I'd have A's on my report card but she never saw them. She only saw the B's and C's." This man happened to be a wrestler in high school - a very good one. But, he said, "My parents never came to see me wrestle. I longed so much for a pat on the head, a smile, a word of encouragement, but it was always criticism." This man is still longing for his mom and dad to bless him even though they're long gone.

The desire for God to bless us is kind of like that. We long to have God pat us on the head from time to time and say, "I love you. I'm proud of you, not because of what you have done or have failed to do, but because you belong to me. I see your frustration, your struggles, your fear and anxieties - and I will be there for you and with you. I love you."

The story of Jacob wrestling with God teaches us that God blesses those who persevere in this striving. I believe that everyone of us here this morning has a

deep, abiding desire of being cherished by God. I believe that there's something in each one of us which longs for the assurance that there's nothing we can do to make God stop loving us.

Jesus Christ is God's blessing to us and for us and with us. We are not the only ones who struggle with God and humans. Jesus also wrestled with God on our behalf that we might know God's blessing and salvation. In the Garden of Gethsemane ~~he sweat drops of blood as~~ he struggled with God the Father's will. All night, God the Son, wrestled with God the Father. Jesus sweated ~~in~~ drops of blood. <sup>And</sup> Jesus wrestled with God on the cross when he cried out, "Why have you forsaken me?" But Jesus prevailed. God blessed him and the whole world through him. We know Jesus prevailed, because he appeared, risen from the dead to his disciples, walking on wounded feet and embracing with wounded hands. In Christ we see God face to face and live. In Christ alone we encounter the living God who longs to bless our persevering faith. I dare you to give ourselves into the embrace of this wounded God, the risen Christ.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, in seeking your kingdom give us the single mind of Jacob, that we may take life by the throat to shake out every ounce of meaning; that we may engage in deadly conflict, and hang on though our knuckles bleed; to receive at last our Lord's new, proud name of 'Christian'. Micklem, Contemporary Prayers for Public Worship.