

Sermon Series: Falling into Goodness

Sermon Title: Wrestle with God

Genesis 32:22-32

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This is one of my favorite stories in the Bible. I can relate to one who wrestles and struggles with God. I bet some of you can as well. As I shared last week, this “odd and wondrous” calling that brought us to Boone and now is leading us in a new direction can be a bit like wrestling with God. There are times when it has been easy and quite beautiful in that we have wonderful friends, brothers and sisters in Christ all over Western NC and beyond. There are also moments when it has been a more difficult road, times like now when God is calling us to serve in another place. So, I’d like to say every moment of a life of faith is a mountaintop experience, the kind of experience we have on a great retreat or at an especially moving worship Service. The spiritual high of those moments can be almost like you’re standing in the very presence of God.

But we all know that sometimes, getting to the top of mountain can be difficult and dangerous and you can’t stay there forever. The retreat ends, worship is only once a week. You have to come back down at some point. As they wrestled with what it meant to be his disciples, Jesus often took his friends atop the mountain to pray and draw near to God, to have moments of deep connection with God. And, he always led them back down again. They never stayed there for long. Jesus always led them down from their mountaintop experiences, back into the streets and alleys and villages where life and ministry happen.

Life is filled with ups and downs, mountaintops and valleys, and our life with God is no different. It can, in moments and seasons, feel like a struggle. The founder of the Methodist movement certainly knew this. John Wesley was a brilliant student at Oxford, a highly respected Fellow, *and* he was also a miserable failure as a missionary in Georgia. It was a disaster and he returned to England doubting his faith and his call, literally wrestling with God over his future. He was an amazing leader of the Methodist movement, a force that literally reshaped English history and the shape of the Church in the colonies and then the U.S. But his personal relationships were often a mess. You may recall his Aldersgate “mountaintop” experience which he described as a very personal and powerful experience of the Holy Spirit, saying it was like “having his heart strangely warmed,” What you may not know is that a few months later, with his mountaintop high still in sight, Wesley writes in his journal, “I am not a Christian.”

Wrestling, struggling with God...trying to get a handle on this the mystery that is God. That which is beyond our capacity to grab hold of, and more often than not seems to have hold of us. Mountaintop and valley. His brother Charles, the great hymn writer, who wrote hymns like, *Hark, The Herald Angels Sing*, captured Jacob’s story and our wrestling with God in his hymn *Come, O Thou Traveler Unknown*. Charles writes,

*Come, O thou traveler unknown,
whom still I hold but cannot see;
my company before is gone,
and I am left alone with Thee;
with Thee all night I mean to stay,
and wrestle till the break of day.*

“With Thee all night I mean to stay, and wrestle till the break of day.” Does that in anyway name your experience of faith, or describe your relationship with God? Wrestling, struggling in the darkness of night. Trying to figure it all out, to make sense of this One that’s come to us and taken hold of us. Sometimes life and our life with God can feel like a struggle, as if we’re wrestling in the dark, grabbing hold of whatever we can cling to that makes us feel safe and secure. Only to discover in the struggle that it’s actually God that’s gotten hold of us and we don’t get to make the demands or set the terms. We only receive and fall into God’s goodness.

Now you may remember a bit about Jacob. He came out of the womb grabbing his brother Esau’s heel. As Richard Hays writes, “From the day of his birth, he was a trickster and an operator, grabbing and scrambling, figuring the angles to outsmart and outmaneuver his brother Esau -- indeed, cutting a deal to swindle Esau out of his rightful inheritance -- then later jockeying for economic advantage with his equally devious father-in-law, Laban. If Jacob were alive today he would probably be packaging derivatives and collecting sweet executive bonuses. But -- as is always the case -- the day of reckoning was coming. After long absence, Jacob is returning home, preparing to face his estranged brother Esau, whom he had defrauded. And it is under these circumstances that he meets God.

And God doesn’t come to Jacob as some sweet, forgiving presence. Rather, under the cloak of darkness, God comes as a mysterious adversary, appearing from out of nowhere to accost Jacob in a wrestling match....Jacob hangs on for dear life, refuses to let go without receiving a blessing. And the blessing he receives includes a new name: Israel -- the one who strives with God. Jacob ‘the supplanter’, becomes Israel ‘the one who strives with God.’ The name Israel itself is a reminder of a lengthy struggle in the dark -- a struggle that leaves Israel, or Jacob, lame, permanently limping, marked as a reminder of surviving a strange face-to-face encounter with God.”¹

It’s a beautiful story. “Tell me your name, give me your blessing; let me know you.” Jacob – a sinner - estranged from his family, trying to figure out how to get back into everyone’s good graces, still playing the angles, trying to undo all that has gone wrong, trying to climb his way out

¹ Richard Hays, *Faith and Leadership*.

of the valley and back to the mountaintop, in the dark of night, perhaps in the darkness of his own soul, Jacob strives with God, wrestles with God, seeking relationship and God's blessing and a chance to begin again. Like so many times before Jacob believes he has the upper hand, that he will come out on top. What he discovers is the One with whom he struggles, in fact, already has hold of him. And he will wake from the night marked and renamed.

Richard Hays has a couple brilliant insights about this story and how it informs our life of discipleship. "First, if Jacob/Israel is our precursor as one who first receives and then finally gives blessings (and surely that is not a bad description of what we do as servants of the gospel), then we should remember that we don't deserve what we get or get what we deserve. Yes, our life of faith can be a dark night struggle out of which comes blessing."² But, we don't earn the blessing of God because of our striving. It's God that has taken hold of us. We are the ones marked and renamed in the struggle. Why does God choose Jacob as the one through whom the line of promised blessing is to extend? Only God knows...but it certainly wasn't because Jacob was more devout or virtuous than others around him. As Hays points out, it's a reminder of our depravity. That is, we receive God's grace despite our total unworthiness. That's not a popular message in an age that prizes self-esteem, but it is, simply put, the gospel. We get what we don't deserve. That is what Paul means when he characterizes God as the one who 'justifies the ungodly' (Romans 4:5)."³ In part, that's what it means to fall into the goodness of God. We don't earn our way into God's goodness, or work our way there, or even wrestle or struggle our way there. We merely respond to the invitation, allow God to take hold of us, and fall back into God's loving embrace. Even when we've taken advantage of those whom we're supposed to love, or when we've been away in some far country living off our inheritance, forgetting our true and best self, only to come crawling home, or like Jacob wrestle with God under the cover of darkness as if to hide who we've become, God still is eager and willing to welcome us in, God clings to us to give us the very thing we do not deserve – God's blessing and love, a new name, a place on the family, a calling, a mission in which God uses us to be a blessing to the world. So, God chose Jacob to become Israel for reasons we cannot begin to fathom. "Just before this midnight encounter, you will recall, Jacob had rightly prayed, "I am unworthy of the steadfast love and all the faithfulness you have shown to your servant" (Genesis 32:10). And so, it is also with those who are called to the work of the kingdom."⁴ We are unworthy of the steadfast love and all the faithfulness God has shown to us. And sometimes our journey of faith may feel like a wrestling match as we struggle to be the people God has created us to be, and yet the promise is that God comes to us again and again, even in the darkest of nights, grabs hold of us, and pulls us into God's embrace.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

Second, our wrestling, struggling with God in prayer, in conversation, in pouring over scripture, in the daily effort of trying to work out how to live in a way that honors and glorifies God, this journey towards holiness, towards becoming more and more like Jesus is like a refiner's fire. As I shared last week, "For Jesus, the Lenten journey must go through the cross. The journey of faithfulness and obedience to the will of the Father literally leaves its mark on him. He is scarred – hands, feet, head, and side. And for each of us, there is a daily dying in which each part of us that grasps, accumulates, and strives, chooses once and for all to surrender. This is a lifetime work. It's slow and it's not easy. But, in time, our true selves in Christ emerge from the ashes like the resurrected Christ, freed to live the full, abundant life God promises. But a lot of dying and letting go has to happen."⁵ Jacob's wrestling with God reminds us that "those who encounter God in the dark will be not only changed but also marked, left with the wound created by God's wrenching us out of one life and blessing us with a new one."⁶

And that's the good news, the promise, the hope in our relationship with God even if it is at times a struggle. Even if it's like a wrestling match that leaves us battered and bruised, in the end we can say with Jacob, "I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." (Genesis 32:30) Falling into the goodness of God, becoming who God longs for us to be, wrestling and struggling and allowing God to mark us and rename us.

It has been said that "...one of Israel's major problems was that they actually failed to wrestle well with God. Instead of wrestling, Israel often went back to old habits and loves, old idols and addictions. Instead of wrestling, clinging to God, allowing God to remake them, Israel often looked for security in military power, in kings, and in leaders. But where Israel failed in their vocation as God-wrestler, Jesus didn't. Jesus fulfills what Israel could not. And because we are 'in Christ' – because Christ is more near to us than we are to ourselves – we, too, can wrestle well with God. And when we do, we too are then marked, not by a merit badge of our own accomplishment but by a holy limp. We make Jesus known not in strength but in weakness. Remember we are healed by his wounds. And we are transformed not by climbing a ladder, but by being like Jacob, staying close to the ground, the dust from which we've come, and wrestling in relationship with our Creator....As Chuck DeGroat suggests, this wrestling, this struggle with God isn't a sign of failure, rather, it's a declaration of trust. By grabbing hold of God and allowing God to take hold of us...we're declaring, even when we find ourselves in the dark night of the soul, that God is real, that God can be trusted, and with God there is life abundant.

Maybe on that day we'll be bearing a few scars, a few marks of the struggle. After all, for the rest of his life Jacob walked with a limp. But he walked. He woke from his sleep, brushed off the dust from which he came, and walked with God. And so, might we allow God to take hold of us, to

⁵ Chuck DeGroat. *Falling into Goodness*. pp. 59-60.

⁶ Richard Hays. *Faith and Leadership*.

mark us, and rename us and out of the struggle use us, even in our weakness, to bless the nations and bring heaven a little closer to earth. In the name of Jesus, by whose wounds we are healed.
Amen.