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Genesis 32:22-31
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Wrestling with God

This morning we are continuing the story from last week and Jesus' resurrection from the dead. If we were to scan each of the four gospels for the emotions and responses of the disciples following the news of his resurrection, I think we would see that they were very mixed. Some were joyful. Some still mourned. Some were locked away in private rooms afraid of what had happened to Jesus would happen to them. Some were out opening walking and talking about the events that had occurred. Some said nothing. Some were bewildered. Some wondered. Some believed. And yet some had doubts. We tend to think, this side of Easter, that the disciples like us full of joy and simply accepted what they had heard was true.

But that was not the case. For the disciples this season between Jesus' resurrection and Pentecost, when he poured out his Holy Spirit, this was full of uncertainty, questioning, and great fear. It was a dark time for the disciples though interspersed with glimmers of hope as Jesus appeared and then disappeared. I would even guess that people wrestled with God and their faith.

Over the course of the next several weeks, until Pentecost, we are going to stay with the disciples and explore what might have really been going on behind the scenes. We are going to look at stories of faith of people who wrestled with God. Who experienced loss. Challenge. Disappointment. We are going to walk with people like Thomas who struggled to make sense of God and what God was up in this season of life.

It's not a series that we hear preached very often. But so many of us, myself included, need to understand that wrestling with God and life's difficult questions is part of maturing our faith. It's when we transition from the faith of our youth, to that as an adult. I would say, it's about moving beyond the honeymoon phase with Jesus into having a faith like Job who suffered greatly and yet still believed.

I'll be drawing a lot from several books that spoke to me over these past two years and my own dark night of the soul which began back in the September of 2020. You'll hear more about this over the coming weeks. But these books are *Wrestling with God* by Ronald Rolheiser. *Disappointment with God* by Philip Yancey. And from the 16th century *The Dark Night of the Soul* by Saint John of the Cross and Saint Theresa of Avila.

Struggling with the long haul reality of the pandemic, the death of Dorman Holcomb, the smoke caused by wildfires, and depression caused by several

personal situations, I was having a hard time understanding where God was in that season. God just seemed absent and unconcerned with what was going on around me. So I went to my spiritual director and described what I was feeling, or rather what I wasn't feeling. Was I losing my faith? Was God calling me out of the ministry? Or was there something else going on?

Morris said to me, "Chris, I think what you are experiencing is what is known as "The Dark Night of the Soul" where God seems hard to find but when your faith is stretched and matured beyond the giddy emotions of a new believer." The more I probed and learned about this dark night of the soul, the more I could confirm that yes indeed that is where I was, and have been ever since. So this in-between season of Easter and Pentecost feels very real to me. I feel more like a disciple of Jesus in that time more now than I ever have.

My hope is that as we explore this idea of wrestling with God together over the next couple of weeks, that we can learn more about God and our relationships with God...to prepare us for when, not if, we reach that dark night of the soul ourselves. So then we won't be frightened by it. We won't make rash decisions like leave the church. But we will embrace it like a friend who stays for howsoever long it chooses.

We are starting our journey this morning looking at the great story of our faith in Genesis when Jacob wrestled with God and won. To provide a little background and context for our story, Abraham had a son named Isaac and Isaac had two sons named Esau and Jacob. Esau was the older and Jacob the younger. But Jacob was more cunning than his older brother and cheated him out of his birthright as the older son. Jacob tricked his blind and dying father to bless him with the birthright that was to be for Esau. Needless to say, Esau was furious with Jacob and planned to kill him.

So Jacob fled his home and settled in Laban where he met his two wives Leah and Rachel and had his children. Jacob's flocks increased and Jacob planned to return home to make peace with his brother and settle back in his homeland. Before he met with his brother, Jacob had this encounter with God that changed him forever. No doubt he was afraid of what his brother would do to him when they met. No doubt he was also full of guilt and remorse for having tricked his father and brother.

This is where we pick up the story today. So join me as we read from Genesis 32:22-31 as we hear about Jacob's wrestling with God.

“22 That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. **23** After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. **24** So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. **25** When the man saw that he could not

overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. **26** Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak."

But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

27 The man asked him, "What is your name?"

"Jacob," he answered.

28 Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome."

29 Jacob said, "Please tell me your name."

But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there.

30 So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."

31 The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip."

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

There are several things in this story that I want to lift up that I think will help us understand the dark night of the soul that Jacob encountered. He was alone. He was wrestling with his self and past choices long before God challenged him. Wrestling with God is multifaceted. There is a blessing in the wrestling. He was not the same person after his wrestling. Not only does it directly impact us, but it can have implications for our family, our friends, our community, and the world around us. And finally we see what God's ultimate goal was in wrestling Jacob... reconciliation between Jacob and his brother Esau.

First we see how Jacob was alone and vulnerable. No one knows best how to take us down than the enemy. And if the enemy can isolate us and make us think that we are all by ourselves, then it's a greater chance for our defeat. This is why we need good brothers and sisters in Christ who can walk with us through our dark night so that we don't make rash or stupid decisions. We need people physically around us, who know us, love us, and remind us of who we are in those moments when the enemy whispers lies in our ears.

As for me, my spiritual director was key in helping me understand what was going on in my relationship with God so that I did not panic or make rash decisions. I am also grateful for Erik and Erin Suttan, Cordell Beck, Sarah Shewbert, Nancy Bisbee and Phil Hickok. During the early months of the pandemic, we would gather on Wednesday evenings to record our online worship services. Erin Suttan often arranged dinners for us to share...at different tables, albeit. But these folks became my spiritual community who carry me through each week.

Toward the end of Jesus' life he said, "A time is coming, and has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home. You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me. I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world, you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."¹

Though Jesus was deserted by his closest disciples, he knew that he would never be deserted by God the Father. We too can take comfort knowing that the Father is with us when we feel like we are vulnerable and all alone.

The wisdom writer of Ecclesiastes wrote, "Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up! Also, if two lie down, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not easily broken."²

Second we see how Jacob's wrestling was not only with God but with his self and bad past choices. Remember the trauma he had experienced growing up, always feeling second in line to his older and obviously more macho brother Esau. Dad clearly favored him. Folks those kinds of scars don't often heal very easily this side of heaven and usually surface in the dark night of the soul. I can't express how important it is to have a spiritual director or good therapist who can help us make sense of these scars and how God might be working through them to lead us to a new self understanding and eventually healing.

Because the truth is that this kind of wrestling with God is not only spiritual, but it is highly emotional, relational, and physical as well. Jacob's wrestling took a toll on him. During the season of my depression, I struggled just to get out of bed in the mornings or find meaning in my day. Listening to my morning 360 Devotions were so important to start my day and then get in my garage for a workout. Being physically active helped get my serotonin and healthy hormones flowing so that I could think properly. I struggled to find joy in the things that usually lifted my spirits.

During the pandemic alcohol and drug use were at an all time high. The same was true with overdoses, suicide or thoughts of suicide, and people dealing with all sorts of mental illness. It was hard finding a good available therapist to talk with during this season.

Jacob's wrestling impacted his relationship with his family, most especially his brother Esau with whom he was estranged for many years. You got to know that the guilt and shame that Jacob had must have weighed him down for all that long.

¹ John 16:32-35

² Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

All of this has impact on our physical wellbeing as well. Jacob was left with an injury to his hip and he limped on afterwards.

The Psalmist says, “My life is consumed by anguish and my years by groaning; my strength fails because of my affliction, and my bones grow weak. Because of all my enemies, I am the utter contempt of my neighbors; I am a dread to my friends - those who see me on the street flee from me. I am forgotten by them as though I were dead; I have become like broken pottery.”³

But we also see that there was a blessing in wrestling with God.

Jacob was not the same person after his wrestling, as he was before. He is standing tall, though with a limp. He is more confident. He is ready to face his brother come what may. I wonder if some how he even had a more keen sense of God’s presence which would always be with him. That he would never truly be alone again.

The Apostle Paul told the Roman Christians who lived through the dark season of Roman oppression, “Yet in all things we are more than conquerors who gives us strength.”⁴

Jacob was also given a new name. A new identity.

In the same way we see how Saul who persecuted the early Church also was given the new name of Paul after he wrestled with Jesus. Ok maybe not a wrestling match like Jacob’s but he clearly got his but whooped! Saul was knocked to the ground when he encountered the living Christ.⁵ I think it was this experience that later led Paul to proclaim to the Galatians, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”⁶

This same Paul also said, “We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”⁷ Through the good, the bad, and the ugly. Even our sin and past poor decisions, God can turn around and use them for our good.

Jacob knew after the fact that it was God who he wrestled. It’s not that Jacob was stronger than God, it’s just that he persevered and overcame the test.

We also see how this experience had implications not only for Jacob, but also for his family, and for the entire nation of Israel who would be named after him. And we know that Israel as a nation that has continually struggled even still today.

³ Psalm 31:10-12

⁴ Romans 8:37

⁵ See Acts 9 for Saul’s conversion story.

⁶ Galatians 2:20

⁷ Romans 8:28

Finally we see through this story how Jacob's wrestling with God equipped him with courage to encounter his brother who did not respond with vengeance as Jacob had imagined but met him with love, unmerited favor, and joy. Esau ran to Jacob, embraced him, threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept. Sure sound like the same response as the Father in Jesus' Parable of the Prodigal Son. Jacob expected one thing, but received quite another. The blessing the received was the gift of forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration.

None of which might have been possible unless Jacob had entered his dark night of the soul and wrestled with God. So in the end, who really won? Jacob or God?

They both did. That is the Good News for us today.

So may we not be afraid of our dark night of the soul when it comes. May we embrace it and wrestle with God, knowing that God invites our questions, our fears, our doubts, and our suspicions. May we anticipate how God may use our dark night to bring us to a new understanding of ourselves and of him. May we be open should Jesus choose to touch us in such a way that changes us forever. And may we never forget, "the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world."⁸

That is Good News! Amen!

⁸ 1 John 4:4