

September 24th: Wrestle

This Fall we return to the Narrative Lectionary—a year long collection of readings that take us from the origins of God’s people to the first century world. These readings are chosen on purpose, because they help us trace a particular theme throughout our scripture texts—and this year our theme is “Love in Action.” Over the course of the year, we’ll read a wide variety of passages, from Old Testament stories, wisdom literature, prophetic teachings, scenes from the life of Jesus, and instructions for the early church—but in each, there’s a compelling action that is embedded into the narrative. Last year’s theme was “A Family Story,” and we focused on the identity and purpose of God’s beloved children—but this time around, we’ll be taking a closer look at the movement behind that belonging—the verbs that form the foundation of our faith and life together. Of course, love is the most important verb of all, so we’ll also be tracing how God’s love was shown to our spiritual ancestors and discover how God’s love is still being shown to us today.

As we study together, the goal isn’t simply to increase our knowledge of God—the goal is to increase in love towards God and towards each other. So as we read, and as we reflect, I want to challenge all of us to respond to these stories with action—with real, tangible ways that we can each show love to our hurting world. I want us to take these words of wisdom from our text and transform them into positive change in our community—so that our neighborhood, our city, our country, can be a place where God’s love is seen and felt by everyone.

If that sounds good to you, let’s take a moment to pray.

Transformative God,

Our scriptures tell us that when human beings encounter you, they walk away changed—and so we come into your presence this morning seeking to encounter you so that we might be transformed into more faithful, more loving, more gracious people. Reveal your face to us this morning, show us a better way to engage with each other, and remind us of the reconciliation and wholeness that

you are calling us to as your family. Lead us in a new direction this week, so that we might be sent out with your good news. Amen.

I was a fully grown adult, 25 years old, about to graduate seminary when I learned that professional wrestling wasn't real.

One of my close friends invited me to his apartment to watch Wrestlemania, and as someone who had never really watched professional wrestling before or even taken an interest in it, I was immediately enthralled by the drama of it all. The costumes, the music, the intensity of the crowd, I was taken in by it, my eyes glued to the screen. It was like figure skating at the Olympics, but with scary looking men. I watched for many minutes as different people hit each other with chairs, or leaped from great heights to smash down on their opponents in their moment of weakness, or spun each other around until they let loose and went flying, before asking my friend who he thought would win the title that day.

He hesitated, and asked me if I understood how professional wrestling worked. I answered, "of course not," expecting him to explain how different maneuvers were scored and weighted, or how long a knockout needed to be in order to declare victory. But then he hesitated again, and told me the truth: that these matches and these events were mostly for show, and the winners and losers were largely scripted beforehand. It was like a soap opera, and the plot dictated that certain characters would advance to the next round, while others were relegated to the side lines. And the players knew all of this and were in on it. Needless to say, I was shocked.

However, the more I watched, the more I understood the appeal. Wrestling as a sport has been around since ancient Greece, and I think that there's something to be said for the kind of transformation and catharsis that happens when you're watching other people duke it out. There's an energy that's palpable, almost primal to it. It feels invigorating, exciting. It may not be completely authentic, but neither is Grey's Anatomy and I very much enjoy

watching that, crying my eyes out while various characters argue, fight, get married, get divorced, and die.

But today we have a story from the Book of Genesis that involves actual wrestling—and not just any old match between humans, but a match between our biblical character Jacob and a divine being. And while there isn't an audience to observe this scene, there is a sense of transformation—Jacob walks away from this encounter a little different than before, and with a new perspective on his life and his relationships.

Before we talk more about that, let's rewind just a little bit and remind ourselves of some background information.

Last week we met our friends Abraham and Sarah, and we learned that through a series of divine promises, they become the parents of a miracle child named Isaac. Isaac grows up, and becomes the father of two boys, twin sons named Jacob and Esau. Now, Esau was the older of the twins, and set to inherit the majority of Isaac's estate but we learn that there is conflict brewing. The younger son, Jacob, isn't happy that his older brother is going to receive more, so he has come up with a plan to steal his father's blessing from his brother while his father lays on his deathbed. With the help of his mother, Rebekah, Jacob successfully tricks the elderly and mostly blind Isaac into believing that he is his older brother, and at the moment when Esau is called away to the fields, Jacob steals Esau's birthright and receives his brother's inheritance.

With all that conflict and deviousness in mind, it might make us scratch our heads that the book of Genesis considers Jacob the hero of this narrative rather than the villain. Esau, the one who did nothing wrong, is only a minor character in the rest of Genesis, and rarely referenced throughout our Old Testament, while Jacob, our liar and cheat, is the one whose lineage continues to be at the center of our story. It may sound strange and unfair, but according to our text, it is Jacob's family that carries the legacy of Abraham and Isaac into the future. However, that future isn't exempt from even more conflict, as we'll see in just a few minutes.

In this passage from chapter 32, we read that Jacob is on the move from Our story begins, “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. After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions.” This opening line gives us a lot of information: we learn that Jacob is already married, to the sisters Leah and Rachel, and he is also in relationship with two of his female servants, Bilhah and Zilpah. Through these four relationships he is, at this point, the father of eleven sons. So if you count it all up, that makes five adults and eleven children on this road trip—so I’m sure you can imagine all the luggage, snacks, and toys that are required to outfit this family for this journey.

Jacob is in charge of making sure all of these possessions are ferried across the water, but once this has been accomplished, this leaves Jacob all alone on one side of the river. There’s this sense that Jacob is vulnerable, but we don’t yet know exactly what he’s vulnerable to. Then we hear in verse 24 that a strange man starts to wrestle with Jacob, and their wrestling goes on through the night until daybreak. Our text isn’t clear how this man has arrived on the scene—did he appear out of nowhere? Did he rise out of the river? Did he follow Jacob and his household from somewhere?

We don’t really know how this man comes into the picture, but we do know that he and Jacob are really well matched in their wrestling skills. This isn’t like WWE or Wrestlemania, Jacob and his opponent are wrestling for real, all throughout the night.

There are clues embedded in our biblical story that indicate that Jacob would be a good wrestler. Early on in her pregnancy, Rebecca prayed to God, asking why she was so uncomfortable, and God answered that the twins were fighting in the womb. And then In chapter ____, when Rebecca gives birth to her twin boys, we read that after Esau was born, Jacob emerged holding onto his brother’s foot, grasping for him even at this moment of birth. Even Jacob’s name, Ya’aqov in Hebrew, literally means “heel catcher” or “leg puller.”

Verse 25 records, “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.” This is a cheap trick, aimed at getting Jacob to surrender, but it doesn’t sound like Jacob is ready to admit defeat, so the man requests to be released, as it is now morning. But Jacob refuses—and he says, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.”

In this ancient culture, a blessing was given from one person to another as a transaction, but also as an act of relationship. Like the blessing of inheritance that Isaac gave to Jacob on his deathbed, this blessing that Jacob expects from his mysterious wrestling partner is like a binding contract—intended to convey a gift or a reward or a legacy. So what Jacob is asking for is both a spiritual and prophetic promise that he will be materially and cosmically enriched by this encounter. But Jacob gets a different kind of blessing than he expects. Rather than receiving a piece of land, or a flock of sheep—he receives a new identity.

When the man asks Jacob for his name, and when Jacob has responded, the man says, “Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome.” This new name, Israel, from the Hebrew roots “el” meaning God, and “sarah,” meaning to “to rule or have power over,” literally translates to “one who has prevailed over God.”

As you might expect, this new identity isn’t just a name to write down in history books—this new name sets Israel apart from everyone else. With his father’s blessing, he inherited a fortune, but this blessing gives him a future as the leader of God’s people. In his family, he was already the father of many, but with this blessing, God has identified him as the Patriarch of a nation. This is why the sons of Jacob, and the many generations after them form the Kingdom of Israel, because they are a people who have inherited this blessing. They rename the land of Canaan in honor of their Patriarch, demonstrating to the world that they are also people who have wrestled with God and people who have been given power through him.

So as we reflect on this text and think about applying it to our modern lives, the verb that speaks to me the most is: to wrestle—and I mean that in the emotional or spiritual sense, not in the Wrestlemania sense.

So here's our assignment this week: wrestle with God this week. Like Jacob, find a way or a time or place, where you can grapple with whatever is on your mind.

Wrestle with what it means to be human, wrestle with your current limitations or challenges, wrestle with your deepest doubts or darkest fears.

Wrestle with a choice you made recently, wrestle with a future possibility that has been revealed to you, wrestle with what God is calling you to do as you start a new week or new season of life.

Wrestle with your past, wrestle with your mistakes, wrestle with your regrets.

Wrestle with the conflict that exists in your life, wrestle with what it would mean for you to reconcile with someone that you've harmed. Wrestle with what you would say to the person who you have wounded recently.

As it was with Jacob, this wrestling may not be easy. It may happen when you least expect it. It may keep you up all night, it may feel like a never ending struggle, but I promise you that it will not be in vain. And that is because this spiritual wrestling is the perfect venue for spiritual transformation—because in and through it, we encounter God and the truth about ourselves in a profound and tangible way. In our wrestling, we confront our strengths and our weaknesses, we struggle with our desires and the things we'd prefer to avoid. Through our wrestling, we might receive the blessing that we have been waiting for. We might be blessed with a new sense of hope, or a new purpose or even a whole new identity.

We might encounter the divine in a way that sends us in a whole new direction, on a path towards reconciliation, towards a legacy, towards an

impact that will resonate for hundreds of generations. We might come to the other side ready to let go of labels that no longer fit us—and be given the chance to see ourselves through God’s eyes. We might realize that our story isn’t over yet, and there is still so much that God has planned for us and the people whose lives we will touch.

So my friends, let the match begin.

Amen.