Wrestling with God

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When Andrew and Emily were young, wrestling was something of a family pastime. We would push all the furniture to the edge of the room and get after it. I would position myself on the floor and they would run at me in full stride. They would barrel into me and we would tumble to the floor in a heap. Sometimes they would attack from behind. Then I would deploy my signature move. I would grab their little arms and flip them over my shoulders. Their enthusiasm for wrestling was relentless. Our matches would continue until I finally tapped out.

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Sermon Series: Life is Messy

Our Scripture lesson tells a story about a wrestling match. It’s a remarkable story about someone who goes to the mat with God.

We left off last Sunday with Jacob and Uncle Laban taking leave of each other. Jacob has left with his wives and children along with a considerable amount of livestock. Jacob is now going home to face his twin brother whom he deceived 20 years ago. For all he knows, Esau could still be harboring the same murderous intent.

Jacob sends messengers ahead to meet Esau. These messengers return with the news that Esau is approaching with 400 men. Jacob regards the report as ominous and prepares for the worst by separating his family into two groups. If Esau attacks one group, the other group will be able to escape unharmed.

Jacob is a schemer who plans for every contingency. But in this vulnerable moment, he also prays. Jacob’s only other recorded prayer was offered 20 years previous when Jacob encountered God in a ladder dream. His earlier prayer was full of conditions, “If you will watch over me and return me to the land of my ancestors, then you can be my God.” There are no such conditions in this prayer. At long last, Jacob acknowledges himself as unworthy in God’s sight (32:10). He no longer appeals to God on the grounds of past performance but solely on the basis of God’s promises. His petition minces no words, “Save me from the hand of my brother, Esau” (32:11).

Jacob arrives at the Jabbok River by nightfall. He has already sent his family across the river and his servants as well, bearing gifts for Esau. His motive is hardly subtle; he wants to pacify his estranged
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brother and soften him up (32:20).

Jacob is now utterly alone. Suddenly, a stranger appears and wrestles with Jacob. All night long, they wrestle in silence.

There’s a subtle play on words in the Hebrew text. The word for wrestle, ye’abeq is rather uncommon and chosen to accentuate this wordplay. It looks and sounds like Jacob’s name (ya’aqob). One commentator playfully translated this verse, “Jacob was left on his own and a man Jacobed him.”

Jacob isn’t able to make out his attacker’s identity. Perhaps our narrator doesn’t want Jacob or his readers to know too much.

This assailant is unable to overpower Jacob. Their wrestling match has become a draw; neither man is able to have his way. Yet, with a simple touch, the man dislocates Jacob’s hip socket. Jacob is now disabled.

The man asks to be released, but Jacob defiantly holds on: “I will not let you go unless you bless me” (32:26). Jacob is still striving after all these years to gain a blessing. He’s a master at wrestling something out of difficult situations.

His assailant ignores Jacob’s request for a blessing. Instead, he asks Jacob for his name. By stating his name, Jacob discloses something of his character. “I am Jacob,” must have sounded like a confession. I am a heel-grabber! A cheat! A deceiver!

The unknown man issues Jacob a new name, “Your name is now Israel, because you have struggled with God and have overcome” (32:28). Jacob asks for a blessing but gets a new name instead. This new name expresses Jacob’s new identity. He will no longer carry the stigma associated with being a deceiver.

This assailant leaves without ever revealing his identity. Jacob is convinced he has just seen the face of God. That’s why he calls the place Peniel, meaning face-to-face. In Jacob’s mind, he has seen God face-to-face and yet, his life has been spared.

For 20 years, Jacob has been preparing to meet his brother. Our narrator seems in no hurry to tell this story and bring these two estranged brothers together again. God has business to do with Jacob at Peniel.

Wrestling epitomizes Jacob’s life. Wrestling is his signature move. His whole life could be characterized as a struggle. He is born grabbing the heel of his twin brother. He wrestles his brother out of his birthright and struggles with his father to steal the elder son’s blessing. He wrestles with Laban for Rachel’s hand in marriage and the largest share of the herd. Jacob now stands on the threshold between his past struggles and his impending struggle with Esau.

Numerous artists have interpreted Jacob’s adversary as an angel. Yet, he is described in
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this story simply as a man. He is evenly matched with Jacob and yet, has the power to disable Jacob. He has foresight enough to bestow on Jacob a new name.

Who is this man? He must be more than a man. Clearly, Jacob thinks so. By the close of our story, Jacob has come to regard this man as the equivalent of God. He has encountered God face-to-face, yet his life has been spared.

God could have pinned Jacob to the mat. Yet, for some reason, God chooses not to overpower Jacob. Maybe it’s comparable to not overpowering my kids when we used to wrestle. Sure, I could have pinned them, but the very object was to wrestle.

It’s significant in this story that this man wrestles with Jacob. It’s not the other way around. Jacob doesn’t initiate the wrestling; God does!

Could it be that God wants Jacob to come to the end of his strength? Maybe struggling with God is precisely the point. Throughout his life, Jacob has gotten virtually everything he wants. This time, Jacob has met his match.

I identify with Jacob’s struggle. I wrestle, at times, to make sense of my life. My wrestling assailants are not always clearly identified to me. Am I wrestling with my own private thoughts, the devil or God? After the struggle has ended, I gain perspective. I’m more likely to recognize God’s presence in the struggle. It’s not lost on me that Jacob’s wrestling comes when he is alone, when his guard is down and he is vulnerable.

Sometimes I wrestle with God. Life’s apparent inequities don’t always make sense to me. Why do the good die young? Why do the evil prosper?

I’ve been struggling of late with the mission of this church in this increasingly secular culture. A secular world view continues to take more shore line in our country, much as it already has in Europe.

The Christian church in America is in danger of capitulating and accommodating itself to secular norms. The authority of Scripture and the centrality of Christ are being replaced with a generic God and a feel-good ethic of easy tolerance. I believe it’s going to be imperative for this and any other church in America in the 21st century, to become more intentionally counter-cultural in the future. We can no longer rely on the wider culture for support. Our Judeo-Christian ethic is disintegrating in America. Do you doubt it?

If the church will be of any service to Christ in reforming the world in the 21st century, we will only do so as we offer a viable alternative to the world’s way of doing things.

Following Jesus Christ with your life will entail struggle. Don’t let anybody tell you otherwise. Your devotion to Jesus Christ will cause you to
wrestle with cultural norms and values. “In this world you will have trouble,” Jesus told his followers (John 16:33). If we are serious about following Christ, we can expect push back.

God doesn’t chastise Jacob for wrestling with his assailant. Quite the contrary, God commends Jacob for his tenacity. “Your name is now Israel because you have struggled with God and have overcome.”

God’s blessing in this story comes in the midst of struggle. When we struggle, we come face-to-face with our dependence on God.

In the title of his book, Frederick Buechner coins a phrase for this struggle. He calls Jacob’s wrestling with God a Magnificent Defeat. Some things are gained only in struggle. There are times when we lose yet still come out on top. As Jacob prepares to meet his brother, he finally comes to the end of his strength and surrenders to God. He wins by losing; a magnificent defeat!

Jacob emerges from this wrestling ordeal with both a new limp and a new name. His wrestling with God has both disabled and blessed him. Jacob is now a cripple with a blessing.

God could have strong-armed Jacob. He could have out-muscled Jacob to display his superiority. Instead, God engages Jacob in such a way that he finally comes to the place of surrender.

You may be struggling at the moment. You may be wondering, why God, are these things happening to me? What are you doing in my life? Take a page from Jacob’s story. Don’t let go. Don’t ever give up.

The title for this sermon series resonates with virtually everyone I meet. Everybody identifies with this Life is Messy theme. Interpersonal relationships are messy. Family dynamics are messy. Office politics is messy.

The message of Scripture is that God enters the mess of our lives. This is the central message of Jesus. God comes in the person of Jesus Christ into the mess of life to reconcile and make new.

God wrestles with us until we come to the point of willing surrender. He may have to disable us in the process, but God wants to give us a blessing and a new identity.