

We Who Wrestle With God

When I think about what is the greatest challenge we Christians face today, it is not the coarseness of mass media, or the infringement of our First Amendment rights, or even Sunday morning soccer games. No, the greatest threat we face in our life with God is not any of these usual suspects; rather it's our refusal to wrestle with God's Word. Too often people come to church expecting to hear an edifying story, an uplifting thought, a moral lesson—something elevating, obvious, and (frankly) boring. As if our relationship with God was settled and all the rules were clear: be a good person; take care of your family; flee bad company and rise above adversity.

This may not be what is preached, but it is often what is heard, if only because we humans have such a great need to control the chaos of life. You almost never hear about God having a role in the chaos, let alone *causing* it. On the contrary, it is God's job to make the chaos stop. God is supposed to bring calm, restore peace and help everyone feel comfortable again. Isn't that how you know when God is present...when the danger has been avoided? when your heart stops pounding and you can breathe normally again? when you are not afraid anymore?

Listen to how we pray, what we ask for: protection, prosperity, peace, for a God who will operate within the familiar boundaries, without doing anything to frighten us unnecessarily. We want to be chosen, we want to be saved, sure, but only gently, please, by gradual degrees, so that we can see where we are going and say, "Yeah, that would fine with me. I can handle that. Show me more." Nothing too rough or demanding or scary.

It is an attractive idea, but unfortunately the Bible will not back it up. In the Bible, much of God's best work takes place *amidst the chaos*, with people scared half out of their wits: Moses, being told by a talking bush to go back and confront the tyrant Pharaoh; little David, standing before the giant Goliath, with only a few stones and a sling; Elijah, trembling under the broom tree, pleading with God to take his life; Mary, listening to an angel's ambitious plans for plunging her into scandal; the disciples, huddled in the upper room after Jesus was crucified, fearing they'd be next. Perhaps it's because we know how these stories turn out that we overlook the struggle, the doubt, the stark terror our forebears felt. Because we know how these stories turn out, we forget that a positive outcome was *anything but certain* to those involved as they were living it.

Consider what happens with Jacob, in our reading today from Genesis. In this passage, Jacob has a climactic encounter with God the night before Jacob is to meet his brother, Esau, for the first time in twenty years. To appreciate what Jacob was feeling that night before this meeting, we have to understand that the last time Jacob saw him, Esau was on a tear, looking to kill Jacob, and for all Jacob knows, he still wants to do so. In fact, Jacob has just heard that Esau is coming

to meet him with a virtual army! It doesn't sound like the makings of a happy reunion. And Jacob is scared spitless.

Now, it's hard to feel too bad for Jacob. For you can't say he didn't deserve it. Jacob is a liar and a cheat. As a young man, he tricked his brother Esau out of his birthright and then later, with his mother's help, he tricked him out of their father's blessing. Jacob took off right after that, heading for the wilderness north of Beersheba. It was there in the wilderness, at a place called Beth-el, that Jacob had been visited by a dream—his own holy vision of a staircase to heaven, with angels ascending and descending. Now, you'd think being blessed with a vision like that would have changed him, maybe straightened out his scheming ways. But it did not.

Before he leaves Beth-el, the King of Deals cuts another one. Speaking to no one in particular, but loud enough for anyone "upstairs" to hear, he says, "If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God." You hear all those "ifs," all the qualifications... "*if* God will do this for me, *if* God will protect me, *if* God will provide, *if* God will prosper me, *if* God will bring me peace, *then* I'll follow him." Jacob, the consummate bargainer, the wheeler-and-dealer.

It's easy to pick on Jacob, but all of us have prayed that Beth-el prayer at one time or another. We promise to follow God if God is with us, and then we tell God what that means: *if* God does this, *if* God gets me out of that mess, *if* God gives me what I want. . . then the Lord shall be my God." These are the terms we will accept. If God chooses some other way of being with us, well, then, the deal is off, or at least in question.

Thing is, God is not in the business of making deals with us. He's not interested in making us comfortable. What God wants is not to make us secure but to save us, to transform us, to raise us from the dead. And if you've ever seen someone come back from the dead, in person or on television, you know it's no calm and gentle thing. The pounding on the heart, the blue lips, the shock paddles, the smell of fear in the air, the choked return of breath, like a drowned thing coming up for air.... To the bystander, it's an unnerving, scary sight. But to the person who's been revived, it's downright traumatic. If that is what God wants to do with us, to raise us from the dead, how'd we ever think life with God would be gentle and easy?

It reminds me of the conversation in CS Lewis' book *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, when Susan and Lucy ask Mr. and Mrs. Beaver about Aslan:

"Is Aslan a man," Lucy asks.

"Aslan a man? Certainly not." Mr. Beaver replies. "I tell you he is the King of the wood and the son of the great Emperor-beyond-the Sea. Don't you know who is the King of Beasts? Aslan is a lion-- the Lion, the great Lion."

"Ooh!" said Susan. "I'd thought he was a man. Is he--quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion."

"That you will, dearie, and make no mistake," said Mrs. Beaver, "if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly."

"Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy.

"Safe?" said Mr. Beaver. "Don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about being safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

Aslan—God—is good, but he isn't safe.

If we need further reminder of that, we have only to look again at the story of Jacob. After making the “deal” with God at Bethel, Jacob went on to Haran, where he met his deal-making match in his uncle Laban. There he also met Rachel, the love of his life, and ended up doing fourteen years' indentured servitude for her hand. But after enduring *twenty* years of his father-in-law's manipulations, deceiving and being deceived, Jacob decided it was time to go home. Taking with him his two wives, two mistresses, twelve children and the livestock Laban owed him, he set off to the land of his ancestors.

This is where today's passage picks up. On his way home, he learns that his brother Esau, whom he's cheated, is looking for him, him and four hundred of his closest friends! After taking some precautions—dividing his caravan in two—Jacob settles into camp for the night. Or at least he tries to. A powerful restlessness gets hold of him and won't let him go. So he gets up in the middle of the night and moves everyone across the river—everyone and everything—and returns to the other side alone. Only Jacob is not alone for long. No sooner has he caught his breath than there's someone on his back. An *ish*, the Bible says, a man, although there is some doubt about that. The Jewish legends call him an angel. Jacob himself says it is God who attacks him.

Whoever he is, he's strong. Jacob has lifted a stone pillar at Beth-el and hauled another solid slab of rock off a well in Haran. He is a big man himself, but he's found his rival in this man, this angel, this well-muscled God. There is no talking at first, just the dull slap of flesh against flesh, as one of them gains a hold and the other one breaks it. It's so dark, they might as well be wrestling in some underground chamber for all they can see of each other, an arm grappling the neck without warning, a knee angling behind the blind back. They fight by feel, not by sight, until the sky lightens. Then fear gives the Stranger new strength. He brings his fist down and Jacob's hip cracks. But Jacob still will not turn him loose.

"Let me go," the angel says to Jacob, "for the day is breaking." According to Jewish tradition, he must go because angels sing in the morning choir before God's throne. But Jacob is unsympathetic. He has got hold of someone who smells of heaven, and he simply will not let him go. And so Jacob does what Jacob does best—he makes a deal. "I will not let you go," he says, "unless you bless me."

"What is your name?" the stranger asks Jacob, as they are locked in each other's arms. "Jacob," he answers. But just then for the first time since his birth, that name doesn't seem to fit. It falls away from him like a second skin. "No longer shall you be called Jacob, the 'supplanter,' the 'grabber' (which is what Jacob means), but Israel, the survivor, the striver, for you have wrestled with God and with humans, and have prevailed." The Stranger departs, leaving Jacob broken but blessed.

With that, Jacob receives the answer to the prayer he prayed at Beth-el. Not the comfort and safety part, but the God-be-with-me part. He is “one who wrestles with God,” one with whom God wrestles. That is who he is, that is his new name, his new name. And that is name that will

grace his descendants for eternity: Israel. That is what it means to be part of God's people, God's chosen—to be people who wrestle with God, people who won't let go of God even when it hurts, who hold on to Him, until He gives us his blessing.

We who are the spiritual descendants of Israel have inherited this stubbornness, this refusal to let go, this tenacious clinging to God. God is good. As Christians, we know this. But we also know that life is full of chaos, suffering, and injustice. Your life is a mess, your spouse betrays you, your child breaks your heart, others lie about you and judge you unfairly, the wicked and immoral go unpunished...Where is God?, we want to know.

And even when answers don't seem to come, we hold on. We struggle. We wrestle with our questions, questioning ourselves, questioning God's goodness, God's existence even. But we don't let go. But then just when we think we're beaten, we find in the desperate wrestling the answer to our prayers. Indeed, the wrestling *is* the answer. In refusing to let go of God, we discover the God who refuses to let go of us. God is holding on to us, even more tightly than we are to Him.

The story of Jacob wrestling the angel challenges the view that sees life with God as safe, settled and predictable. It shows that to be a superficial faith, paper-thin, and easily crumpled when tragedy and hardship strike. Faith isn't about finding peace amidst the storm, or about having all the right answers, or never having doubt. Faith, real faith, living faith, is rather the stubborn refusal to let God off the hook, the refusal to let go of Him, the determination to wrestle with God, even as God wrestles with us.

Make no mistake, it's never fun, this wrestling. It's exhausting, consuming, often deeply painful. But just because something is painful, doesn't mean it is not of God. As Jacob shows us, often the blessing comes with the brokenness. Thanks be to God!