

**“Blessing-Wrestling”  
October 16, 2011**

**Genesis 32:1-8, 13-18, 20a-31  
the Rev. Michelle Slater**

You probably know by now, if you’ve been here a few times, that I love the stories of the Hebrew Bible, especially the ones in Genesis. There is something captivating about the stories of these individual people and families, and the ways they work with, and against, God’s hopes and desires for them over the course of their lives. It was Soren Kierkegaard who said, “Life is understood backwards, but must be lived forwards.” Somehow reading these ancient lives backwards, helps us understand our own lives, even as we are living them forwards.

And so we come to Jacob, not too old, but no longer young, either. A man who, twenty years earlier, ran away from home after swindling his brother Esau of his inheritance, and deceiving his dying father to get his brother’s blessing. Fleeing to his mother’s relatives, he worked for his uncle Laban for fourteen years, seven years each as a bride-price for Laban’s two daughters. Now with a few more years working for Laban under his belt, Jacob has become prosperous, a patriarch on his own account, with wives and servants, children and flocks. But it is not enough. There is a shadow in the past, a hurt that must be healed. “Return to the land of your ancestors and to your kindred,” God said to Jacob, “and I will be with you.”

Return to your kindred. Return to Esau, the brother from whom Jacob has stolen everything that matters. The brother who had vowed to kill him, the last time they met. Clinging to God’s promise, Jacob sets out with all that he has gained, to face the past, to make what’s wrong, right again, if he can. And before long, Jacob hears the news he’s been dreading: his brother Esau is coming to meet him. With four hundred men.

Hoping to appease his brother’s anger, Jacob sends generous gifts ahead of him. Yet how many head of livestock could compensate a man for a lost birthright and blessing? Fearing for his own life, as well as for the lives of all his people, he gets up in the night and sends them all across the river. And he is left alone. In the dark. Afraid of what the coming day will bring.

Then, God showed up as promised. “And a man wrestled with him until daybreak.” Scripture doesn’t begin to capture the raw physicality of the scene. Imagine the grappling, the struggling, the straining and the sweating as two powerful figures attempt to subdue one another through brute force. This is no ethereal angelic vision; this is muscle against muscle, flesh against flesh.

Perhaps Jacob wonders if this is his punishment, payback for all the lies he’s told and tricks he’s pulled, always taking what isn’t his. It hurts as the two throw each other around, grunting with effort and pain, but perhaps there is also a strange satisfaction in it, a catharsis, in digging your fingers into something real that was only a fear a few hours before, pushing back against it, saying finally, “bring it on”.

Then the stranger seems to be afraid of the day coming. He drops his weight and Jacob’s hip cracks, but he will still not let go. The stranger speaks. “Let me go, for the day is breaking.” But Jacob knows that something bigger is going on here, something of God. “I will not let you go,” he grunts, “unless you bless me.”

I wonder, why didn't Jacob let go? When the stranger wanted to be freed, why didn't he give up, let go, and run away? Why stay in the fight, in the struggle, in the embrace? When it looked like he could not win, why didn't he give up?

You can imagine him standing there holding on for all he's worth, panting, gasping, sore, with that hip throbbing in pain. It is then that he realizes he's been wrestling with God. That's why he doesn't let go. In that darkness that comes right before dawn, he holds onto his supernatural wrestling partner and says, "You have to bless me. You put me through this, God, you brought me to this night of confrontation, of grief and exhausting struggle. I will not let this struggle end until I receive your blessing."

It happens, sometimes, that this is what the spiritual life is like, what having a relationship with God is like. Oh, sometimes we feel God's presence in other ways. We know that God is near because of that sense of peace that passes all understanding, in a hard time. Or we feel God's presence in a sense of oneness with all of creation.

But not all the time. Sometimes, scripture tells us, we experience God's presence like a wrestling match. In the book of Job, for example, Job and God go forty-two rounds, complete with ringside commentary from Job's three friends. At the end, we are no more sure who won and who lost than we are when the sun comes up on Jacob and his assailant. Then there's the prophet Jeremiah. He would dearly love to get God off his back, but God's word is like a fire in his bones (Jer. 20:9) that will not let him rest. And there's the garden of Gethsemane, on the night when Jesus is betrayed, the night before he is crucified. His prayer then was no serene, mystical union with God, but more like a wrestling match, in which, the gospel of Luke tells us, he sweated blood, agonizing over what to do, whether to follow (Luke 22:44). [Patrick J. Wilson, *Feasting on the Word Commentary*]

Sometimes people you know wonder, don't they, why you come to church? Co-workers, friends, family. Even if they don't ask, you can see it in their surprised expression, even their hesitancy, when you mention oh-so-casually that you're going to a church event. And if they ever do ask the question, what might you say? I suspect you'd say you're looking for a connection to something bigger than your own life. Something deeper, and richer, and more meaningful, than anything you could come up with on your own, even on your best days. If pressed to be more specific, you might say, I'd guess, that you come to church for peace, or for guidance. You might say that you come to know that you're not alone, or for an assurance that there is some meaning to life, to our lives.

Not many of us would say that we come for a wrestling match, for darkness and struggle, for wounding and a limp. But we know, don't we? We know what it is like, wrestling with God, protesting against God in the name of God, when the cancer diagnosis is given, or when the alcoholism is pulling our family apart. We know the darkness of the night, and the aloneness, of the chronic depression and anxiety, the burnout and despair. We know the limping, the effects of a life marked by childhood sexual abuse, or violence, or profound loss.

And we know that the wrestling is not something that can be avoided, not forever. Sometimes when I tell people what I do for a living, they look embarrassed and say, "Oh, I used to go to church. But if I go now, I just cry." It makes my heart break a little, to hear the effort that

has gone into avoiding that wrestling with God. The energy spent in keeping at bay any time or place of real quiet, real darkness, real aloneness. That fear that if a moment of vulnerability, of closeness to God was embraced, then what is really going on inside will escape: will finally have to be faced and held and wrestled to the ground, as painful as that will be.

But that's not all we know. We know also the blessing. The blessing that comes, paradoxically and simultaneously, with the wounding. In the dark, in the wrestling, we hear our true name being spoken. And all the names we have given ourselves, the names others have given us, based on our weaknesses, our faults, our failures, fall away.

And we know the intimacy, the oh-so-close presence of God in the struggle, sometimes working against us, it seems; and sometimes working with us, lending strength to our struggle, helping us to hang on one more minute, or hour, or day in the wrestling for a blessing. We know that sometimes the wrestling itself is the answer to our prayers, the sign that God is in this with us, that God really does give a damn about us, enough to settle in with us for the long night, the long haul.

And we know how hard it is to remember that, when we're in the midst of it, feeling all alone, in the dark. Maybe that's the reason, you might consider saying, that you come to church. Not because God's somehow present here in a different way than God is present everywhere else. But because the community of faith is a place to bring your sacred struggles and wonder together about where God is in the midst. A community of fellow wrestlers who can remind you, when you're in the very middle of the fight, that blessing will be given. A community that tells a sacred story of other wrestlers in the faith, that is big enough and deep enough to transform and redeem our own stories. A community that lives a way of understanding our lives backwards, while at the same time, living life fully forwards.

It's not like that all the time, or even most of the time, this wrestling with God that takes everything out of you and leaves you limping. Thank God for that! But the spiritual life, the walking with God, is like that enough of the time that it's worth remembering, once in a while. It's worth taking a look at our lives backwards, now and again, and seeing how God was present in the hardest times, understanding how the struggles yielded the blessings along with the wounds. And giving thanks that we are not only not alone, but blessed.

Thanks be to God! Amen.