

**A Sermon for DaySpring**  
**Wrestling with the Angels**  
**By Wes Eades and Lauren Barron**  
**August 3, 2008**

**Introduction by Wes Eades:**

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That's a pretty dramatic statement. And it's certainly not endorsed by many, perhaps not even by most, Christians.

The message I got growing up in typical evangelical congregations was almost the exact opposite of that. The message I got was more along the lines of, "*If you are living in God's will, then you'll not get wounded.*"

If Jacob had grown up with the same messages as me, he might have limped away from that encounter by the river, but you can bet he wouldn't have been walking like Festus for long (and it brings me great pain to know that many of you have no idea who Festus is - go look him up on Wikipedia). No, Jacob would have gotten physical therapy, and steroid shots and perhaps even hip replacement surgery, but he'd figure out a way to not limp.

Where I come from it's okay to say, "*I used to limp.*" But it's not okay to say, "*I limp.*"

Let's do an experiment... Let's all go to different Sunday School classes around town, and introduce ourselves, "*Hi my name is Bill, and I'm an alcoholic.*" Let's do it... just for fun... and let's gather back here and tell what happened.

But I digress...

A few months ago I was invited to participate in the Medical Humanities retreat that Mike Attas puts on for pre-med students at Baylor. The most compelling presentation of the weekend, for me, was by our own Dr. Lauren Barron.

Most of us will agree that God is showing up all around us, at all times, and in all sorts of ways. And most of us will agree that it is very difficult to grow the sort of spiritual eyes that can see this activity as it is unfolding. In Lauren's presentation, however, I heard a woman who is dedicated to honing her spiritual eyesight describe a week in her life. I heard her describing angels and wrestling matches where I would have probably only seen annoyances and distractions.

And perhaps most importantly, Lauren doesn't mind saying "*I limp.*"

If a picture is worth a thousand words, then a story can be worth ten thousand sermons. So I've asked Lauren to simply offer you a picture of how one person brings her life down to the river.

## **Dr. Lauren Barron's presentation:**

I am up at 3 a.m. again, with my laptop, trying to catch up on charting. My mind is cluttered, troubled. My neck is hurting, as usual. I am chewing my nails again and trying to figure out how I am going to manage seeing patients, and testify in a child custody case that I have been subpoenaed for tomorrow afternoon. I have several friends I am concerned about but keep forgetting to call. My house is a mess. I forgot to take a vitamin. My back hurts. I can't sleep. And on top of that I am looking at an email inviting me to speak to a group of hospital chaplains about balance.

I try to summon an image of balance and what comes to mind is this: a bus perched precariously on the edge of a cliff, teetering back and forth on the brink of disaster. I suspect this is NOT the kind of balance they mean.

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It's 8:30 a.m., time to start seeing patients. Well-woman exams, rechecks for blood pressure and diabetes, suture removal. And then. Here is a child who has been booked for an upper respiratory infection. But it is much more complicated than that. The child has been sick for a year. His mother has brought him to me from another doctor. I look back through the chart. Literally, he has had a sinus infection, pneumonia, bronchitis, allergies every month, for a year. His mother is tearful. The kid has headaches, doesn't want to play with his friends, cries because he doesn't feel well, is missing too much school. The mom knows there is something very wrong. I see her controlled panic. I do a complete history and physical. I order CTs of his sinuses, his neck, his lungs. I tell her we will find an answer. It takes much longer than 15 minutes to hear this story and examine this child; much, much longer to explain my plan to his mother and reassure her. It takes another 15 minutes to calm my nurses down because I am so far behind schedule now.

Here is a woman who is overweight and depressed, with profound fatigue. I listen to her story. It takes time. It takes time. She isn't crazy, she isn't complaining. She has been trying to get help with her symptoms for years. She had lymphoma when she was a kid and wonders if this has anything to do with her problem. I work her up. She has the lowest B12 level I have ever seen. I bring her back to discuss her labs and tell her we have found something, something that is real and something we can treat. I tell her I don't know why her B12 level is so low. Because only vegetarians and the very elderly are supposed to get B12 deficiency. Oh, and people with GI problems. She reminds me her lymphoma had been in her intestine and she had had extensive bowel resection as a child. The lights go on in my mind—I hadn't put that together and told her so. We give her a B12 injection. She comes back in two weeks and she says I have worked miracles. She says it is the closest thing to a miracle she has ever seen. I am glad for her, I am delighted, and I am also aware that it was not brilliance but divine luck that I checked a B12 level. It isn't a miracle of New Testament proportions to me, but it is for her. "This is what I live for" goes through my mind.

In between patients I am being called by other doctors, the clerk at the desk is reminding me to check my email messages and refill requests, my computer battery goes dead in the middle of a patient encounter and I haven't finished charting on any of the patients I've seen this morning. I flop into my chair at the lunch break. I work at the computer as fast as I can. I forget to remember to breathe. I do not eat. I don't go to the bathroom. I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror and put some lipstick on, stat, so I don't look sicker than the patients.

I see patients all afternoon, and then I look up. It's 5:30 and the nurses are restless, the lab is asking if they can go, do I need them. My husband calls just to check in, see if I will be home by 6 for dinner. I am too short with him, needing to see the last patient. She keeps coming in with gynecologic problems, and seems worried out of proportion to her symptoms... I have seen her 3 maybe 4 times in the last month, and she has been worried each time about discharge or pelvic pain or irregular cycles. She's back again? I think to myself. I open the door and she is crying, tears streaming down her cheeks. Something doesn't fit. And then I know. I look her in the eye and ask her if she has been assaulted. I know the answer will be yes. It happened 6 months ago, and she has never told anyone. I listen to her story. It takes time. We talk about dealing with the medical consequences as well as the psychological ones. I put the number to the crisis center in her hand. She says she will call. I upbraid myself for not having recognized this sooner.

It gets quiet down the hall, as the clinic empties out. I am facing another hour and a half to two hours (at least) of charting. I couldn't do it right now if someone put a gun to my head, which I am sure the nurses have considered doing. I am overwhelmed, irritable. I try to be grateful for glimpses of God's presence as I have seen patients, examined them, talked to them, cared for them. But at the end of the day, the Holy Spirit clocks out and leaves ME with all the paperwork.

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Sometimes, when I am awake, trying to sort things out, trying to tease out answers to questions that won't go away, wondering how much difference there is, really, between blessing and burden—I think a lot about the story of Jacob, wrestling with God in the middle of the night. It is such a strange story...wrestling? What is it about wrestling? It's gritty, it's sweaty, it's physical, it's psychological—it's combat of course, but it's also a kind of embrace. Violent, but intimate at the same time. It's disturbing.

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What kind of a man wrestles with God? A very foolish one, perhaps. Or a very wise one? One who has nothing—or is it everything?—to lose.

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But the most interesting question to me is what kind of a God is it that wrestles with man? A God who considers us a worthy opponent? Or maybe a God who knows we need to wrestle, we need to struggle, we need to be exhausted, we need to come to the end of ourselves and still, somehow, not only hang on, but demand something to show for it. This is a dangerous kind of God—unpredictable, sneaky even. The kind of God who will surprise you in the middle of the night. This is a God who can and will hurt you. Who will mark you for life. Tangle with this kind of God and you won't ever be the same.

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Of course he could have killed Jacob at any point. He could have wounded him any one of a thousand ways. So why did he pick Jacob's hip? Why wound him there, of all places? Maybe so that Jacob couldn't run from God, or from himself anymore. Maybe so that every step he took, for the rest of his life, he would be reminded that it was only by God's grace and mercy that he could walk at all.

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I expect extraordinary things to happen every day. I really believe that God brings me the patients I am meant to see. I believe I am supposed to love my patients, to give generously, exuberantly and without reserve of my time and attention and to bring every thing that I am and have when I encounter a patient. I believe that I need to listen for what love requires of me as I listen to patients and their stories and to be with them in their suffering. I believe in the practice of medicine as a sacrament. I try to think intentionally about hospitality and the exchange that happens between host and guest, the gifts we give to each other. I believe that my patients minister to me and love me, and I am learning to let them, and it helps, it really does. I know what I am doing in the room when I am with patients is real; I know that because time goes away. These are the things that matter, that cannot be measured with any kind of number that I know of, the kinds of things that are worth spending your life for.

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But what I believe is completely contrary to the system in which I find myself daily. By system I don't just mean my particular clinic. I mean, or at least I think I mean, American medicine. So I am constantly bumping up against a competing system of beliefs, an alternate reality. The realm of time and money, of schedules, of insurance companies, plans and policies, of co-pays and coding; of big business, formularies, paperwork and email. Of physician efficiency and clinical guidelines, of ICD-9 codes and CPT's and the list goes on. These things are utterly insubstantial, literally and figuratively, and of no eternal consequence whatsoever. Yet I am forced to admit that, if they are illusions, they are powerful, pervasive, stubborn and convincing ones, not to mention annoying. And some days, it'll squeeze the Jesus right out of you.

So this is my struggle: It is a curious thing, a very uncomfortable thing to have on the one hand an internal assurance that I am doing what I have been created to do, what I have been ordained to do. And yet: Why am I so

overwhelmed, why can't I stay on time, why can't I get my charts done, why can't I see as many patients as my partners, why is my family frustrated, why do I disappoint so many people and fall so short? And does feeling this way mean that I am doing something right or does it mean I am doing something wrong?

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Sometimes I want to hang up my stethoscope, because this work is too hard. And then I will see a patient like Angela. She comes in with her adult daughter who is mentally disabled and blind. She brings me another loaf of bread. She grinds the wheat herself. She puts in apricots and golden raisins and walnuts and sunflower seeds and cranberries. I stop her in the hallway before she leaves and I tell her how much the bread means to me, how much I savor every bite, how much I feel cared for and how it is, for me, as sacred as communion.

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Or a patient like Susan, who hemorrhaged, almost to death, after a mastectomy. The next morning in the ICU, she asked me to close the curtain and then she told me she had seen Him. She had seen Jesus last night, she had wanted to go with Him, but her family kept calling her back, so she decided to stay. She told me how handsome he was, how low and beautiful his voice was, how she had been ready to die. I thanked her for telling me. I told her she might be ready but her family wasn't ready and I wasn't ready. And then I told her in no uncertain terms that sneaking around behind my back with Jesus was strictly against doctor's orders.

I saw her in the office a week later and here is what I wrote about it later that night:

There is no way to capture and explain what transpired today between us. Her wound is jagged and ugly, the bruising extensive all along her flank and what is left of her breast. It was horrible and fascinating and seeing her lovely body, distorted like this, made me want to weep. I want to put my hand over my mouth to stop myself from trying to describe it. Words would weaken it. Words would make it fade, wouldn't they? Or would they keep it from fading? And yet my heart is so full, so full of the blessing of having this amazingly beautiful and tragically ill woman put her arms around me and pull me to her, so much gratitude and grief passing back and forth between us. I am bewildered by this. I am afraid of it; I am afraid of being consumed by it; I am afraid of what this will require of me, afraid of the suffering that she will face, and that I will have to face alongside her. I am afraid of what I will see. I am afraid of what lies in store for all those I open my heart to and lay my hands on. I am afraid that I will not have the courage to look, that I will fail to be present, that I will lie or pretend, that I will turn away.

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Thornton Wilder wrote a one-act play called "The Angel That Troubled the Waters." It is about a physician who travels to a healing pool, like the pool of Bethesda, looking for relief from the burden of suffering that he had accumulated as he ministered to the sick and suffering. But the angel appears and instead of helping him to heal, blocks his entrance to the pool. The physician tries to convince the angel to let him pass. To which the angel responds, "Without your wounds where would your power be? It is your melancholy that makes your low voice tremble into the hearts of men and women. The very angels themselves cannot persuade the wretched and blundering children on earth as can one human being broken on the wheels of living. In Love's service, only wounded soldiers can serve. Physician, draw back."

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Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God." - 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 (NIV)