

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

By Eric Howell

**“Jacob Encounters God”**

2 Timothy 3:14-17

October 17, 2010

If you grew up on “wrestlin” like I did, the Old Testament reading this morning has a special place in your heart. For those of you not initiated into the sweet science of southern backyard sports, “wrestlin” is totally different from wrestling. Wrestling is what they do in the Olympics when well-trained athletes try to pin their opponent, or drive him out of the circle. There are points awarded, medals won and lost. It’s an international sport with a tradition back to Roman times.

“Wrestlin” is just different. In “wrestlin” you win belts not medals. There are no points, just pride. There’s a ring, but the action goes inside and outside the ring. There are no particular rules either, except do whatever you can to pin the other guy’s shoulders for three slaps of the referee’s hand on the mat. “Wrestlin” gave us such vocabulary as the half-Nelson, the pile-driver, and the clothesline. It also gave us such personalities, back in the golden era of the sport, as Ric Flair, The Ugandan Giant, the Fabulous Freebirds, and my all-time favorites, the Von Ericks, three farm-boy, hay-baling brothers who were our heroes because they were Texans. I got to go to a “wrestlin” match once. It was lots of fun. I just couldn’t figure out how the guys managed to put one another on the ground when it seemed from my seat, a few rows back, that their punches never actually landed on the opponent. Strange, I know; but it just goes to show how amazing these guys really were.

I guess that’s actually the other thing about “wrestlin” vs. wrestling. In “wrestlin,” you didn’t really mean it. It was all sort of a big show. It was more about flair than substance; more about style than significance.

In contrast, there’s an actual wrestling match in the Bible, or so it seems, in which there is actual struggle, and someone actually walks away changed. It was: Jacob vs. a mystery man that might be an angel or might be God Himself. It doesn’t seem like a fair fight. Jacob is wily and all. He’s proven to this point in his life that he’s able to exploit a weakness in others to his own advantage. Even when he was born, he was said to have grabbed hold of his twin brother’s heel. That’s how he got his name, Jacob. It means, “He takes by the heel.” It also means he cheats. Jacob lived up to his name. He cheated his barely older brother Esau out of his inheritance, and so cheated his father Isaac out of his blessing. He cheated his father-in-law, Laban, out of his herd; and his daughters and granddaughters, sneaking out with all of them in the middle of the night. For God to tell Moses many years later, “I am the God of your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” is really saying something about the character of God, who would choose someone like Jacob and stay with him; and invoke his name as the one through whom God will redeem the whole world. Jacob was a mess.

It was at one of Jacob’s lowest places when he wrestles all night long. He’s just barely escaped the wrath of his father-in-law, and now must face the wrath of his estranged brother, Esau. He’s got himself married to two sisters who are jealous of

one another. He's fleeing from one problem into the arms of another. I've had days like that. Some of us it seems have lifetimes like that. Sometimes we are the ones who are a mess.

Now let us acknowledge that, like Jacob, some of those problems we create on our own. When we have strife, struggle, pain and hardship, we have to confess the ways that we have made life harder on ourselves. Sometimes the wrestling we do is with our own worst tendencies. Sometimes they get the better of us; and we get ourselves in trouble again and again. But while Jacob had plenty of that in his personality, that's not what he wrestled with on that night.

Sometimes we wrestle with things that we didn't do to ourselves, but they are just a part of life. That's probably where we most often use the language of struggle, wrestling and striving. We use it about temptations that come from without, or situations that are beyond our control. Sometimes we struggle to hold on when there's a lot in us that wants to pull us down. We struggle to hold on to faith when doubts pull at us. We struggle to be good when it's so much easier to go wrong. The spiritual vocabulary of exertion is often used about things that are bad. Contrast that with how we talk about things that are good: resting, peace, calmness. Those are things that are good.

So, in our typical vocabulary, struggle is for when things are bad. Placidness is about that which is good. The good is described as the absence of struggle, effort, or exertion.

We notice here however, that in this story, Jacob, the one who would be renamed Israel and become the father of the people of God was not wrestling with his demons, not wrestling with himself, but was wrestling with God. His exertion wasn't to resist something bad; it seems it was to embrace something good.

"Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of day. When it was over, Jacob named the place Peniel, "the face of God." There's no telling what Jacob saw that night. He seems to even have some confusion at first over exactly what had happened to him, and the narrator doesn't come right out and say it. Wrestling with God is not a trifling thing. You may not even know you are in it until you are well into it.

It was a dark and troubling time for him, but God did not abandon him to that valley by himself. Rather, God showed up. And God's presence didn't provoke a campfire, a round of hand-holding, Kumbayah, or a sappy praise chorus. Jacob struggled with God all night long. For some reason, I really like that. It's a strange story, but I really like that we have the image of an encounter with God like this.

The things of faith are to be wrestled with. They don't always come easily. They are not always accompanied with words like placidness, peacefulness, or calmness, easiness. Wrestling with faith is not the same thing as battling against it, or resisting it. It's being willing to be wrapped up in it in such a way that everything you are is employed in engaging God. Sometimes we are too passive and too quick in our faith. Whatever else wrestling with faith means, it certainly means time and energy put into it.

It's interesting that the Lectionary paired this story of Jacob wrestling with God with the verses in 2 Timothy 3 about the importance of scripture. The way scripture is described in 2 Timothy, it's like it has life: all scripture is breathed out by God. 2 Timothy obviously was not originally referring to the New Testament since there was no New Testament yet. It was talking about the Old Testament with all those stories like Jacob wrestling and Moses, David, the prophets, and poets. Christians came soon to understand writings about Jesus including 2 Timothy itself as scripture in the same way as those books from Israel's history and worship. So here, scripture refers interestingly to itself. We've experienced the power and challenge, comfort and teachings of the New Testament as we've met Jesus in those pages, and met those who first followed Him, and testified to His life, death, and resurrection, and then wrestled to understand and practice their faith in a world in which Jesus has been raised from the dead.

Scripture is able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

Scripture is profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, for training in righteousness.

Scripture makes us competent and equipped for God's good work.

Scripture is breathed out by God.

Scripture has God's breath in it. Scripture is the breath of God.

When you hold the Bible in your hands you are holding the Word of God breathed out. Scripture is alive. It has a heartbeat, a pulse. It is not a dead archaic rulebook. It is not a how-to manual for your best life. It is not a weapon. "Scripture is God-breathed" is not a doctrinal statement about the inspiration or infallibility of the Bible or any of those distractions.

Rather, it means that in scripture we meet the living, breathing God. When was the last time you wrestled with scripture? It is very easy to not read the Bible long enough that you kind of forget how to get started reading it again. It is very easy to skim a verse now and then quickly and impatiently. It is also very easy to study the Bible as if it were dead, like a cadaver on a morgue table, dissecting it.

If we trust scripture enough and God enough to allow ourselves to be embraced by it, grabbed by it, held by it, and to give ourselves enough to hold it and not let it go easily, we find not just words here about God that sharpen our understanding: we encounter the Word of Life here. We meet God.

This is where Lectio Divina and contemplative prayer practices may be misleading. They look like nothing is happening. There's no shouting, yelling, or obvious struggle. There's even an absence of explaining, dissecting, or arguing. Sometimes there's an absence of direction, guidance, or cheerleading.

But what there is, is space for engaging God in scripture and prayer and scripture as prayer.

Think of the person who wrote Psalm 119, the longest Psalm in the whole Bible. Each letter of the Hebrew language is used as the first letter of each line in a section:

aleph, bet, gimmel, dalet, so on. Whoever wrote that took some time to do it. All 176 verses are celebrating the Word of God. Imagine the discipline it took to write that. But even more, imagine the inspiration. Your Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.

Another Psalm, Psalm 1, and Jacob's story from Genesis both take place by a river. In Psalm 1, the person who meditates on scripture is described as a tree planted by rivers of flowing water. That's a nice, pastoral image. Always been one of my favorites. The image in Genesis 32 is also by a river, but the image is of rolling around in the dirt, grunting, groaning, sweating. For some of us, that's a more real picture of prayer and faith and quietly soaking up spirituality through deeply planted roots.

At the end, both the practices of contemplative prayer and Lectio Divina lead us to submission, openness, and emptiness before the One Who Is. Most of us have some work to do to get to that point. Not just the work of struggling against that which would prevent us from being open to God: distractions, guilt, doubts, etc.; but, actually grasping hold and wrestling with God. Benedict was right on wasn't he, when he said our prayer is our work. Prayer is work. It's hard work. So is engaging scripture as prayer. A little book called the Kneeling Christian ends this way, "Prayer is our highest privilege, our gravest responsibility, and the greatest power God has put in our hands. Prayer, real prayer, is the noblest, the most sublime, the most stupendous act that any creature of God can perform."

Eugene Peterson in his wonderful book on spiritual reading called, "Eat This Book" opens by reflecting on the phrase in Psalm 1 which reads, "blessed is the man or woman whose delight is in the law of the Lord on which he meditates day and night." The word meditate suggests a quiet room, candles on the altar, and silent reflection. Peterson noticed that the word for meditate in Psalm 1, Hagah, is used in Isaiah to describe a lion over his prey, saying "As a lion growls (hagah) over his prey." The word translated meditate in one place is the same word for growl in another. The growl might be a warning to enemies or a defensive posture, but a growl over prey is also the low, throaty rumbles of pleasure an animal has for a prized bone. This word hagah has been described in terms of prayer as someone who is "lost in his religion;" utterly caught up in it, mindful of nothing else, focused, engaged, perhaps wrestling all night long with God.

Be forewarned that there is risk to this, to embracing the divine. Jacob's whole life changed that night. Even his name changed. Before, he was Jacob, the cheater --- the thief; that night his name was changed to Israel, the one who strives with God. He and his sons would be remembered by generations to come as the fountain heads of the 12 tribes, known as the people of Israel. It was on this night that he received his new name.

But he didn't just walk away from his encounter with God with a crown of glory. He walked away with a limp that would remind him the rest of his life of his struggle with God. We never really engage God and walk away from it unchanged.

To wrestle with God is to know going in that you may walk away with a limp and you may walk away with a cross on your back. Either way, even in our dark nights, let us grab hold of God and never let go.