

*The same night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. Genesis 32:22-31*

When's the last time you did any wrestling? Maybe it was on the floor with your siblings, or maybe with a parent when you were getting older and testing your strength and your limits? Wrestling is an ancient combat sport that has endured over 15,000 years. So, it shouldn't surprise us that there's a story in the Bible about wrestling. That it would be Jacob who was the wrestling champ also should not surprise us, after all, he's been wrestling since before he was born.

Jacob, whose name means the "heal grabber" was wrestling in his mother's womb with his twin brother Esau in an attempt to be the first born. After being born second, Jacob continued his mental and literal wrestling, cheating and tricking his way through life in ways such as trading Esau's birthright for a bowl of stew, and stealing from his father Isaac the blessing that had been intended for Esau. He found a clever wrestling opponent in his Uncle Laban and it took him years to win that match, but he eventually left Laban's land with his own wives and possessions as a man of great wealth; wealth resulting from scheming and trickery.

As Jacob heads back home, he knows only too well what awaits him there – his angry brother. The brother he wrestled all those years ago, the brother whose life he disrupted by his deceitful actions. Jacob has good reason to be afraid of Esau, who has become wealthy in his own right and who, upon hearing of his brother's return, has dispatched an army to meet Jacob. Jacob thinks he will have to wrestle his brother yet again, and we know he is afraid and feeling vulnerable. Alone in the dark, he's confronted by an unknown wrestling opponent.

This sure sounds familiar to me; does it resonate for you, too? How many times in life have we found ourselves alone in a dark place, wrestling with something we won't recognize as God until much later? So much of our wrestling is with our own guilt, fear, doubt, grief, or unforgiveness; with family, friends, enemies, people at work or at church. All that wrestling is ultimately with God.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says "In the night, the divine antagonist tends to take on the features of others with whom we struggle." So, if we want to know what needs to be pinned down in our psyche, then we want to pay close attention to what disrupts our sleep, what wakes us up in a sweaty panic.

When we wrestle with God, we may be wounded and even leave the match with a limp, but in the end we are assured of a blessing. In the wrestling, we are confronted by the demons inside of us and brought to the end of our strength, to the last of our clever moves, pins, and holds. And we must expect that we will be changed in the process — and not always in ways that are painless or comfortable or easy.

Jacob's God is mysterious and determined. Jacob's God doesn't hesitate to wrestle him all the way down to the dusty ground. Indeed, the Hebrew word for "wrestle" means "to get dusty." Jacob's God, and ours, is a God who prevails with us in the dust and struggle. A God who is willing to stay with us through the darkest night and then lift us out of the dirt. Our God welcomes our wrestling, encourages our persistence, and will not let us go.

And so, knowing all this about our God who desires to be in relationship with us so much that God would wrestle us to the ground with love, knowing all this, what are you wrestling with right now?

Obviously, we've been wrestling a pandemic. Perhaps less obvious is the whole list of things that result from life in a pandemic, things like loneliness, fear, job loss, illness, even changes in our hopes and dreams. We worry about the education of our children and finding a vaccine for the COVID virus. We miss being at church, we want to see and hug our family members. We are wrestling with some very real loss, anger, and grief over all this. Some of us are wrestling to understand the violence that is everywhere right now, and the poverty and racism that is being more clearly revealed than ever before. The list is endless, really, and more than enough to keep us wrestling all night every night as we try to solve the problems, find someone to blame, and escape our own responsibility. And all this wrestling leads us, in the end, to God.

There are times when the spiritual life is grasped only by hanging on tightly to the God we cannot see, don't yet understand, and cannot imagine could bring grace and healing into the dusty wrestling matches of our lives. But the blessing has already been given, and it is there waiting for us, even when we cannot see it.

Just as God knew all along who Jacob was, God knows who we are, each one of us. God knows those things with which we wrestle – our insecurities, our self-destructive behaviors, our scheming and selfish ways, the material things we are so quick to grab, every life disaster we have created. God knows.

All those years ago, when Isaac asked, "who are you?" Jacob could not confess who he was. But God asked Jacob, God gave Jacob another chance to really examine himself, and Jacob finally stopped wrestling and answered honestly. And that was the moment of blessing, the moment when his life was preserved.

Even in these most difficult times, even when our lives are a dusty mess, God waits to wrestle with us, to ask us, "who are you?" not to defeat us, but that our lives might be preserved, that we might be transformed into the blessed ones God has called us to become. Amen.

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