

Wrestling with Angels

Oak Grove Presbyterian, Rev. Dr. Anne Fisher
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Genesis 32:22-31

²²The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. ²⁴Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. ²⁵When 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. ²⁶Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." ²⁷So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." ²⁸Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." ²⁹Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. ³⁰So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." ³¹The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

A few years back when we could travel, Gregg and I went to Greece. On our trip we went to the birthplace of the Olympic Games. The different city/states would send their strongest and fastest men to compete. The honor of the city/state was at stake. Competitors would go to Olympia and train for a month before the competition. They would compete in seven sports, such as boxing, wrestling, running, chariot racing, discus and the javelin throw. The price of winning was high! The city/states were the victors over others if their athletes won an event. Corruption was high in order to win. To deter the competitors from cheating, the games had a tradition. While proceeding to their event, every competitor had to walk past a row of statues of Zeus that were paid for through the fines that had been levied on the cheaters. Each statue had a cheater's name written on the base. They were forever memorialized in shame. This served as a warning for those who were about to

compete...think twice before cheating. The Olympics was a great alternative to war because the winners would be welcomed home as heroes. The city/state would be considered the strongest and most impenetrable -- at least until the next competition.

As we saw the ruins of the gymnasium where the men held their wrestling matches in the ancient times, I could not help but compare Jacob's trial (from today's scripture) as a contest of Olympic proportions. Jacob, who fears for his family, leaves quickly from Laban, his father-in-law. He takes his growing family with him. Jacob is without land or position. (During this time, his wife, Rachel, runs off with her father's idols.) In the midst of the upheaval, he has a wrestling match with an angel. We are aware, as they physically wrestled on the banks of the Jabbok, that this is not a mere physical contest but a spiritual one as well.

This wrestling match for Jacob took place much earlier than the Greek contests and farther east than the Olympic fields. Jacob's match has far more at stake than the honor and reputation of a city/state. Had Jacob been in Olympia for the contests, there we might have seen his name inscribed on a cheater's statue because his name means "trickster." Jacob is the one who cheated his own twin brother out of his birth rite.

We know that we too can find ourselves in the ring wrestling with angels as we feel the turmoil of today. We see injustice in our very own streets or see others not playing by the rules (i.e. such as mingling and not wearing the masks so others are protected).

Our physical strength may not be the test that is required of us in this life, but perhaps our Olympian test will be of the spiritual sort. And we can apply this test of wills and spirit not only to us as individuals but as a community of faith as well.

THE BELL SOUNDS -- Round 1 begins, *the encounter*. The encounter is the realization that there is something greater than we are. As we tune into our service, we acknowledge there is something more than our own lives at stake

in this world. We encounter the Holy at different moments. We know there is more to this world than what we can control and design. Round one is flirting with the spiritual. Round one is acknowledging that we are Christians, which says that this communion meal before us is important in our lives. Jacob acknowledges the stranger as someone with whom he needs to deal. He does not walk away and he acknowledges the encounter.

At this point we don't feel changed by our encounters. We believe, but nothing much happens. We go through the motions to change the world but we do not change. We joined the church or said yes to serve but we are still remains the same persons. Although an encounter is made, the match is far from over.

If we stay in round 1, but do not go further, then we will be that church that simply gets by doing the bare minimum. Encountering Christ is a good thing, but never discovering what that means in our lives means we have left before the match is over.

THE BELL SOUNDS -- Round 2. As round 2 begins, the encounter turns into *engagement*...contact is made with the spiritual and the struggle begins. Faith and belief are not benign words that one does not share in polite company. Faith is tested and re-tested. We are faced with unexpected questions that we cannot answer. Soren Kierkegaard writes about faith saying, "No person has the right to delude others into the belief that faith is something of no great significance, or that it is an easy matter...whereas, it is the greatest and most difficult of all things."

The wrestling with faith begins in earnest when we are jolted upright and our beliefs and assumptions can no longer be taken for granted. Sometimes being a church is very difficult. Right now, we are in difficult times. Keeping the church going when our habits are broken is not easy. Keeping our witness alive when we are tucked in our own homes, isolated from those with whom we usually come in contact, is not a walk in the park. Feeling isolated and alone when church used to relieve such feelings but now doesn't, is real and

difficult. It requires wrestling with our faith when things are not all going as we had hoped.

Jacob is wounded in this round of engagement. The angel touches his hip and forever more he limps from it. We are changed when we come to terms with our own human frailty and with our social disparity. No one can come out of this time in our lives without being affected. As we engage in our faith and struggle with what it all means, we end up changed by the encounter. At times, faith comes at a cost. At times, faith is deepened by the struggle.

When our commitment to God is thrown into question, when loving our neighbor is a stretch, we can either walk away from the struggle or choose to wrestle with our faith and hang in there. Round 2 seems to last forever. In this round, victory is certainly not assured. When this round ends and the engagements eases, we can go back to our corners and feel the support around us of our trainers, coaches, friends who comprise the community of the church. These folks help us rub the bruised and sore muscles and give us words of encouragement. This feeds us with food that will strengthen our spiritual reserves and help us wash away our doubts, anger, and fears so that we can enter the third and final round.

As a church, we cannot continue without the engagement round. As difficult as it might be, if we have not invested our hearts, souls and resources in our church, then it will not mean anything. Engagement is vital and it leaves us forever changed. We are called to hang in there...to wrestle and not give up.

THE BELL SOUNDS -- Round 3, *blessing* begins. The third round moves from engagement to transformation. The final challenge is not yet won. In our scripture, Jacob is physically changed by the engagement but has yet to receive the blessing. In his tenacity, Jacob refuses to let the stranger go until he gets the blessing from God. That is when Jacob's transformation occurs! Jacob's name is changed from "the trickster" to Israel, "the one who struggles with God." This is the turning point for Jacob. He now enters into the realm of patriarch in which the twelve tribes of Israel descend. He now is not only the head of the vast household, but also the spiritual leader of his people. This

encounter with God, this wrestling match with the angel/man has changed him forever -- both inside and out.

If we leave the contest after the engagement and not enter the blessing, we leave wounded and bitter. The blessing comes at the price of our Savior and we are reminded of that every time we face this table and gaze upon the cross. Within our own spiritual wrestling matches, we have the assurance of God's blessing for us. Writers and mystics have given our struggles with our faith many different names: "the dark night of the soul," "the cloud of unknowing," "walking through the valley of the shadow."

If we hang on, when we are lost in the dark, we can come to know the *blessing* that we have from God. If we can accept God's blessings, then we are forever changed. Once claiming God's blessing, we can no longer go through the simple motions. The blessing of God transforms us as we become the forgiven children of God. We are blessed by God's enduring grace.

As we take part in this meal before us, we say we are ready and willing to *encounter* the Holy, to *engage* with the challenges of life and to be *blessed* by God's grace. With Christ as our Savior, we can win the challenges and be more than conquerors. Like the Greek athletes of old, our victories come to us not through cheating, but through Christ.

Amen.