

### **“Wrestling with God”**

“So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, ‘For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.’”

One of my best friends in high school was Dave Presuto. Dave and I met in study hall, where we discovered that we shared a similar sense of humor and many similar interests. We would watch hockey games in each other’s homes, drive around town in his father’s station wagon listening to music on his 8-track player, and attend movies that had a definite male theme (Burt Reynolds, Charles Bronson, etc.). But even though we were good friends, Dave and I had some different interests that we did not share in common:

- Dave was a star athlete, the starting offensive tackle on the varsity football team. I’m one of the worst athletes ever; my time on the football field was with the marching band at halftime, when the teams were in the locker room.
- Dave was a big fan of the rock group Kiss. Even though I still enjoy a lot of loud rock ‘n’ roll, I have never understood this band’s abiding attraction to so many people.
- Dave was a huge fan of professional wrestling. Even though we would watch the bouts at his house, I never could understand why people are so devoted to something that – to me – is so silly.

One of the problems I have with “professional wrestling” (the WWE variety) is that it is a pale imitation of the real sport of wrestling that I experienced in high school. When I attended our wrestling matches, I could see how challenging a sport wrestling is, how it is a combination of strength and skill on the part of these gifted athletes. There is nothing “fake” about the sport of wrestling; it takes a great deal of training, dedication, and experience in order to excel in this athletic endeavor.

Wrestling is one of many sports at which I am completely unqualified; but I can honestly say that there have been many when I have engaged in wrestling bouts of varying types. Susan and I have often found ourselves wrestling with our cats to cut their claws or to give medication, something that no cat enjoys. While my health has been quite good over the years, there have been occasions when I have wrestled with various illnesses, and I have ongoing bouts of wrestling with a bad back and arthritic hands. During my student years, there were many subjects with which I wrestled, especially math and science which were two of my weaker subjects. I wrestled with the call to ordained ministry for many years, and I often find myself wrestling with Biblical texts in order to understand their meaning so that I can preach and teach them effectively. Even if you have never met an opponent on a wrestling mat, all of us have faced those occasion when we have had to wrestle with a difficult problem, to struggle with a life-changing decision. Unlike my friend’s favorite sport, there is nothing “fake” about the wrestling we experience in real life.

Our first lesson brings us into a wrestling arena as we hear the story of Jacob’s bout with an unnamed opponent on the banks of the river Jabbok. The Jabbok River is an eastern tributary of the Jordan River, about 20 miles north of the Dead Sea, an area that was a frontier point for the Promised Land (*“And to the Reubenites and the Gadites I gave the territory from Gilead as far as the Wadi Arnon, with the middle of the wadi as a boundary, and up to the Jabbok, the wadi being boundary of the Ammonites”* – Deuteronomy 3:16). It is at the banks of this river that Jacob arrives with his entourage, *“his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children”* (Genesis 32:22). They are not traveling on vacation, or taking a trip to visit relatives in a distant land; Jacob is on the run, fleeing the wrath of his brother Esau who is seeking to kill Jacob after the younger brother stole the birthright that belonged to the older sibling. Up to this point, Jacob’s life had been one in which he lived up to the meaning of his name; “Jacob” is derived from the Hebrew word for “heel” and has the connotation of “supplanting” or “cheating.”

- “And that name encompasses the truth of who and what Jacob has been – a supplanter, a cheater, a liar, one who lied to his blind father and stole his brother’s blessing, one who had to run for his life and go into exile, one who struggled for twenty years with his father-in-law Laban, deceiving and being deceived. That’s the Law, the hard truth of who Jacob was and is.” – Kathryn Schifferdecker.

It was while he was fleeing the wrath of his brother that God first encountered Jacob at the place Jacob would name Bethel, promising that *“I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”* (28:15). But in spite of this assurance of God’s abiding presence, Jacob is still a man on the run, fleeing both the land of promise and the anger that his past deceptions have created, until he comes to the banks of this river and stops. For reasons that are not explained, Jacob sends his entire caravan across the river and stays behind by himself. *“Jacob is alone; he will not be able to call for help should trouble come.”* (Terence Fretheim).

Troubles arrives in the form of an unknown assailant with whom Jacob wrestles all night long. While the details as to the person who attacks Jacob and his motives behind the assault are not provided, what is surprising is Jacob’s tenacity. Before this incident, Jacob has been portrayed as a weak figure, a person who could be easily manipulated (especially by his mother), someone who displayed no outstanding character traits.

- “Compared to his predecessors, Jacob seemed a personality of no real stature, with a mediocre, or at least commonplace, destiny. Without his adventure and metamorphosis at Peniel, he would have gone through history as a melodramatic and moving figure, but one lacking majesty and a sense of tragedy, a stranger to the events and conflicts of which legends and epic poems are made.” – Elie Wiesel, *Messengers of God*.

Jacob’s sudden display of stubborn strength leads his opponent to take a more drastic step: *“he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.”* (32:25). The blow has a crippling effect and brings to struggle to its climactic moment in which the opponent insists that Jacob *“let me go, for the day is breaking.”* (32:26). But Jacob’s newly-found tenacity will not allow his opponent to get away so easily; Jacob insists that *“I will not let you go, unless you bless me.”* Jacob’s insistence that release be contingent upon blessing results in his opponent giving him a new name: *“You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.”* (32:28). The name “Israel” comes from the Hebrew word *sara*, which means “struggle.” In bestowing this new name upon Jacob, the identity of the opponent is also revealed; it was not with a human opponent nor an angel that Jacob wrestled, but with the very God of his ancestors. Jacob’s new name represents his strength and capacity for struggling well. God’s blessing makes Jacob ready for the encounter ahead, arming him with continuing blessings for the journey.

- “If Jacob had not struggled and prevailed, there would have been no new name ... Jacob can now face any foe, no matter how hostile. Jacob is about to embark on a life-and-death struggle, and he now knows that God the wrestler will be at his side.” – Fretheim.

God takes Jacob seriously enough to engage him in a struggle, but God is not willing to submit to Jacob’s final request: *“Please tell me your name.”* (32:29). God is concerned not to be revealed fully to Jacob, because to see God in the full light of day would have meant death to him (*“But you cannot see my face; for no one can see me and live.”* – Exodus 33:20). While God’s name is not revealed to Jacob, he does receive God’s blessing, the assurance that *“God is a God of blessing, a deity positively disposed toward Jacob.”* (Fretheim).

As Jacob’s previous encounter with God had resulted in his naming that place “Bethel” – the “house of God” – the newly-christened Israel names this place Peniel, which literally means “the face of God,” because *“I have*

*seen God fact to face, and yet my life is preserved.*" (32:30). Unlike at Bethel, no altar is built at Peniel. Jacob gives it this name not because of any later historical significance (although it is mentioned in 1 Kings 12:25: *"The Jeroboam built Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim, and resided there; he went out from there and built Peniel."*); he gives it this name because of the experience he had there, and how it became a defining moment in his life and in the lives of the people who would bear the name God gave him at this place: Israel.

- "At Peniel he was attacked, at Peniel he responded. Jacob, the nonviolent, the timorous, Jacob the weak, the resigned, the coward who always succeeded in avoiding confrontations, particularly violent ones, suddenly resisted the aggressor, plunged into the fight and returned blow for blow... It was a turning point for Jacob. He had a choice: to die before dying, or to take hold of himself and fight. And win... Israel is decidedly no longer the sentimental and disoriented Jacob we have known until now. He has learned to be tough and resolute. To defeat his foes and command the respect of the angels. Oh yes, he could contemplate Peniel and remember it with pride." – Wiesel.

This scene ends when *"the sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip."* (32:31). Jacob's injury signifies his success; he has struggled and prevailed. It also attests to God's graciousness, for Jacob has wrestled with God to the break of day, and yet his life is preserved. He leaves Peniel not only with a new name but a renewed responsibility: he is Israel, the father of a new nation that continues to bear his name into our present age. This once self-centered youth, the weakling and cheater who seemed to possess no strength of character, becomes the patriarch who will lead his family down to Egypt and even bless Pharaoh himself (*"Then Jacob blessed Pharaoh, and went out from the presence of Pharaoh."* – Genesis 47:10). Jacob's new name is more than merely a new identity; it brings with it a new responsibility that will change him forever: *"It is hard to recognize the egocentric youth in this careworn old man, who is rendered almost transparent by surrender to the demands of the blessing he once stole."* (Ellen Davis).

While Jacob's encounter with God at Peniel is in many ways a unique – and strange – story, there are many instances in which people have found themselves wrestling with God's call and the transformation that it demands of them. While prophets such as Isaiah eagerly responded to the call of the Lord (*"Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!'"* – Isaiah 6:8), others such as Jeremiah are wrestling with their own feelings of inadequacy to be the prophet of the Lord (*"Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy."* – Jeremiah 1:6). Mary of Nazareth wrestles with the meaning of the greeting of the Angel Gabriel when he suddenly appears before her (*"But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be."* – Luke 1:29), while her cousin Elizabeth wrestles with understanding why God has chosen her to be in this place at this moment in history (*"And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?"* – Luke 1:43). The life of Saul of Tarsus was transformed when he is wrestled to the ground on the road to Damascus and is confronted by the presence of Christ who commands him to *"get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."* (Acts 9:6). Like Jacob, Saul is given the name Paul that will identify him throughout his ministry as *"an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God"* (1 Corinthians 1:1), and a physical impediment that will constantly remind him of his own limitations and his dependence on God's grace:

- "Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.'" – 2 Corinthians 12:7-8.

Martin Luther's early life was one in which he was constantly wrestling with his sense of sinfulness and inadequacy in the presence of God. Even after he was ordained a priest, Luther continually wrestled with God's Word until one day his encounter with the Gospel transformed his life:

- “Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that ‘the just shall live by his faith.’ [Romans 1:17]. Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors to paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the ‘justice of God’ had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to be a gate to heaven.” – Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*.

It should not surprise us, then, that there may be moments in our lives when we find ourselves wrestling with God – wrestling with our understanding of who God is, wrestling with what it means to be a child of God, or wrestling with what our faith means in our daily lives. We may find ourselves wrestling with understand how a good and gracious God can allow so much hate and evil to exist in the world; or how a loving God can stand by while a person dear to us is dying; or why the church that bears the name of the Lord of Love can be such a hate-filled place. Wrestling with God is not a pleasant experience, and many people would understandably want to avoid such encounters or run away from these ordeals. But while occasions such as these are difficult, they can also be transformative. As Jacob walked away from Peniel limping but a changed person, no one who comes into God’s presence and wrestles with the challenges God places before us comes away from that experience the same. Our experiences of wrestling with God may result in some sacrifices and defeats, but as God’s encounter with Jacob at Jabbok was an occasion of grace that blessed Israel and all who bear this name, so will our encounters with God allow us to be changed from the persons we were previously to those who have been changed by being in the presence of the God who wrestles with us in order to transform us and bless us. As Jacob’s encounter with God transformed this former weakling into a tenacious fighter, we are also a people who hold onto God’s promises tenaciously: we hold onto God and God’s promises because we are a people who *“bear the great responsibility of being chosen, and blessed, by God.”* (Schiffendecker). As people who now bear the name of Christ, we cling tenaciously to that *“love that will not let me go, I rest my weary soul in thee; I give thee back the life I owe, that in thine oceans depth its flow may richer, fuller be.”* (George Matheson).

I know that Dave no longer plays football, and I’m not sure if he still listens to Kiss or watches professional wrestling. But I’m sure that he’s wrestled with some very real challenges in his life – as a husband and father, as a business owner, and as a person who is entering the seventh decade of his life. All of us have wrestled with many challenges that may appear to be overwhelming; yet no matter what ordeals may befall us or storms come upon us, God is with us throughout these ordeals and will even use that which seeks to destroy us as a means through which we might be strengthened and transformed. Like Jacob and Paul, we may walk away scarred and wounded, but in the sure and certain knowledge that *“the LORD of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our stronghold.”* (Psalm 46:7). Amen.