

My Jacob Story

Genesis 32:22-31

October 20, 2019

In his eighth-grade year, my middle brother Justin did something no one in the family ever pictured him doing: he joined the wrestling team. A couple times, I went to see home games, where I saw him thrown to the mat every time, but maybe I was just an unlucky charm for him. After breaking his wrist in one match, that was pretty much it for his wrestling career, but what's odd is that the boy who broke his wrist wasn't the biggest opponent he faced that year. In fact, his greatest opponent was one my whole family took on that year: God. See, later on in the school year, my grandmother was murdered while taking bread to the local senior center. I think I was the one who wrestled with God the most after that happened, because everyone in my family had a strong faith in God before and after. Up to that point, I attended church because my parents made me, not because I wanted to. In fact, I got bored out of my mind during the sermon every week and I couldn't comprehend why anyone in their right mind would want to be a pastor. Goes to show just how much of a sense of humor God has I suppose, but I digress. After she died, I can recall feeling very angry at God, arguing that this "God of Love" that was preached about so much in my home church couldn't possibly exist, because a God of Love would have stopped such immense pain from being inflicted on myself and my family.

As time went on, I continued to wrestle with God, first because I was angry at a God I can't recall believing in before that point, then because I came to believe God was punishing me. However, I could not recall or imagine what I possibly could have done to merit not only the murder but my experiences in middle school and high school. Nothing added up, which only made me angrier at a God I for some odd reason couldn't stop worshiping, almost as if some part of me knew that this would all make sense in the end and that this "God of Love" I keep hearing about would show himself to me.

As sad as this story is, I tell it to you not because I wish to have pity or sympathy. I tell you this story because, as I was reading the story for this week, I saw much of my own story embedded in the story of Jacob wrestling with his adversary, and because I believe all of you have had at least one moment in time, however long and for whatever reason, where you too wrestled with God. Maybe it was over the death of a loved one or the loss of a job. Maybe it was for a day or maybe it was for a year. The why and the how long don't matter, especially when you consider the why and the how long for Jacob.

Although we are not told this in the story, Jacob is on his way to meet his brother Esau, from whom he stole the rights of "first born." Fearing for his life, we'll recall Jacob ran away, never apologizing for his wrongdoing and abandoning the family and land he now had claim over. This all happened 20+ years prior to where we are now. So, for at least 20 years, he has wrestled with God over what will happen when Esau sees him again, whether Esau will forgive him, whether he should turn around, etc. 20 years of fearing for his life. 20 years for Esau to possibly hold a grudge. 20 years of running to avoid his potential fate. 20 years is a long time to carry such a burden on one's soul, but yet, Jacob has done just that.

Then, as he's on his way to meet Esau and potentially be killed, should Esau harbor a grudge, he wrestles with another being. Some interpretations say that this was just an angel. Some interpretations say that this was God in the flesh, hence the reason Jacob names it Peniel, because he saw the face of God (something we as humans are physically unable to do) and lived. Regardless of which being you choose to make the opponent, no one would think that Jacob would win, especially given that the wrestling match supposedly went the whole night. Standard wrestling matches are about a minute. Even "professional wrestling" matches don't last more than 30 minutes. So, for Jacob to wrestle with a divine being for many hours, the physical possibility of him winning seems sharply stacked against him.

As the morning arrives, he won't let the opponent go until he has been given a blessing, almost as if he needs some line of protection from his brother. So, this divine being blesses him, telling him his name is now Israel because of his success in striving against both God and humans alike. We're given this image that Jacob's struggling against God that was a blessing in disguise, that it somehow prepared him for this moment and that this wrestling match was simply an outward expression of his internal struggle, leading to a final resolution. That resolution then led to Jacob being able to face his brother, because what's a mortal man in comparison to an angel, right?

This is not an isolated incident. As I said before, we all struggle with or wrestle God at some point in our lives. Granted, it's not a physical match like Jacob has here, but we all have those periods where we are trying to figure out how this fits into the plan of a loving God and how we move forward. As theologian Walter Brueggemann writes, "Israel is not formed by success or shrewdness or land, but by an assault from God. Perhaps it is grace, but not the kind usually imagined." As I wrestled with God, it couldn't have felt less like "grace," but in retrospect, the pain I endured for many years helped me to be more sensitive to the needs of those around me, to be more empathetic and to have the heart of a pastor. We all have our "Jacob story," our moment where we wrestle with God but are blessed in the end. So, I invite you to consider what your "Jacob story" is, and what you have gained from your wrestling with God.