

“In the Ring with God”  
Genesis 32:22-31

Pastor Liz Miller  
October 16, 2022

There once was a man who was caught between a rock and a hard place. The man was Jacob, and the rock was behind him, in the land of his father-in-law. His father-in-law had lied to Jacob, tricking him into 14 years of service and then 20 years, when it should have only been seven, and his father-in-law became *very* rich because of Jacob’s labor. Jacob grew angry and resentful at his father-in-law’s deceit so in the middle of the night he took his father-in-law’s two daughters, his grandchildren, his livestock and he fled.

His father-in-law pursued him, caught up after a few days and said, “WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU ARE DOING TAKING EVERYTHING THAT BELONGS TO ME?” The two men had words back and forth but eventually reached an agreement. As long as Jacob honored his father-in-law’s two daughters and cared for his grandchildren and tended to his livestock, he wouldn’t harm him. Jacob escapes punishment, but he can’t go back to where he came from. He is only safe so long as he steers clear of his father-in-law’s country.

And so, Jacob must turn away from the rock and face the hard place. The hard place lies ahead of him, in his ancestral home, where his twin brother Esau awaits him. Long ago, Jacob had tricked his twin brother, older than Jacob by a few minutes, out of his birthright and blessing from their father. Esau was furious with Jacob and had threatened to kill him - sending Jacob far from their home in hiding.

But now that Jacob had nowhere else to go, he is returning home. He sent apologies and gifts to Esau ahead of his arrival, hoping that would make for a warm welcome. The message that returned to him was, “Esau’s received your gifts and he is waiting for you...with four

hundred men at his side.” Jacob was terrified. He couldn’t turn back and he was afraid of what waited for him ahead when he would meet his brother the next day.

This is the moment today’s scene opens and we meet Jacob. It is nighttime. He has sent his family off to rest. He is alone. I picture him pacing around a campfire, trying to anticipate every possible response to his brother when they meet, wondering how he will protect his family and possessions from harm, worried that he is leading them all to their death or worse.

I imagine that in his fear and muttering, at some point Jacob cries out that timeless prayer of anyone who has found themselves between a rock and a hard place, the prayer that goes, “WHY GOD WHY? WHY IS THIS HAPPENING TO ME?” God, never out of hearing distance, responds to Jacob, “Are you really blaming this on me? You and me. Right now. Let’s do this.” And they wrestle. They wrestle the whole night until daybreak. Eventually God says, “Okay! Enough! Let me go!” But Jacob holds on and will not let go until God blesses him. Satisfied, their wrestling match ends. Jacob is left with a limp where he has been wounded and a blessing that ensures whatever he is about to face when he reunites with his brother, God will be by his side.

This is a story for anyone who has ever found themselves between a rock and a hard place. For those who cannot turn back to where they came from but are afraid of what the future holds for them. For anyone who has felt a lump and was waiting for a call back from the doctor to find out the test results, the statistical chance of recovery, the hard road through decisions and treatments and uncertainty ahead.

This is a story for anyone who has hit rock bottom in the form of booze or pills or whatever addictions left a trail of burned bridges behind you, and now that you have found the

courage to live one day at a time, you are not sure how to begin to repair the bridges or make amends or trust where this shaky new sobriety will lead you.

This is a story for anyone who has given everything they have to a relationship only to have reached the end of the road, a place where no amount of therapy will heal the wounds, a place of recognizing that peace and healing will only come through separation or divorce. There is no turning back the hands of time, no undoing the fissure that has come between these two people but in the relief of admitting all that out loud there is also the uncertainty and fear of what comes next. The dividing of beloved possessions and hard earned assets and the intricacies of a life built together. The negotiations and compromises in coparenting with new boundaries.

This is a story for anyone who has ever cried out, ‘Why God, why? Why is this happening to me?’ What we learn from Jacob is that when that prayer escapes our lips, God will be there with us. Not to placate us or shove down our emotions, not to make empty promises that it will all be okay when it so clearly is not okay, not to tell us that everything happens for a reason or it’s part of some grandmaster plan.

No, God will be there with us and will wrestle with us through the hardest, most fearful nights of our lives. Wrestling is a full bodied sport. There is holding and throwing, you are on your feet, you are down on the mat, you are up close and personal, wrapped around another being. There are different rules to wrestling styles around the world, different moves and holds that are allowed but no matter the form, wrestling is intimate. It requires close contact. It requires a certain level of vulnerability, of inviting someone into your space and trusting, hoping, that you will be strong enough to survive the encounter.

When I imagine Jacob wrestling with God, I imagine not just the physicality of it, but I imagine Jacob throwing every doubt he has ever had back at God. I imagine him calling into

question God's love, God's plan for Jacob's life, God's integrity as the Creator of earth and all that dwells within it. I imagine Jacob spewing anger and pain and unleashing all of the fear he has about facing his brother onto God. I imagine God receiving it, holding Jacob, releasing him to the ground and then turning to face him again - strong enough to handle whatever Jacob has to give, compassionate enough to know that Jacob has to get it out even if it takes all night long to do so.

Jacob's wrestling match with God is our reminder that we can turn to God with the fear we carry or the injustices we have faced or the uncertainty for our future and God will be right there with us. God will meet us where we are at, not asking us to put on a brave face or find a silver lining, but God will meet us in the ring, will wrestle with us until we are ready to face the hard place. Walk into the doctor's office. Go to the sober support group. To start the next chapter of our life alone. Whatever it is, God is strong enough to receive our fear, our doubts, our anger, and to wrestle with us until we are ready to face the next thing.

I wonder if it wasn't just *nice* that Jacob was able to wrestle with God until he was ready face his brother, but I wonder if, perhaps, he *needed* to wrestle with God in order to be ready to face his brother. I believe that in wrestling with God, wresting with our faith and our assumptions about what we believe in and calling into question everything we know to be true in our lives and in the world is actually an important part of preparing our bodies, our spirits, our hearts and minds, for the hard places. It is a practice that makes us honest with ourselves. That makes us get real with God. That strips down our surface level smiles to reveal what lies beneath. I believe that wrestling with God is a deeply faithful part of preparing ourselves to face the hard moments, the difficult seasons, the unfathomable experiences that occur in life. There is no avoiding these hardships. There is no skipping out on the pain. But when we are real about

what it does to us, when we are honest with God about the questions it raises, when we find places to release our fears - places that are strong enough to hold it for us - we go into those difficult seasons with a different perspective, spiritually prepared and grounded.

Jacob did not leave his wrestling match unscathed. He left with a limp. Which, to be honest, is as reassuring as knowing that I can turn to God with my doubts and fears and don't have to always put on a brave face. Jacob faced his fears, he survived a very difficult time in his life and he made it out with a limp.

Who among us doesn't bear evidence that we have seen some things? That we have been through it? Who among us doesn't have scars we can point to with gruesome stories, real and metaphorical, that detail where we've been and what we've survived. Jacob's limp does not make him less than or does not make him weak. It is evidence he can point to, a reminder of his wrestling match for sure, but also reminder of how when he bared his soul to God, he survived and he was blessed. His limp points to a life fully lived, fully faithful. His limp reminds me that on the days I look and feel a little worse for the wear, I'm doing something right. Our scars and our wounds are often evidence that we took risks and that we survived.

There once was a man caught between a rock and a hard place. In that place he wrestled with God, and God wrestled back. God hung in there with Jacob the whole night through. And God blessed him. So when on our long, dark nights of the soul, when we are wrestling with our deepest beliefs and our deepest fears, know that God will be with us too. God will hang in there until daybreak, and we too will be blessed. May it be so. Amen.