

Wrestling with God

**Sermon by Fred Joblin, August 3, 2008
St. Paul's United Church, Orillia**

Genesis 32:22-31

Jacob's life had been one of struggles, trickery, and fast getaways from trouble. From the beginning—right in the womb—he and his twin bother Esau struggled and wrestled with each other. He tricked both Esau and his father Isaac into getting the blessing always given to the eldest. He ran for his life when Esau, angry at being deceived, was going to kill him. He struggled to find his way in life after leaving home. He arranged a deal with his uncle to get the wife he wanted. He ran for his life again after prospering at his uncle's expense.

Now, 20 years after leaving his original home, God tells him to return. This is both an exciting, yet scary prospect, for he doesn't know if Esau will accept him or kill him. To appease his brother, he sends ahead a huge number of gifts: goats, rams, camels, cows, and donkeys. And now, rather than his cunning, he must rely on his brother and on God for how things turn out. He sends his family and all they have with them across a river to safety. Then he sits alone, by the banks of the river, to wait for dawn and the arrival of his brother, who he learns is coming with 400 men—hardly the look of a welcome committee!

It would be a long and anxious night.

We might interpret what happened next as a dream or vision, but in biblical times, it was considered not unusual for a human to literally fight with a god. Actually, the Genesis passage doesn't say he wrestled with God, as the assailant is unnamed, so there's an element of mystery here. Unusual things happen, with the wrestling occurring all through the night,... with the assailant appearing to be afraid of the dawn and desperate for Jacob to let go,... with Jacob holding on hard and demanding a blessing,... with the assailant asking Jacob's name and then renaming him Israel,... with Jacob asking the name of his assailant and not getting an answer—but instead, receiving the blessing he asked for.

The clear implication now is that God, or a messenger from God, has been his assailant, as Jacob, now "Israel," declares that he has seen the face of God—something that in Hebrew understanding would result in instant death—and yet lived.

What a strange and wonderful story, full of meaty things to question and ponder!

Perhaps the first thing we can say in trying to interpret the story and find meaning in it for our time, is to recognize that in all moments of life, but particularly the difficult, painful, and challenging times, God is with us. For this is the promise God gave Jacob long ago when he left home and had the vision of the ladder climbing from earth to heaven.

You might take a moment to think of the most momentous or challenging times in your life, and reflect on how God was present with you then, or is with you right now.

Perhaps you experience God's presence as comfort when you are grieving. Or as support when you feel alone or in need of uplifting. Or as protection when you feel attacked or criticized or let down. Or as mystery, when you are gazing at a flower, or the stars, or a child's eyes, or when a miracle happens in your life. Or as a guiding spirit as you go through daily living, doing your best to be loving. Or as inspiration in moments of prayer or while reading. Or as a nudge when you are deciding what to buy, or what to eat, or what to give. Or in people who are there for you in all these times. Or in your own inner sense that blessings will somehow emerge from an anxious and challenging time.

Jacob is certainly in an anxious and challenging situation. What's different this time is that he experiences God in a very new way: as an adversary with whom he wrestles and demands—and receives—a blessing.

Thinking of God as an adversary, as a presence with whom we wrestle, and from whom we demand a blessing, may be something new and unusual for us to consider, but that's what this passage invites us to do.

Questions arise right away of who and what are the adversaries in our lives? And can we see the presence of God in them? Perhaps an adversary is that one person we just can't stand to be around. Perhaps it's a boss or co-worker or friend who drives us nuts. Perhaps it's someone who always seems to be on our case with criticism or judgment. Perhaps it's someone who has hurt us, and we're still feeling resentful. Perhaps we are wrestling with inner issues, like things we have done wrong, or ways we have hurt others, or decisions we regret, or a lack of self-confidence, or dreams that remain unfulfilled, or something we, like Jacob, have run away from.

What blessings might we be wanting, even demanding, to wrestle from these situations? We may be wrestling with what to do or what to say in such situations, and how to find peace and reconciliation. We may be wrestling with what people have to teach us about ourselves, or what life lessons can be learned that might lead to a change of attitude or approach, or even a change in our life direction.

If so, then we are wrestling with God, because wrestling with God means we are seeking meaning and purpose in our lives. It means we are seeking the path in life that God would have us take—and often it is the road less travelled—of showing compassion for self and others, of doing what Jesus might do in this situation.

This wrestling requires pausing, perhaps well into the night, to be alone and to allow God's presence to be felt. It also requires tenacity—the kind of tenacity Jacob showed by wrestling all through the night and not letting go. He's not just praying and hoping God will take care of things; he's actively engaging with his situation and demanding a blessing.

I watched a movie this week called *The Big Fish*, about a son's desperate attempts to understand the truth about his dying father and so to find some peace in his relationship with him. The son is resentful and irritated at the endless exaggerated and fanciful stories his father tells, stories that appear to hide any truth and only serve as an attention-getting device. Only when the son becomes able to enter into the stories, see things from his father's perspective, and even tell a wild story himself, does he find the peace he seeks with his father.

It's the same for us. We need to enter the story, look at things with new eyes, and venture with passion as we wrestle to uncover truth.

In Jacob's case, he steps right into the challenge of the moment. He is different now, no longer trying to be the trickster, but sending gifts as an acknowledgement that he has wronged Esau and that he wants to make peace. He is no longer being deceptive, pretending to be Esau to steal his birthright; now when asked his name, he says who he really is, Jacob. He is no longer running away from his reality; he is preparing to face Esau head-on, whether that means reconciliation, or whether it means death.

So this might be the next thing we can say—along with knowing God is present with us at all times, and with seeing God in our adversatives—that sometimes, God is there to challenge and confront us with the realities in our lives, and with questions of who we are and where our lives are going next. This is especially so when our lives are in the balance, when something momentous is about to happen, when we are faced with our biggest life challenges.

Gail Sheehy in her book, *Understanding Men's Passages*, invites men to struggle with some very basic life questions, such as, "Why am I here? Where is the meaning? What parts of myself have been left out that I am now free to live out?" When we wrestle with these questions, we are wrestling with God, because wrestling with God means engaging in the kind of questions that really matter regarding the purpose and meaning of our lives. And when we do this work, we are inevitably led to new awareness, new life directions, and new passion to live a life that matters.

So I invite us to look at our lives as they are at this moment. What challenges are facing us? What realities do we need to acknowledge and address, particularly within ourselves? What kind of life purpose questions do we need to wrestle with?

Earlier, I described some general things we might be wrestling with. Now I will get specific. As I share a few specifics, you might be thinking of ones that apply to your life, and how today's passage speaks to them.

The first one I'd like to share with you is perhaps not as momentous, but one that goes on week by week here at St. Paul's in preparing worship services. Choosing a scripture passage of focus is the first challenge. The next challenge is choosing what the sermon focus will be in order to weave all the other parts of the service around that. Next comes the wrestling with *Voices United*, choosing hymns that suit the focus. This is far more arduous than you might imagine. A line of a hymn will jump to mind, like for today, *Here, O My Lord, I See You Face to Face*, and I'll look it up hopefully, only to find it unsuitable, since it's a communion hymn and is passive rather than active in its tone. I'll check out ones suggested in worship resources, like *Gathering*, and *Seasons of the Spirit*, and the back of the hymnbook, and find ones with overly heavy or questionable theology, or ones with only a half line that suits the theme, or ones with a lifeless tune, or ones that are close but just aren't it. In the process, suitable ones will finally emerge, and then the question becomes where to place them, and how many verses to include. A wrestling match it is, indeed!

Then there's the writing of the sermon, which has its own moments of flow and of writer's block, of frustration and inspiration, of editing and honing, of wondering if what I end up with is

worthy of the responsibility and privilege it is to preach, and contains something that will resonate in someone's heart. Delivering the sermon is actually the easy part!

Another area of wrestling for me at the moment is my future. Now that I know there is a time limit to my being on staff here, I'm in the place of wondering what new adventure is waiting. Like Jacob, I need to be active in this search, asking, where is the spirit leading me? What life purpose have I yet to fulfill? What has this experience been preparing me for? What talents and gifts are yet to be fully used and followed? What does God want me to do next?

Something I've learned over the years, after being in this situation many times before, is that I can trust the process. There is nothing to fear. I can trust that new blessings will emerge and that whatever is next will be wonderful, just as I hope you will be able to trust the process here that is unfolding for Monica's coming in February to be wonderful and just what is needed for the vision of St. Paul's to move forward in new and exciting ways.

I also look back at previous transitions and note the blessings that came with them—blessings I couldn't possibly have predicted beforehand. I recall, for example, the time Kathie, Ted, and I decided to sell our home outside Parry Sound, and buy some property and a business with some friends. We ended up having to sell the property and close the business, which failed. As challenging a time as that was, unexpected blessings came in life lessons, and particularly in being able to be there with our friends when one of them died of cancer. The changes in our lives that followed also led to our moving to Orillia, which in turn led to all the blessings of our time here St. Paul's.

Our Social Services team here at St. Paul's is strongly committed to providing emergency and ongoing support to those people in need in our community. The intention is to provide a hand-up rather than a hand-out, so that we help people get back on their feet, become more able to move forward in their lives, and become able to give a helping hand to others in turn. We wrestle frequently, though, with situations where we don't know how genuine the need is, or if what we're doing is really helping or not, or if we're maybe being taken advantage of. We trust the Spirit to lead us in determining what and how much to give and how often. We appreciate your trust as we wrestle with the best thing to do.

I'd like to share a couple of other examples that have recently come to my attention of wrestling with significant life issues.

One is described in a book that Craig Maltby and his wife Christine loaned me called *Schools with Spirit* in which various authors describe their attempts to bring a spiritual approach to their teaching, in which teachers and students together engage with issues such as honouring their inner soul journeys, and integrating spiritual issues into the curriculum. Blessings upon all teachers and students embarking on this challenging quest!

Another example is a prayer group that has met weekly on Parliament Hill for several decades. People who come are invited to leave their political affiliation at the door and bring their spiritual journeying with them as they wrestle with personal issues and how to bring a spiritual approach of care and compassion to the work they do and the decisions they make. Lifelong bonds of friendship have resulted that go beyond political boundaries.

I leave you to discern how the Spirit is leading you as you sit, like Jacob, in the night, wrestling with God to find meaning and purpose in your life in the midst of your life challenges.

In most stories, there is one major climax that resolves the drama. In our Jacob story, though, I see several climaxes.

One is that Jacob is renamed “Israel,” which is actually ambiguous in its meaning, but one meaning is “the one who has struggled with God.” A name change represents a change in identity, and in this case, Jacob, as the father of the people of Israel, becomes a symbol of the identity of the Hebrew people, and Christian people in turn, and of all the struggling and wrestling they will have from then till now, in being a servant people. No one seeks out suffering, but it appears to paradoxically be part of the human journey that this is how we grow, how we learn, how we become wise, how we become more able to show Christ-like compassion.

Another climax in the story is the blessing Jacob wrestles from God that comes with a price: a wound that he will carry with him for the rest of his days. Some of life’s blessings are freely given: our worth, unconditional love, freedom to live our own lives. But others, like this one, are earned through persistence, prayer, and spiritual wrestling, leaving us wounded from our sufferings, but wiser and stronger to live out our life purpose, free of fear.

Still another climax happens next, when Esau accepts Jacob’s gifts, although unwillingly, since he’s happy with what he has in life, and he accepts Jacob back into the family. Esau, the big, hairy, stupid oaf, becomes a hero who accepts and forgives.

Jacob now becomes the patriarch, the leader of his people. He will suffer many more wounds, including one of his daughters being raped, two of his sons committing incest, his beloved Rachael dying in childbirth, and his son Joseph being lost for the longest of times. But he will persevere and will live as one of God’s blessed ones, something that we inherit through him and through Jesus.

Of course, Jesus’ life is our primary example of a life full of wrestling with God to uncover his mission in life. He struggles with the temptations, with his disciples’ inability to grasp what he is saying and doing, with the religious authorities who try to trick and discredit him, and with God directly in the Garden of Gethsemane over whose will would be done, his or God’s. When he chooses God’s will, to stand firm in his passion for truth and love, he opens himself up to tremendous woundedness, but also to resurrection and new hope and new life for us.

As we wrestle with our adversaries, both outside and within ourselves, and with God’s meaning and purpose for our lives, may we be sure, not only of God’s presence at all times, but also of the blessings and new life that will ultimately come when we trust and live in the Spirit. May it be so in our lives, and in the lives of all God’s people. Amen.