

WRESTLING IN THE NIGHT
Genesis 32:22-31
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How do you sleep the night before a test, or a big race, or a final presentation to a client? Do you go to bed feeling ready and prepared, set your alarm for a reasonable hour, turn out the lights and turn off your brain? Do you cram until you can't stay awake any more, and then fall exhausted into a pile, waking up just in time to run to the lecture hall or the track or the boardroom, gulping a cup of coffee as you go? Do you go to bed, but find yourself waking up in a cold sweat imagining yourself showing up and not recognizing any of the words on the page, or coming in dead last?

For preachers, the dream involves finding themselves standing naked in front of their congregation, or forgetting all of their notes, or trying to speak and having nothing come out of their mouths. Hopefully none of these will happen to me today, and if any of them do, you will have the grace to reassure me that it's ok anyway. I can assure you that I have had all of those dreams at one time or another. Maybe you have too.

Jacob is preparing for a test. The son of Isaac is no stranger to conflict. It began when he was born, as he came out of his mother's womb grasping the heel of his brother Esau, the firstborn. Thus he was given his name, meaning "heel" or "cheater" in Hebrew. And he has lived up to that name. He stole his father's blessing, meant for firstborn Esau, and then ran away from Esau's wrath. He was able to marry his wife, Rachel, only after serving as her father Laban's slave for seven years. He gets back at Laban, though, and makes a fortune from the gift of stock that Laban gives to him. But then he has to run again, away from his father-in-law.

And now he is in trouble. He has heard that Esau is on his way to meet him. Esau, the brother who deserved the birthright. Esau, the other brother, the one who has tried to do the right thing but somehow has always lost to Jacob. Esau is coming back, and he is bringing 400 men with him.

To Jacob, this can only mean one thing. Esau is going to fight back. Esau is going to get back at Jacob for all of the things he has done wrong. There is no way anything good is going to come out of this for Jacob. No way he can pass this test. No way he can win this time.

Jacob is sure Esau is going to kill him. So, to prepare for his last day on earth, he sends away his wives and children. He even sends away his tents and his livestock. Everything he has gained as a result of his conniving and tricks, everything he has gained from his theiving and fighting, he sends across the river. Completely alone, with no protection from what might come, he lies down to sleep.

Stripped of all of the reminders of his accomplishments, faced perhaps for the first time with the realization of how what he has done has affected his brother, Jacob sleeps. And then he dreams.

Jacob's dream is not a dream of failure. His dream isn't a dream of 400 men coming at him with the single minded intention of killing him. His dream doesn't seem to have anything to do with what is going to happen the next day. Or maybe it does.

In Jacob's dream, he is met by a stranger. A stranger who comes at Jacob and wrestles with him for hours. Finally Jacob has met his match. He can't seem to win this time. But that doesn't stop him from trying. He gives this battle, just like all the others he has fought, everything he has. The stranger strikes Jacob on the hip, putting his hip out of joint. But still Jacob doesn't give up. He seems to realize that this battle is about more than passing a test. This match is about more than winning.

On the mission trip this week, I talked with Mike Heard about wrestling. Mike wrestled for Cleveland Heights High, and he filled me in on some things. There are several types of wrestling these days, with different sets of rules for each one. For the type called "Greco" wrestling, you are not allowed to touch your opponent below the torso. If Greco wrestling is a descendent form of the wrestling of Jacob's day, it would appear Jacob's opponent has broken the rules. But finally, the man seems to be ready for the wrestling match to end. Daybreak is coming. But Jacob isn't ready to give up. He wants one more thing from the man. He wants a blessing.

Why would Jacob want a blessing from a man he has fought with all night long? Isn't a blessing what got him in trouble in the first place? Stealing his father's blessing from his brother is why he is out here, waiting for what he is sure will be his final battle, alone and restless and maybe even scared.

Or maybe a real blessing is all he has ever wanted. A blessing he really deserves. A blessing meant for him, and for him alone, one he doesn't have to trick his way into. The man who has wrestled Jacob all night has seen Jacob, the real Jacob. Not the man with all those trappings, the slaves and livestock and all that had come as a result of tricks and conniving. But the man as he is, who he is, stripped of everything except his relationship with God.

What would it look like for you to stand before God without everything that the world uses to define who you are? Without the letters in front of or behind your name that represent the degrees you have earned or the board exams you have passed? Without the car that you drive or the t-shirts you wear with your favorite sports teams?

It's been fun for me to come here and meet a whole bunch of new people all at once. I've not been shy about proclaiming that I am a Red Sox fan, and that I love to watch baseball. You don't need to know me for long to realize I love to play soccer with a bunch of my woman friends every Saturday morning and that I have been getting back into long distance running. There is an MS and an MDiv behind my name on my nameplate to let you know that I do have a degree in ministry that helps me do my job here, and another degree in engineering that helped me figure out the angles and measurements for the wheelchair ramp we built this week, with a lot of help from Matt Hercheck and Tom Sperl and Jim Leonard. Maybe we share some of those things in common – an engineering degree, or a love of sports, or even a Red Sox hat.

But what I hope we really share in common is one thing. It's one name, a name that really I am most humbled to accept and most concerned about living up to. It is the name of

follower of Christ. Because in the end, none of those other things really matters. For Jacob, really, what mattered in the night of wrestling was his own calling as follower of God, too.

After that long night of wrestling, Jacob gets his blessing. But he gets more than that. He gets a new name. No longer will he be called “cheater” or “heel”. Instead, he will be called Israel – meaning “He who strives with God.” The man who wrestles with God – and from that wrestling, gains a blessing. Of course, we know that Israel becomes more than just a new name for Jacob. Israel becomes the name of the nation of tribes fathered by Jacob, a name that has endured through this day.

And after receiving his blessing, Jacob comes to a realization. He has not been wrestling with a man at all, but with God Godself.

When morning finally comes, Jacob is ready to meet his brother. Rather than the conflict he expects, Esau comes to him in peace, and even more, in reconciliation. Esau, the one who has been wronged, comes to his brother with an embrace and with love.

This encounter with his brother becomes for the now Israel the beginning of a new life, with his new name. He no longer depends on trickery and deceit to solve his problems. He has learned how to hold his peace and be more patient. He recognizes God’s presence with him. He joins with Esau to return to Hebron to be with his father Isaac in his last days, and then to bury him, an idea that would have been unthinkable for Jacob, but is possible for Israel.

It seems like for Jacob, the test wasn’t really what happened with Esau, but his encounter in the night with God. And it was a test that he passed with flying colors. By refusing to give up or give in, by hanging on to God for dear life, Jacob has shown God what is really important to him. Not cattle, or land, or slaves, or even his beautiful Rachel. What is important to Jacob is his relationship with God.

Have you ever had an encounter with God that was so profound, it made you want the world to know about it? Have you ever had an encounter with God that changed your life so much that it seemed like who you were was now someone completely different?

It would be nice if our daily lives were filled with these encounters, and I believe they really are, but we don’t tend to notice them until something, like fearing our imminent death or having some time to pause and reflect, or going on a missions trip with 60 people, most of whom you have never met before, and working for four days in 90 degree sun, make us stop and think about who we are and how God has touched us.

My own call to ministry came in the night, in the dark sanctuary of Trinity United Methodist Church in Wilmette Illinois, after a time of struggle and wrestling and wondering. I had felt a call to the ordained ministry since high school, but my own anxieties and fear of public speaking had prevented me from answering the call. It was easier for me to go to the engineering school in the city twenty miles away then to think about what it might mean to be a pastor, easier for me to follow in my dad’s footsteps then to consider what God’s tugging on my heart might mean. But God didn’t stop engaging me, from leading me into doing youth ministry at my home church in college, to helping me find a church in our new hometown when my husband Corbin and I moved to Chicago. My friend Amy, the minister of Christian Education at that church, helped me to find my teaching voice in a Disciple class. And that same class surrounded me with love and prayer during some of the darkest days of my own life, as my husband and I struggled with infertility and pregnancy loss.

And then, in that darkened sanctuary on that cold February night, God came to me in a way I could not ignore. God didn’t tell me, that night, that the rest of my life was going to be

easy, or that I would be able to stop questioning my faith. God didn't tell me that if I went into the ministry I would lose my fear of preaching or my own struggles with what it means that bad things happen to good people over and over again in a world in which I am sure God is present and active.

But what I did know was this: God was in it with me. God would never leave me. And God would not stop engaging Godself with me. Even if it meant nights of wrestling and days of prayer. Even if it meant meeting my fears head on and not knowing if I was going to make it through the next test or the next class or the next medical treatment or the next presentation.

After that night in the sanctuary, I went to talk to my pastor, Phil Blackwell, and tell him that I wanted to go to seminary. I wish I could say Phil was enthusiastically supportive of my call, but I think he was a bit taken aback that the 30 year old engineer who never spoke up in Sunday school wanted to be a pastor. But he did say this: "Dianne, if this is right for you, you will find that doors will open for you when they are supposed to. You will be loved into your call"

And that is how it has been for me. Charles Wesley tells in the poem and hymn *Come Thou Traveler Unknown* of a God whose very nature and name is Love. That God loved us so much he became human to show us that love. Jesus entered the struggle with us, just as God did with Jacob that night, encountering us at our most vulnerable and intimate.

In Jesus, God is the love that will never let us go. This is the good news. In our darkest nights, in our most fearful hours, God is with us. God knows us as we really are, without all of our external trappings. And God loves us as we are, and as God knows we can become. Thanks be to God for being a God who meets us at our most vulnerable and loves us into being who God knows we can be. Thanks be to God for showing us that love through Jesus.

Thanks be to God, we can all ace the test, through God's grace and love

Amen.