

“Wrestling God”

“And Jacob was left alone.” Our most painful times in life are when we sense we have been left alone. Dinner is not the same without loved ones. Even a thrilling roller coaster seems terrifying with no one to hold onto and scream with.

This particular isolation we have been going through this year is unique. The devastation of our period of sequestered isolation will probably produce long term effects on our mental health and our sense of social safety. Since COVID-19 set upon us, we have encountered many dimensions of isolations. Most cruelly, those with loved ones in the hospital have been unable to visit those they love.

In high school I was in the marching band. We began practice in July, five days a week. The summer before my sophomore year, I had an incident of loneliness. The practice ended about 3:30 in the afternoon. I did not have my driver’s license yet, so one of my parents picked me up from the practice. School was not actually in session, so there was no one at the school to help me if something went wrong. This was 1976, well before cell phones.

One afternoon in late July, about this time of year, my parents did not show up to get me. By the time I realized this, everyone had left. I could not catch a ride with anyone else. I was alone, scared. This had not happened before. I knew the route to walk home but it was a long way. I was vulnerable. I could just sit around

or I could make my way home on my own. It would be a long way. By car, without much traffic, it took about 20 minutes. I figured it would take me at least two hours to walk. The advantages I had were I was young and I would have enough daylight. The problems were the July heat and much of the route was along a country road. I feared I could run into a dog or a wild animal.

I decided to start walking home. I learned that day just how long it takes to walk somewhere. I appreciated what cars do for us. I prayed to God that he would help me. But boy, was it lonely!

In our passage today from Genesis 32:22-31, we encounter Jacob again since his dream at Bethel. Much time has passed. In the story today he and his family and possessions are going into the Promised Land. He has already sent them over the Jabbok River. He has arranged for himself to have solitude. He is on a journey to meet his brother Esau for the first time since he stole his birthright. While alone, Jacob, like us, was probably asking many questions. How did I get here? What am I going to do? Jacob was full of anxiety. He feared Esau might harm or kill him. He was vulnerable, subject to attack

We too can feel alone and vulnerable. But, like Jacob, do we forget God's presence. Do we forget that God is there to help us?

During the night there is a surprise attack on Jacob. Is it an angel? What is it? There is dispute between theologians over whether this was an angel or God. It seems to clearly be God. After the struggle, Jacob says, "I have seen God face to face, and yet my life was spared." God took on human form and fought Jacob. And this was not a spirit. Jacob suffered actual damage to his thigh in the fight.

Do we debate with God? Do we fail to seek his help? Do we wallow in self-pity?

In this story God approaches Jacob and starts the struggle. He is testing Jacob. Jacob is part of God's plan of salvation. God wants to see what this guy is made of. Will this guy get tough or will he give up?

God wants to test our faith. Keep that in mind when you go through struggles. God may break into our life and have a new direction for our life for thought and action. Sometimes a struggle is best for those who doubt themselves. Struggles and conflict should not always be seen as negative.

They struggle all night. God cannot win, so he strikes Jacob in the hollow of the thigh. But Jacob is the ultimate negotiator. Jacob gets God to give him a blessing before he will grant God's release. He limps off but it is a sign of success.

We may struggle with God but in the end we get a blessing. God affirms that he is in an active relationship with Jacob. God confirms he is with us. He will remain in relationship with us during the difficult times.

Jacob is given confidence. If he can stay even with God, he can stay even with Esau. And he will need confidence throughout his life. Although he is successful in life, he later will encounter more difficulties. His favorite son Joseph will be sold off by his brothers and Jacob will be told he is dead. The family will go through great famine. But God stays with Jacob, and eventually the family makes its way to Egypt and Joseph saves them. God is always with him.

Your struggles with God can also give you blessings, confidence. They prepare you for what will happen. Conflict can produce good results. Think of the interaction between the Old Testament and the New Testament. As Paul writes in Romans 8, which we studied last week, as we struggle, all things work together for those who love the Lord. Nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Our struggles with God may happen because we are angry with God. Jacob may have been angry at God. For years he had feared Esau's revenge but God had done nothing about it. His greater complaint was how he had been tricked by his father-in-law. Jacob had worked seven years to be able to marry his love Rachel but

due to deception by his father-in-law he had instead married her sister Leah. Jacob then had to work another seven years for Rachel.

As I have told those in our grief support group, we may have a right to be angry at God. Most back away from this belief, thinking it is heresy to be angry at God. But we do have that right. Remember Jesus on the cross saying, “My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me.” (Matthew 27:46) There are things which have happened to some of us which gives us the right to be angry. But we need to resolve this anger. In our struggle with God, as the Psalmist writes in Psalm 22, we need to pray to God, “But you Lord, don’t be far away. You are my strength. Come quick and help me. Deliver me from the sword.”

In his struggle with Jacob, how does God struggle and why? Jacob’s insistence that he will not let this being go until he is blessed is not just a statement of determined faith. Remember who Jacob is---throughout his life he leveraged his power through relationships. But he is asked the question, “What is your name?” We never get away from this question of our own identity. It is not about who we are wrestling with as much as who we are. Remember that when Jacob was asked his name at the blessing of the birthright, when he deceived his father, he lied. The confession comes, and now he is ready to receive what is his honestly and what this being can produce.

Jacob is given a new name. Israel means “God strives.” Jacob will now be the head of a people. The name affirms Jacob’s strength. He can now move forward with what he needs to do. His character is not changed but he has a new identity.

There is no reciprocity here. The being does not answer Jacob’s request for his name. The being is still not fully known. As Rev. Gary Simpson writes, we do not need a God who sits on a throne and controls everything so much as we need a God willing to become intimately intertwined in our struggles for our change and the change of creation.

So, what happened to my struggle of loneliness? I walked down the road for about 45 minutes and then I saw the car my mother drove. She stopped and apologized. She had been canning grape jelly and had a cooking accident. A terrible mess was created. In the process she said she forgot all about coming to pick me up. Thank goodness I did not have to walk all the way home that day.

But it was not all that bad. On my faith journey with God, I had more confidence that God would be with me through my struggles. I knew I could rely on my parents even when they made mistakes. From my own identity standpoint, I saw myself more as an adult able to take care of my own problems.

What happens with Jacob? He met Esau who had four hundred men with him. Jacob expected a battle but Esau ran up to meet him, embraced him, fell to his feet and kissed him. They wept. They reconciled. Jacob's fears were not realized but he was ready to deal with them because of his struggle with God.

In closing, let us remember this thought. Whatever we struggle with in our times of isolation, we are ultimately struggling with what we believe about God. The place where we are both isolated and committed to our struggle is the place where we meet God. This encounter is an inward wrestling with who we are and where we are going. And when we come to this place, maybe it is time to let go--- not because God is weak, but because in wrestling with the mystery, we can see ourselves differently in the light of the new day. And so we leave the isolation, limping!