

Wrestling with Ourselves, Wrestling with God

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Rev. Jeff Mansfield



Jacob Wrestling with God, Jack Baumgartner

Preaching on:
Genesis 32:22–31

The story of Jacob wrestling with someone—we'll talk more about who he's wrestling with in a bit—it's one of the most iconic stories in all of scripture. There are lots of strange things that go on in the Bible. Sometimes we find ourselves scratching our heads, other times we just shrug our shoulders and move

on, but every once in a while you get a story like this—a story where even if it were the only story in the whole Bible that had survived to this day, it would be every bit as mysterious and powerful. It would still captivate our imaginations. This morning I'll talk a little bit about why this story works on us the way it does.

It all starts with this incongruous line: "Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak." If we were in grammar school and we turned in a sentence like that, our teacher would send it back to us probably with a big red circled question mark on it. And yet, even though we know that there's something wrong with the sentence, there is another part of us—a quieter part, a feeling part—that tells us that this apparently bad sentence is really a doorway into a sacred encounter. If you can accept this sentence, you will see something holy. If you can't accept this sentence, then maybe this passage is closed to you.

At least for now. Because, of course, you can't both be alone and be wrestling with someone all night long. You can't. You can't, that is, until it happens to you. And once it happens to you—once you've passed through the long, dark night of your soul—you'll never forget it, and this passage will come alive. But it requires three things. First, and quite easy to come by, it requires turmoil. Second, and more difficult, it requires solitude. And third, and this one is the toughest of all, it requires a willingness to allow the loving Father God we worship and adore to be more than just light and love—to be a God whose blessing can come running out of the dark night and tackle you to the ground.

Let's start with turmoil. Jesus taught us that "the first will be last, and the last will be first." Jesus asks us to reject the worldly desire to always be the best and have the most. Instead, Jesus asks us to follow the more meaningful way of the Kingdom of Heaven in which values look very different and the order of the world is turned on its head. But Jacob didn't know Jesus.

Jacob lived in a world not so different from the world we live in, where the people on the bottom of the pile had to fight their way to the top by any means necessary. So, as a second son, Jacob had to become a calculating opportunist and a devious liar to steal his older brother Esau's birthright and to steal his father's final blessing away from his brother. He believes that he's willing and able to handle the consequences of his choices. No problem, he says, I'll just get out of town. So, Jacob runs away from his mess for a long time.

Now he's headed back home with all the riches and the spoils of the driven, self-made, dominating man he's worked so hard to become—gold, livestock, slaves, wives, concubines, and children. But the only way to get back home is to first pass through Esau's lands. Now, this isn't just a geographic issue, it's a spiritual and psychological one. Once you've conquered the world, and you weary of all your exploits, and you want to go home to actually enjoy your life, you've got turn around and walk back the path you forged. If it's a path of peace, you'll have an easier journey. If it's a war path you left behind you, you might not be able to overcome your own past. It's like karma. Whatever you have to face, you

have to face it. There's no other way home.

Jacob uses all the tools at his disposal to try to avoid this conflict with Esau—money and charm. He sends all sorts of gifts ahead of him to try to placate his brother. But he feels deep within himself that something is wrong. He fears for his life, he fears for the lives of his family. All these years, to get ahead, he's relied on deception and distance and hard work. But he's coming to a reckoning that he can't smooth talk his way out of, a conflict he can't sidestep. This moment is going to happen. It was always going to happen. And Jacob begins to realize that it's not just Esau that he needs to reconcile with—it's himself. The 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous recognize this reality. According to the steps, we must first make a "searching and fearless moral inventory *of ourselves*" (step 4) before we can make amends to the people we have harmed (step 8). Jacob was hoping to skip a step, but he's realizing that's impossible.

And so Jacob sends everyone on ahead of him, so that he's alone. There are some people who really don't like to be alone. Jacob has two wives, two concubines, 11 children, and lots of slaves. Maybe he didn't like to be alone. Many people who don't want to be alone are afraid (at least subconsciously) of this very scenario—that once they are alone, they'll realize that they're not really alone at all. And the one who confronts them may be angry at having been ignored for so long.

A good trickster can deceive the people around him. And while he's fooling others, he can even outwardly fool himself. But in true solitude, you can't fool yourself, you can't deceive yourself. You see yourself as you are, and you have to deal with yourself. This is why solitude can feel so intimidating. It's also why it should be a regular part of everyone's spiritual life. Ideally, you spend a little bit of time with yourself every day. Sitting on the train listening to a podcast doesn't really count. You really need to be alone and undistracted. Formulaic prayer or silent meditation are a great way to start.

Now that we're alone, the real mystery can begin: "Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak." Who is this man? Jacob asks for his name, but doesn't get an answer. You've already heard in everything that I've said so far a very modern, "psychologized" take on this story—Jacob is wrestling with himself. That answers the riddle of how he can be alone and wrestling with someone at the same time. You probably didn't need me to even spell that out for you. This is just the way we think now as moderns. Now, that's always been a dimension of the story. But to everyone who came before us, that dimension was best understood by saying that Jacob was wrestling with something *GREATER* than himself—an angel according to most Jewish interpretation, God according to most Christian interpretation. And this is, in fact, one of the reasons that the story so powerfully captures our modern imaginations—because it confronts us with this lost truth—that when you struggle with yourself, you are actually struggling with God. Or at the very least, who you are becoming in your life is greater than the sum total of who you are now, and can only be accomplished by some form of grace or blessing which is beyond you. You can wrestle with yourself. But in the end, if you prevail, if you are blessed and renamed and transformed into something more, that is not something

you won for yourself, that is not something that you did, that is utterly beyond you—that was some greater power than you. That was God.

In the end, Jacob's wrestling match illustrates our own struggles to reconcile with ourselves and with God. Though we may try to avoid it, there comes a point in life where we must face the turmoil we have made. In solitude, we're confronted with the truth of who we are, imperfections and all. And if we persist through that long night, we will find ourselves blessed and transformed by an encounter with the holy which is within us, but which is greater than us. Like Jacob, though we wrestle with ourselves, we do not wrestle alone. The Divine presence that dwells within us and redeems us, is the true source of our struggle and our victory. May we always have the courage to face the truth of our turmoil, to let God tackle us, and to emerge transformed.