

Wrestling with God

Genesis 32:22-31

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Have you ever wrestled with God? Why me, God? How dare you, God. I can't do this, God.

Most people of faith can usually tell you about a time they struggled with God, struggled with faith, struggled with walking the way of the cross.

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross talks about the stages of death and dying. Each of these can be described as a struggle with God. Finally, there's acceptance, but first there's a lot of struggle. She suggests dealing with the loss of a job, a divorce, diagnosis, or other grievous news might look a little like this.

There's denial; "O God, this can't be happening to me.

There's anger; "This isn't fair, O God. Why me?"

There's bargaining; "Let me get through this, O God, and I'll be a better man."

There's depression; "You have abandoned me, O God."

The peace of acceptance, she suggests, comes only after struggle—a *struggle with God*.

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I've been struggling about race relations a lot these days. I want to be part of the reformation that will help heal our nation. ("Reform" or "change" shouldn't be scary words to Presbyterians; our motto is 'the church reformed, always reforming.' We believe God's Spirit is always leading us to a better, truer place, calling us always to be a more faithful people.)

Like you, I've been wondering about how my world view is not the only world view. This was driven home to me (again) this week.

A black friend said that in high school he dated a white girl. It created tension between their families. The white father called the black father and said, "I don't like your son dating my daughter." The black father said, "I don't like your daughter dating my son."

The white father was afraid of being embarrassed.

The black father was afraid his son would end up getting murdered.

We cannot change what happened in the past, but we certainly can be informed by it. We *can* change how we lean into future. And for me, that's a struggle. I have to struggle with some of my ways of thinking. I have to remind myself that my way of thinking and doing aren't the only way, and maybe aren't the best way. I do a lot of talking; maybe I should listen more. We all wear blinders, and I have to ask myself, "What are my blinders blinding me to? What am I missing? Who am I missing? I have to remember that not everyone benefits from our social order the way I do as a white, middle aged (very handsome), Presbyterian, man.

This might not be a struggle for you, but it is for me. I want to be a better Christian and a better neighbor and I want to build a better world.

To the degree that I fight against the things that will lead to a closer, truer representation of the kin-dom of God, I am struggling against God.

The good news, is that God always wins that fight.

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I am reminded of Jonah. God commanded the prophet Jonah to go to Ninevah. He didn't want to. It didn't fit his plan for the world. Jonah didn't like Ninevites. So, Jonah went to Tarshish instead. We all know how that turned out. Jonah struggled with God in the belly of a whale before he finally did what God was calling him to do.

The story of Jacob's struggle with God takes different shape. Jacob wants a blessing from God. Jacob and God fight all night long, and by morning Jacob will still not let go. He needs a blessing. He needs peace. He needs a benediction. He needs God to say "all will be well with you."

God dislocates Jacobs hip and he blesses him. Jacob would feel the touch of that blessing his whole life.

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We might think wrestling with God is not appropriate. But it is. Jacob's example gives us permission. God certainly can handle it. We will grow in the struggle. We need not avoid our doubts and misgivings. We can argue with God; Job did. We can plead with God; Jesus did. We will grow closer to God in the struggle. We will become more human and more humane.

Have you ever struggled with God? Dare you struggle with God?

After our struggles with God, we might walk with limp like Jacob. But that limp doesn't so much remind us that we've been wounded . . . It reminds us that we've been blessed.

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Genesis 32:22-31

22The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. 23He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. 24Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. 25When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. 26Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." 27So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." 28Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." 29Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. 30So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." 31The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.

[i] After we survive some struggles with God, after we begin to trust that God won't forsake us, that God's "got our back", we begin to talk like, act like, and love like Jesus. Remember what Jesus said? "Not