

August 6, 2017/18th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Genesis 32:22-31; Matthew 14:13-21;

Rev. Joel M. Krueger

"Wrestling God"

Generally, I think many of us would agree that the nature of our relationship with God is a peaceful one. We may pray to God, seek God's presence in times of difficulty or trouble, ask for God's guidance, or worship and give God our heart-felt thanks. But it is a rare occasion that we, like Jacob in our passage today, actually come face to face with God in a *combative* way.

In the Genesis passage, Jacob's life is in turmoil. He had left his home some twenty years before, after tricking his brother Esau out of his birthright, and deceiving his blind father Isaac to obtain the family blessing. All of this, only to gain his brother's threat to kill him. And so, at the urging of his mother, Jacob packs up and leaves for Haran, for his Uncle Laban's home, where he would work for 7 years to marry the girl of his dreams, be tricked into marrying a different daughter, Leah, and then work another 7 years for the daughter he really wanted, Rachel. On the way he would dream of a ladder ascending to heaven and receive the promise of God's covenant, given to Abraham. And during his time with Uncle Laban, he would become very wealthy, have many children, but ultimately gain the ire of Laban and his sons and be forced to leave, for fear of his life.

So, as he stood at the river Jabbok, having sent all of his company, his wives and children, the flocks and herds of livestock, the servants and shepherds and all that he owned, on to the other side, he remained alone. Alone with his *guilt* about the way he treated his father and his brother so many years before. Guilt about the way he gained his fortune at the expense of his uncle. Alone with the *fear* of what his brother might want to do to him now. Alone with the *hope* that God's Covenant promise, passed on to him through his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac, would somehow protect him and still come to fruition through him.

We can imagine his being in turmoil. His head spinning, his nerves on edge, his stomach roiling. That night, comes a man to with wrestle him. Is it his conscience? Is it an angel of God? Is it the Devil? For Jacob, it will later be understood as the *face of God* which he encounters that night. And for him, it is not merely his imagination, it is not a dream, it is a physical wrestling in which he engages God! For he comes out of it with a real, physical disability. His hip is put out of joint and he rises in the morning with a limp. But it is a disability which he will see, not as a sign of loss nor defeat, not as a curse, but as a badge of courage. For he has *striven with God, as well as with men*, and thus has been given a new name, "*Israel*", the sign of his blessing.

Jacob engaged in a physical striving with God, and came away with a spiritual blessing. He became a new man, confident and blessed, with a new name, and a new insight as to who he was. He also came away with a new understanding of the one with whom he wrestled that night. His God was one who would wrestle with him, would challenge him, would not let him suffer his own uncertainties, his own failings, his own guilt and remorse for the life he had lived. In his struggle, he came to know his God, not only as the one who made and kept Covenant promises, but as one whose nature is to know us, to stay and remain with us in our deepest, darkest nights, who strives with us in our own struggles, and who ultimately blesses us into life made new and abundant, regardless of our past.

Jacob is not the only one who has ever wrestled with God. Many of the most faithful people throughout the history of the church have experienced times of struggling with their faith, with understanding and knowing who God really is.

The great Protestant Reformer, Martin Luther, viewed God as a wrathful Judge and Ruler. Luther saw himself as a wretched sinner, undeserving of God's forgiveness and mercy. He wrestled with the idea that God's righteousness could only be received by earning it, by living a faithful and devout life. But he found himself constantly failing to live God's law and not achieving the righteousness that God demanded. Yet his yearning was to be the friend of God and for God to be his friend. Around the year 1512, 5 years before he would nail the 95 theses on the Wittenburg Cathedral door, Luther experienced what is called his "Tower discovery." There in his study, he struggled with the words of Romans 1:17, *'For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written: "He who through faith is righteous shall live."*' He would come to the conclusion, that it is not by works of the law, not by trying to earn God's favor that one was justified, but rather through faith in the work and death of Christ, gained in the knowledge of God's grace, that one is made righteous. He would not call it a mystical experience, but it changed his life, made him feel that he had been *"born again"*, and led him to become the man that would forever change the church and the world.

Mother Teresa, the founder of the Missionaries of Charity, who tirelessly cared for the poor of Calcutta's slums, and known to many as a saint, struggled herself with her faith and a knowledge and uncertainty about her God. At one point she wrote, *"In my heart there is no faith. I want God with all the powers of my soul, and yet between us there is this terrible separation."* (*"Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the 'Saint of Calcutta'"*). Throughout much of her life she experienced the "dark night of the soul", a sense of estrangement from God. Yet she continued to work and minister and to give her life for others.

Charles Wesley, the brother of John Wesley, who together began the Methodist Church, was a great writer of hymns, writing nearly 9,000 poems and hymns, including many still loved and sung today, such as, "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing," "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," and "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today." Charles early on wrestled with his own faith. Even though he had studied at Oxford and had traveled as a missionary with his brother to Georgia, in the New World, he still had great uncertainties about the nature of his God. On May 21st, 1738, he had what he called a conversion experience. After spending some time with a young Moravian, Peter Bohler, who taught him and John about Evangelical Christianity and of having a personal relationship with Christ, he came to know in his heart, an assurance of God's love for him. In a few moments we will sing one of his hymns, one that is not well known, but was said to be his favorite. Written in 1742, it is based on the story of Jacob wrestling with God and was first entitled, *"Wrestling Jacob."*

In our gospel reading, Jesus himself is in turmoil. He has just heard news of the death of John the Baptist, the man who shared his work and vision of God's kingdom, the man who before all others, seemed to recognize who Jesus was. It must have been a devastating and unsettling loss for him. And it certainly reminded him of the cost of proclaiming the gospel. So, when Jesus sought to find a place by himself, where he could go and pray, to be alone with his grief, we are not told that he would wrestle with God. But he had already had a wrestling match at the start of his ministry, in which he proclaimed, *"Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."* (Matt. 4:4) So when the crowds wouldn't leave

him, he did not respond by becoming angry and resentful of these people who continued to ask so much of him. Nor did he choose to ignore or deny their presence and their needs. Rather, in his time of despair and grief, he looked upon *their* need and responded by blessing and breaking and sharing the bread that would feed the thousands gathered there. He responded with *compassion* because this was the nature of the God he knew. And if God was *compassion and love*, then his life must also consist of that same *compassion and love*.

We may not wrestle with God very often, but we should not be afraid to do so. For it is in wrestling with God that we come to understand our yearnings and our fears. We come to know better who we are, as well as who our God is. And we need not be afraid that God will take offense at our doubts, our questions, or our challenges. No, in fact, I believe God relishes our challenges and our questions. God desires our engagement. God yearns to be known by us.

So, whether we are facing some uncertainties about our lives or our faith, or whether we are in the midst of our own dark night, we can be assured that the nature of our God is *love*, and that through that *love*, by living the *compassion of Christ*, we can know the *blessing* of God's *peace* and become the people that God is calling us to be. Amen.