

Douglas A. Hicks
First Presbyterian Church, Covington, GA
October 20, 2019

“Grappling with God”
Genesis 32:22-31

Prayer: Lord, open our hearts and minds so that as your scriptures are read and your word is proclaimed, we might hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

32:22 The same night, Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok.

32:23 He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had.

32:24 Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.

32:25 When 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.

32:26 Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."

32:27 So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob."

32:28 Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed."

32:29 Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him.

32:30 So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."

32:31 The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.###

It's an image of struggle, of intense effort, of enduring pain and, often, deep disappointment. Perhaps you think I'm talking about being a sports fan in Atlanta. Instead, our topic today is Grappling with God. For millennia, this sports-related image of wrestling—with God, other people, and ourselves—has helped describe a deep and rich spirituality.

Jacob is at the center of today's story. He grapples with God in nearly every chapter of his Genesis life. From before he is born until he is an old man, he fights members of his family. He wrestles with himself, too. In our story near the river Jabbok, his contest is an all-night grudge match against an unnamed opponent.

Jacob's feuding with his family begins before he and his twin brother Esau are even born. In the womb, Esau and Jacob battle. This is truly the mother of all sibling rivalries. At the moment of childbirth, we learn that Esau emerges first, but Jacob refuses to grant him a clean victory. He follows Esau into the world, gripping Esau's foot with his hand. In Hebrew, the name Jacob means "he takes by the heel." Jacob is no saint; he is a grappler.

The combat continues from there. We learn that the whole family is split down the middle. Genesis simply states that their father "Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game, but Rebekah loved Jacob." (25:28) Rebekah helps Jacob to trick his brother out of his birthright as the firstborn. Sometimes wrestling

takes not a physical form, but trickery and deception. This time it is trading Esau's inheritance for a bowl of porridge. Jacob is good at all of it!

We ask, What kind of a person is Jacob who would dupe his brother out of his birthright? What kind of person? Here, the Genesis account is clear: Jacob is a *human* person. He is just like you and me—and we are like him.

There is no moralizing here—and Jacob is not lifted up as an ideal upstanding character whom we should follow. The Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner has said that even preachers must be honest about this: We cannot draw a simple moral lesson about the life of Jacob or many other biblical characters. We would like to say that God calls the righteous, and that those who live lives of compassion and sharing always come out on top. That is *not* a lesson found in Jacob's life. Today's lesson about wrestling in the night is far more ambiguous than that. Perhaps God is wrestling with Jacob because God's very self is struggling with what to do with Jacob.

As nightfall sets before Jacob will encounter God's angel, he is preparing himself to face not God but, instead, his brother Esau. Jacob fears retribution because he stole the birthright—especially when he learns that Esau is bringing 400 men with him to pay a visit. Jacob fears for his life—not from an unnamed man or angel in a dream, but from a man named Esau and his 400 soldiers. Fortunately for Jacob, and we are not told why, his older brother carries no grudge.

But perhaps God does? As scholar Walter Brueggemann of Columbia Theological Seminary points out, we see the darker side of a God who *wrestles* with his chosen one.

One thing is crystal clear: wrestling is no sport for the faint of heart. Growing up, I would watch my older brother Bob wrestle in high school. It was a brutal sport. Sweaty, confined practice rooms with cinder block walls and a lot of grunting and grimacing in pain. The pinnacle of my brother's career was supposed to have been the Midwest tournament. Bob was undefeated that year; he was one of the best in Indiana. Over two days, he wrestled his way into the tourney finals, where he would face the Ohio state champion, also undefeated. The gym was packed. The rounds lasted only a couple of minutes, but this one seemed to go all night. These champions of the 160-pound weight class were well matched. In the final seconds, Bob was down a point, and he tried a move—I don't know quite what it is, but it's called a whizzer—to turn the tide of the match. Then it happened. The whole gym, which had been whirring with yelling and cheering, went silent. We all heard the pop of my brother's shoulder jumping out of its socket. Bob was pinned three seconds later.

What happened with Jacob and the unnamed man at Jabbok that night in Genesis 32? An evenly paired wrestling match that lasted until sunrise. It was fierce. It was primitive. It was existential. Jacob had sent his family ahead and

was all alone, vulnerable to whatever this man, or angel, would throw at him. This had life and death significance. Jacob left injured, but also left having seen God face to face.

It all happened at night, and Jacob was alone in the darkness. There is a saying, which I use with my kids a lot, that nothing good happens after midnight. I say the same thing, come to think of it, to Dean Joe Moon! Joe's 3 a.m. phone call is not one I want to receive, because it would signify something bad for our students.

But it's not true that nothing good happens at night. There is a long biblical and theological tradition of the most profound encounters of our lives taking place when darkness comes; when the activity of the daytime ceases; when we allow ourselves to become still. Jacob's encounters with angels, representatives of God, happen in this darkness. The Psalms include images of crying out to the depths of our souls in the night to feel God's presence. One of the most poignant conversations of faith that Jesus has is with Nicodemus, who comes to Jesus at night to ask about his faith. And no story in scripture more vividly captures the grappling of God than the night of praying that Jesus does in the Garden of Gethsemane. If it be possible for this cup to pass me by, Jesus pleads with God; at that moment he would have preferred not to suffer and die.

A tradition of Christian spirituality has embraced the night and the profundity of prayer throughout the night. It is this willingness to engage in a deep spiritual life, with an openness to asking the big questions, that I'd like us to explore further this morning. This kind of spiritual reflection and exploration doesn't literally need to occur at night, but often it does.

Take for example, the Trappist monks who live nearby in Conyers in the Monastery of the Holy Spirit. As part of their daily routine, they wake up at 4 a.m. for their Vigil prayers. They are following a long Christian tradition of waking up deep in the night, as part of the monastic discipline, to invite God's presence to pervade and order their lives.

St. John of the Cross was a sixteenth-century Spanish monk, who wrote his most famous poem called the Dark Night of the Soul. In this mystical poem, it is only in the middle of the night that the true encounter with the divine will occur. He wrote in lyrical, even romantic tones, to describe the encounter that is possible with God when we venture during the quiet night.

This light guided me
More surely than the light of noonday
To the place where he
(well I knew who!) was awaiting me
-- A place where none appeared.

Oh, night that guided me,
Oh, night more lovely than the dawn,
Oh, night that joined

Beloved with lover,
Lover transformed in the Beloved!

Even for John of the Cross, the spiritual union with God, who is love itself, is about grappling with God. The story of Jacob wrestling with an angel is in the background in John's poem, as he is face to face with God in this verse:

With his gentle hand
He wounded my neck
And caused all my senses to be suspended.

Even this mystical encounter with God has a dimension of struggle, of never being the same after it happens.

We don't tend to speak about God in mystical language, or about encounters in the night, but the message about spiritual seeking, spiritual striving, is important for our life of faith.

I recently saw a cartoon that has two figures lying side-by-side in a field, at night. They are gazing up to the sky, and one says, I wonder what it means that we can see all these stars? The other replies, It means that someone stole our tent!

We have plenty of figurative tents that protect us from experiencing the night—and from grappling with God. So many ways for us to lose focus, to move from one text message to another text message to an email to a social media post. You see, distractions keep us from asking the big questions, from calming our hearts and minds to experience God.

The cultural critic Cornel West, drawing on Henry James, argues that we are living in a hotel civilization. In our hotel culture, we strive for convenience, comfort, and contentment—and other people largely do the work for us. But most to the point, West says that the lights are always on. With the lights on and activity all around us, we don't have to ask the big questions of life, and purpose, and God's presence. His point: We keep the lights on because we are afraid of what we might discover in the dark. Are we afraid of our own vulnerabilities? Of our pain? Of the joy we might discover in spiritual experience?

That's a vision of a lifetime of grappling with God. It requires an openness to questions, a willingness to slow down, and to watch out for God's presence. Make no mistake, the problem with grappling with God is that it's edgy, it's a little unsafe. Just ask Jacob, with his hip dislocated from its socket. Jacob survived the encounter with God, but it also cost him something.

If we want to take this harder path, we are called figuratively at least to turn the lights down, to quiet the daily distractions and scatteredness, and strive for God's presence. In the tradition of monastic spirituality, the Taizé community in France sings an important chant that goes, in Spanish, like this: "*De noche iremos, de noche; que para encontrar la Fuente; solo la sed nos alumbra.*" "We go by night, by night we go to find the source of life. Only thirst lights our way."

Will you go by night? Are you willing to grapple with the unnamed opponents whom you might encounter? Remember Jacob at the river Jabbok—was he wrestling an angel? What happened, exactly, that made him injure his hip? He never learned the name of his opponent, but he knew that he had encountered God face to face. We are called to this kind of spiritual life and practice. We don't know where, exactly, it will lead us, but we have assurance that God will be present with us. May it be so. Amen. ###