

The Most Amazing Thing
Genesis 32: 22-31
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32:22 The same night he 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 Penuel, limping because of his hip.

When I was younger, my brother Steve was obsessed with professional wrestling. He would save all his money so he could watch a special pay per view of Wrestlemania every year, and every Monday night he would tune in for hours (or at least it felt like hours) to see these grown men in elaborate costumes throw each other about a ring all for the glory of getting some fancy belt and a title.

I thought this was ridiculous, even as a little kid. I was concerned with the wellbeing of all the participants but my brother assured me that it was staged. Even though I couldn't see the point, I couldn't help but be drawn into the story lines, the rivalries, the choreography, and the drama.

When I learned about this scripture as a child, of Jacob wrestling with an angel, I couldn't help but apply all my aforementioned knowledge of what I thought wrestling looked like to the text. Was this wrestling like WWE wrestling? Body slams, dramatic jumping, good guys, bad guys? Rivalries?

Of course not. Professional wrestling of that sort is all staged. This scripture passage isn't. No choreography, no costumes. But there's something that this scripture, and "professional" (or even amateur) wrestling have in common. And that is endurance.

It takes a lot of endurance to wrestle. It's not a sprint, it's a marathon. And for Jacob to wrestle until daybreak, that's more than just a little endurance. That requires both endurance and tenacity, something you need if you're a wrestler, professional or otherwise.

If we read the whole of Genesis, Jacob might not be our favorite person at this point in the story. We've seen Jacob con, cheat, and steal to get what he wants. He ran off when tensions were at an all-time high. Jacob does nothing but get away with his bad behavior, or so it seems.

Another aspect that makes this story uncomfortable is Jacob wrestling with God. Many of us were raised with a piety that values submission and deference to authority. Or we were raised in such a way that we would never approach God in such a fashion. But another interesting bit of information is that God comes to Jacob disguised as a threat. In a fashion resembling good folklore storytelling, the writer does not initially tell us who this threat is, only that this stranger is a man, but they wrestle until daybreak, which is another literary device that tells us some transformative event is about to occur.

But why is God the antagonist here? Commentator Amy Merrill Willis posits, could God be tired of being the dispenser of divine "goodies" for Jacob? Is God fed up with Jacob's bad behavior? She also asks, "Is this a test of character or a test of faith?"

Whatever reasons for God coming to Jacob in the form of a threat, Jacob stands his ground and chooses to engage. He doesn't run, like he has before, he stays and fights. He doesn't opt for cunning evasion like before, it's just him and God. Indeed, Jacob has been fighting since birth. Even the words for "Jacob" and "wrestle" come across as a word-play in Hebrew.

And let's not forget here that fighting is intimate. You lock arms, you're embracing, you are often face-to-face. Jacob is getting up close and personal with God. Jacob is refusing to disengage, which in our Genesis story, is a turn of events for him.

And the struggle, friends, is what makes Jacob forever changed. That struggle is a turning point for our unlikely hero. Surviving this contact with God also gives him the strength to go and embrace his brother and tell him, For truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God—since you have received me with such favor."

It should be noted that God does not punish Jacob's aggressive, conflictive nature. God challenges and reshapes Jacob's character. God also defies molds here, God's not "the God that meets my needs" or the "angry, vengeful God," the boxes many of us can put God in. God is something else entirely.

I like what Debie Thomas' commentary says. She writes, "This is a God who ... invites our rigor, our persistence, our intensity, and our strength. This is a God who doesn't let go."

A God who doesn't let go. What does it mean to worship a God who doesn't let go?

About 10 years ago I became "God claustrophobic." This was about the time I was graduating from seminary. I remember a Celtic prayer talking about God's "inescapable community." That sounded absolutely horrendous...a community you couldn't escape? God's close, close presence started becoming a theme that I was noticing everywhere. Even "I sing the mighty power of God"'s last line, "...no place where we can flee but God is present there."

I don't know if it was my life stage, or some type of bad attitude, or just where I was at with my relationship with God, these words felt smothering. God's "closeness" felt smothering. I suppose I was wanting a different kind of God, or at least, a different kind of relationship with God.

In retrospect, I know what I was looking for, which was a God who would generally leave me alone except for when I was in need. I had this sort of casual deism where I could have a "God" experience sort of a la carte. I could pick up help when I needed it, love when I needed it, strength when I needed it. And I could leave the rest.

Subsisting on that sort of "God diet" is not a way to live a robust life of faith. You become malnourished. Your life starts seriously lacking in grace and mercy. And not only that, it's no way to be in relationship. We've all had people in our lives who are there only when we're in good spirits. Who are there only when they need something. Who are there only when times are bad, but not to help, only to help them feel better about their own life.

That's not a relationship. Any therapist worth their salt would tell you to find better people to be in relationship with! The kind of healthy relationships that you want have endurance. They have the ability to hold up under struggle. This endurance doesn't come only when things are going well, or when things are going poorly. Neither is this endurance meant to smother. Endurance stays with you. Endurance in a relationship is a reflection of love.

In this story, endurance is what matters. Jacob wrestles with God, so much so that God has to put Jacob's hip out of joint to curb some of his tenacity. So much so that God asks Jacob to let go. "Let me go, for the day is breaking." God is not abandoning Jacob. God, in a few verses, is about to bless Jacob, but Jacob doesn't let go. Not until he gets a blessing.

What does it mean to be a people who don't let go?. What does it mean to be a people so "after" God, so "in it" for the long haul that we wrestle until daybreak, and even then, don't let go until we demand to know what this is all about?

For Jacob, this was a blessing. But for us, what is it that we're struggling for? What is it that keeps us from letting "go" of God?

I have a lot of friends who let go of God a long time ago, and it's for completely valid reasons. I had a friend who had a very young nephew die, a nephew she loved like her own son. Lots of people in her church community talked about "God's will" and "God's plan," and as soon as that was part of her grief, she never set foot in a church again. People are scorned from the church for being who they are or for being reduced to an event or "thing" that has happened to them. Some of us may have experienced that, some of us will never experience that. I say this to emphasize that we all know folks who have let go and walked away, and their experiences are valid and not for us to criticize or judge. But we also want to celebrate the "hanging on."

In a world that can feel like it's going its own way, a way we are increasingly frightened about, we have stuck around. We have held on. We have not yet let go of God. But the question I have for us is, why? What is it that has kept you holding onto God for so long. I think if we were all to take a look at our life, we can all identify moments where we let go, or could have let go.

Psychotherapist Bob Beverly wrote in his e-zine this week, "You are an example to those around you. The tone of your life matters. Your enthusiasm helps, as does the underrated magic of never abandoning those you love. The experts are in it for the long haul. If it isn't the long haul, it's just kids play.

Perhaps endurance is really the most amazing thing."

Everything lately has seemed like such a struggle, such a fight. It's a fight to get anything done, it's a fight to keep our family going, it's a fight to make decisions about the school year, it's a fight to be safe and stay virus-free, maybe it's a fight to get out of bed in the morning. And even beyond this, there's more struggle happening. There's the struggle for racial equality, for getting our government and our people to acknowledge that black and brown lives matter. There's the struggle to keep ICE away from some of the most vulnerable folks in our community. There's the struggle to fight white supremacy, to fight off where it benefits us, where it's upheld, where it's seen as "the way things are." Individually and as a community, we are struggling.

And maybe endurance is really the most amazing thing.

Our struggles for equality, or normalcy, or to take our lives back...it's not about some flashy, showy battle with good people and bad people like that horrible wrestling I saw in my youth. It's about endurance, perseverance, and not letting go.

We worship a God who doesn't let go of us, a God who struggles with us. A God that doesn't come to us in a robe and a crown, but a God who comes to us in an unexpected way. Maybe even disguised as something that's up to no good.

And we, as a people, wrestle with God. Not for status, or for a better life, or for things to always go our way, but for a blessing. And acknowledgment. To be able to see God's face. And maybe that's our call, to see the face of God in our struggles. Whether that struggle is with ourselves, or someone else, or an addiction, with our wellness, or with our faith. Our struggle is a sign that we are in it. God wrestling back? A sign that God is in it. Neither are letting go.

The most amazing thing is endurance, both our endurance and the endurance God brings to each of our interactions with the Divine. And so we gather the strength to wrestle until daybreak. And then, and only then, can we see the face of God. With endurance, perseverance, and faith, we are blessed with the knowledge that we worship a God who will not let us go. Amen.