

“Wrestling with God”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Genesis 32: 22-32

Although I am an avid sports fan, I have to admit I’ve never been much of a fan of boxing. A generation ago, boxing had a much higher profile in our culture, as heavyweight fights would be shown on broadcast television. But today, with the advent of pay-per-view and so many other sports available to follow, boxing seems to have recessed from the American sports culture. And honestly, it’s never been very appealing to me to watch two men try to knock each other out with their fists.

But boxing, and even wrestling and fighting in general, is probably the most ancient of sports. From the time that God created humans, we have sought to resolve our differences not just with words, but with our hands. There is something instinctual in putting our hands up to protect ourselves, to strike at an attacker who we perceive to be a threat. As children, some of our earliest “fights” are with brothers and sisters or neighborhood bullies who we aren’t getting along with. Too often, words are simply not enough to settle differences between opposing sides.

Over the course of the last month, Lisa and I have chosen scriptures from the Book of Genesis, which detail the story of Abraham and his offspring – Isaac and Jacob. Two weeks ago, we heard the story of Jacob and his dream of a ladder extending into the heavens, and the promise that God would be by his side for all of Jacob’s life. Now, we hear of a very different experience for Jacob, one which appears to show Jacob wrestling with God, and forever marking him by that struggle with his Creator.

To set the context for our story today, Jacob is on his way to meet Esau, the brother whom he has tricked and deceived right from their birth. He has sent messengers ahead of him and his family to offer Esau a present, consisting of goats, ewes, camels, and cows. After so many years of deceit and trickery, Jacob was trying to appease his brother, so that his ways of the past might not destroy what future he and his brother had left.

But when Jacob heard from his messengers that Esau was coming to meet him with 400 men (32:6), he began to tremble. Indeed, he prayed to God, asking, “Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him” (32:11). Jacob pulled out all the stops in gathering his gift, and sent them on ahead along with his wives, children, and maidservants.

On the eve of the anticipated meeting with his brother Esau, all alone on the opposite side of the Jabbok, Jacob is confronted by a man. Jacob did not recognize this man because it was night. Jacob is already filled with much dread, anxiety, and nervousness about his meeting the next day with his brother Esau. And now, before he must face him, Jacob is confronted by an unknown man. Out of sheer instinct he wrestles against him, undoubtedly fueled by the questions which already consume his heart and mind.

How many times have we waited with trepidation for what we know the next day holds in store for us, only to have a rotten night's sleep or to be faced by an unexpected crisis? The night that Debbie's father died, I got the phone call from Debbie around 10:30 at night. The girls had already gone to bed, as they both had State Solo and Ensemble Competition the next day. I felt compelled to wake them up and tell them this heart-breaking news, and reassured them that if they did not want to go ahead with their music completion the next day they did not have to. But both of them did, on very little sleep and very low emotional energy. And we could not have been more proud of how they fought through a very emotional time for us all to do something which they - and their grandfather - dearly loved.

When such times occur, often our first reaction is like Jacob's, to instinctively fight against whatever we are faced with, so that we might overcome our obstacle. Although the text barely describes this encounter, Jacob and the man spend the entire night wrestling against one another. Once the man sees he cannot overcome Jacob, "he struck him on the hip socket," injuring Jacob but effectively ending the struggle. Why did the man have to strike Jacob on the hip? Because he realized that he was not going to defeat him, and he had to leave before daybreak. Those feelings of nervousness and fear of the coming day's encounter with Esau apparently fueled Jacob's strength and determination against this man to the point of victory, or at least a draw.

But the catch to this whole story is that we do know who that man is, and that is what makes this struggle so complicated. We only assume that man is God once we come to the end of the narrative, and Jacob is renamed by him. The impact of such an assumption is tremendous on how we picture God's involvement in humanity. Jacob did not seek out the man to wrestle with him; God sought Jacob out in the night. And the fact that the man "did not prevail against Jacob" does not sound like the all-powerful God who created the world, who caused the flood, who guided Abraham throughout his life and provided a son when all hope seemingly was lost. Although we often pass by it when we read this story, the fact remains that Jacob wrestled against God, "and he prevailed." Is it possible that God was actually defeated by one of his creatures? Can we even dare

to say that the God in whom we believe at one time was less in strength than that of a human?

Those questions may be raised by Jacob's encounter with God, but it is not nearly that simple. It is true, Jacob prevailed over God, but he also received an injury which marked him for the rest of his life. Jacob wanted two things after their encounter: the name of the man and his blessing. God grants the latter in renaming him Israel, a name whose root in Hebrew means "to persist, to exert oneself, to persevere." But God will not grant him his first request, for the name of God will not come until Moses receives it on Mount Sinai. God sought Jacob out, struggled with him, and could not prevail in the end. But God will not reveal everything to Jacob, retaining that measure of hiddenness which has always distinguished Yahweh from all other gods.

Instead of thinking that Jacob was wrestling against God, perhaps it is more helpful to view Jacob wrestling alongside God, beside God, with God. The point was not that Jacob defeated God, or was stronger than "the man," but that he came face to face with God and his life was preserved. God came to challenge Jacob, and through his blessing gave him strength and courage to meet his brother the next day. Indeed, instead of fearing for his life, Jacob was welcomed by Esau with open arms. Jacob is no longer - Israel has been born. And with that change God entrusts more power with Israel, a sign that they are covenant partners in the world, not adversaries.

Whenever we feel like we are wrestling against God, perhaps we should try a different perspective. When hurricanes and tornadoes and storms take innocent lives and cause devastating damage, we feel like God couldn't possibly be on our side. But instead of a God who punishes the world through disaster, what about a God who suffers along with us, when we lose crops, our homes, or friends and family? *A God who wrestles with us.*

Or when an illness won't go away, and we go to the doctor and undergo more tests, and it's discovered that cancer has invaded our body, we feel like God has punished us in some way. But instead of a God who randomly curses innocent people with debilitating disease, what about a God who struggles along with us, walking beside us through surgery and treatment and our emotional ups and downs? *A God who wrestles with us.*

Or when we as a community face crime and poverty, and then the tragedy of two police officers dying in our streets, we feel like God must not care anymore for our world. But instead of an indifferent God who has given up on us, what about a God who cares deeply for all, who is fighting for the least in our midst, who is working for peace and justice, and who yearns for a day when all God's children are whole? *A God who wrestles with us.*

As I said earlier, I'm not a fan of boxing or fighting. But last weekend, when our family went to Louisville for a brief getaway, we went to the Muhammed Ali Center. I may not be a fan of boxing, but I do have great admiration for Louisville's famous son, and for the convictions he lived out for racial equality. The center not only told the story of Ali's boxing career, but also the personal sacrifices he made in the civil rights era for African-Americans in this country, and the importance of others to continue wrestling with the world for justice and righteousness.

One of the powerful exhibits at the Ali Center was a timeline of civil rights events, and the use of video and audio clips and visual reminders of the racial divisions which were so prevalent at that time. A quote cut me to the core in that exhibit, as not only powerful in 1968, but also very relevant to our world in 2017. It is a quote that connects also to our life here in Indianapolis. It was said by Robert Kennedy on April 4, 1968, in downtown Indianapolis, the night when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated.

Senator Kennedy said that night: "What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence or lawlessness; but love and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or they be black" (Muhammed Ali Center exhibit, Louisville, Kentucky).

The struggles, the battles, the wrestling is real and will always be a part of life. But it is not a fight against God. God wrestles with us in our struggles, seeking reconciliation and justice and peace.

For as we go from this place, we are all marked by a limp. Just like our brother Jacob, we are marked as members of the covenant through the blessing God has bestowed on us. And when we face struggles of all shapes and sizes, we have confidence that our God will be there beside us wrestling, and in the end, we will prevail together.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.