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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
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Genesis 32: 22-31

“Wrestling with God”

The other night I caught a few minutes of Bill Maher being interviewed by Piers Morgan on CNN. I didn't watch too long because I'm not a big fan of Bill Maher. I don't like how he makes fun of religious people.

You might recall that a few years ago he produced a motion picture, *Religulous*, which poked fun and mocked all religions. *Christian Century Magazine* called it a “mockumentary” and found it amusing but ultimately silly. Maher found the most extreme, curious, and bizarre expressions of religion for his movie, resulting in (to use the Century's words) “Christians come off as buffoons, Muslims as ticking time bombs” (*Christian Century*, 18 November 2008). Maher, the *Century* review said, simply can't imagine that there are believers who think.

Granted, there is some truth to Maher's assumptions. Religion can be violent and is sometimes intolerant. Religion has been used to justify slavery and the oppression of women and children. Religion has opposed scientific inquiry and academic freedom and is used to oppose women's reproductive health and to deny basic human rights on the basis of gender orientation.

But we know that there are plenty of religious people who are not violent, intolerant, or oppressive. And we know something Bill Maher and other new atheists do not know: and that is that there are believers who can think and do think; who struggle mightily with their beliefs; who are not afraid to doubt; who do not swallow what they're taught hook, line and sinker; and who, just like Jacob, wrestle with God and what it means to believe in God.

Today's story about Jacob wrestling with God is one of those need to know Bible stories because it teaches us that it's OK to struggle with God. It's OK to have a “dark night of the soul”; it's OK; it doesn't mean you're bad or unfaithful; in fact, if anything, the story teaches us that struggling with God will result in a blessing.

Last week we heard the story of Jacob's birth and his subsequent stormy history with his brother Esau. It's putting it mildly to say that Esau and Jacob didn't get along. Jacob stole Esau's birthright, and a few years after that he cheated him out of their father's blessing. The birthright Esau shrugged off; but the blessing, not so much. After Jacob stole his blessing, Esau threatened to kill him.

Because of this, Jacob crosses the border and flees to his Uncle Laban's house. There, he works for seven years to marry Laban's daughter Rachel, but accidentally winds up marrying Rachel's sister Leah. So he works another seven years to get it right, thus ending up with two wives, many children and a lot of money. Jacob is rich.

But, once again, his success is due to his deception. He's been stealing Laban's sheep out from under him in what can best be described as a Biblical Ponzi scheme. But when he's accumulated so much money it's embarrassing, he decides it's time to leave again.

So while Laban is away, Jacob gathers everything he has and leaves in the middle of the night. Rachel even helps him by stealing her father's prized possessions.

So once again, he's fleeing, running away from his lies. He's in the wilderness. His eyes are peeled for his brother Esau, who's out there somewhere. Jacob's worried that the twenty year time span hasn't softened his brother's heart; that his brother still plans on killing him. So he gathers 400 soldiers, his wives and children and servants, and sends them on their way to meet Esau. Actually, he sends them in two groups to meet Esau, thinking that if one group gets ambushed by Esau, at least he won't lose everything. You gotta hand it to the guy, at least he's a consistent cheat and conniver. But Jacob is also a coward; when our story for today opens, he has stayed behind and left his wives and children and soldiers to fight Esau for him. He's all alone, guilty and terrified, waiting for dawn to break.

But in the night an intruder assaults, wrestles him until dawn, and wounds him in the thigh. The stranger won't divulge his name, but he does bless Jacob and give him a new name, Israel, and then leaves him to limp home to his reunion with Esau.

Jacob's story is as good as any modern day soap opera. It's also important because he's given the name Israel, meaning one who strives with God. He'll have 12 sons, the forefathers of the twelve tribes of Israel. One of his sons, Joseph, will become important for his coat of many colors. We'll hear his story next week. His other son Judah is also important because he's the great grandfather many times over of King David, who of course is critical to the lineage of Jesus.

While on a literal level this whole story is strange and fascinating to us, it is not that difficult to relate to when we plug in our own experiences, for who among us hasn't wrestled with God? We wrestle with God:

- every time the news tells of a teenager killed in a senseless accident, or a child abducted and murdered.
- when a baby is deathly ill.
- when health is replaced by illness.
- when the power of nature overwhelms us.
- when a loved one lays close to death.
- when life crashes in around us.

In these times God is literally in our face, like God was in Jacob's face, confronting us. These can be terribly difficult moments in life, and we may want to reason away our difficulties or not deal with them at all. But sometimes God just won't let up on us and takes us to the mat, and we have no choice but to engage in the struggle.

Do you remember the movie Forrest Gump? Do you recall the scene in which Forrest's friend Lt. Dan is sitting on the masthead of the shrimp boat in the middle of a huge storm, and he's railing against God? He lost both his legs in the Vietnam War, he's confined to a wheelchair, he hates his life, and he blames God for his miserable existence. He takes God to the mat for everything that has happened to him.

Now, if you finished watching the movie there, you'd think that Lt. Dan got whapped by

God. But at Forrest's wedding Lt. Dan shows up, walking with the help of prosthetics, and is married to a lovely Asian woman. He stayed with the struggle and walked away literally limping, but also blessed.

Elie Wiesel is probably one of the more famous writers who publicly wrestles with God. Having lived through the Holocaust, watched his father die and his mother and sister disappear into the gas chamber, Wiesel regularly wrestles God in his writings. After World War II, Wiesel came to the United States and met Menahem Schneerson, a rabbi whose followers found him so wise they wondered if he was the promised messiah.

Wiesel's first conversation with the rabbi lasted for hours. Finally, he mustered whatever it took for a pious Jewish boy transformed by the tortures of history to ask: "Rabbi, how can you believe in the Name of the Lord after the Holocaust?" The rabbi looked at Wiesel and said sadly, "How can you not believe in the Name of the Lord after the Holocaust?" In between those two questions is the arena in which Wiesel, and other good people of faith, wrestle with God when the old, easy, pat answers just won't work any longer. (*Feasting on the Word, Year A, Proper 13, Patrick Wilson, Homiletical Perspective*)

The theologian Jurgen Moltmann writes of a similar time when he tells of his struggles with God after surviving World War II. "Why did we survive?" he asks. "Why aren't we dead like the rest? I cried out to God, "My God, where are you?"

"We wrestled with God in order to survive in the abysses of senselessness and guilt and we emerged from those years "limping". In the labor camps, the night of cold despair fell on us, and in that night we were visited, each in his own way by tormenting, gnawing thoughts. But when we emerged, we saw that the sun had risen. The end of the war, when it at last came, found us with deeply wounded souls; but after the years in Norton POW camp in Scotland many of us said: 'My soul has been healed, for I have seen God.'" So we also walked away blessed but with the lasting reminder of a lame hip, the scars of that time in body and soul. (*The Christian Century, "Wrestling With God", 1996.*)

When dawn breaks and the wrestling match ends, Jacob limps off towards the Promised Land, not unlike Moltmann, Wiesel and countless others. Jacob is injured by his encounter, but his limp symbolizes God's willingness to engage in the struggle.

This is significant. For while we may not want to engage in the struggle, or even think that God may needle us to do so, it shows that God will never leave us alone to struggle alone. Jacob's limp symbolizes who Jacob is and who God is.

This is why Jacob's new name is so significant. Israel means both "God strives" and "the one who strives with God". Jacob cannot struggle with a God who doesn't want to struggle back. The wrestling match affirms that God is committed to staying with Jacob, and therefore I believe God stays with us, in the struggles we encounter.

You see, we cannot face our struggles alone. We need God to be there with us so that we do not face our struggles alone. When Jacob went on his way that morning to meet Esau, God went with him tied, in a symbolic sort of way, at the hip. They are bound together and face their future together. God does that with us, too. We may struggle, and we may struggle with God and we may even walk away from that struggle limping. But we do not go it alone then or into the future.

In a little passage in Jeremiah God says:

"I'll show up and take care of you as I promised. I know what I'm doing. I have it all planned out-plans to take care of you, not abandon you, plans to give you the future you hope for.

When you call on me, when you come and pray to me, I'll listen. When you come looking for me, you'll find me. Yes, when you get serious about finding me and want it more than anything else, I'll make sure you won't be disappointed.

I'll turn things around for you. You can count it."

Are you facing a difficult mission from God? One that seems impossible to achieve? The Blues Brothers faced a difficult mission raising that \$5000; they got into some trouble along the way, too. But they raised the money for the orphanage just in time, and walked away with lots of limps. God's mission can be tricky, there are bound to be bumps along the way. But just when we begin to think it's all for naught, when the struggle is not worth, we realize that it's one worth taking and we walk away blessed.

Amen.