



Sermon delivered by
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Quail Hollow Presbyterian Church
August 3, 2008

“Wrestling with God”

Genesis 32:22-31

By the time Good Friday arrived in 1990, I had been wrestling with God for several months. I grew up in the church. I knew Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. I had made a confession of faith in the 4th grade. But, as an adult, I didn't know the love of the Lord. Instead of being held in the grip of the love of the Lord, I was held captive by the guilt of my sins. By the beginning of 1990, my wrestling with God had begun in earnest. I spent time facing the demons of my own sin and, by Good Friday, I was ready to be changed by a living, loving God. Will Willimon refers to this as “one force external to us (that) frees rather than enslaves us – the love of the living, seeking, God who wrestles us into new life.” On Good Friday, 1990, I had the scars of the battle and I was ready to be wrestled into new life. I was home alone, and I remember the tears washing over me, washing my sins away, and freeing me from their grip.

Wrestling with God is a different process for each person. For Jacob, it was a night of physical wrestling with a man – a man whom Jacob is convinced is God. Jacob, the grabber, liar; deceiver, and thief, was about to meet his brother Esau. The last time they were together, Jacob had wronged his brother. He didn't know what would await him at this meeting. In fact, there are those who think that Jacob sent his family and all of his possessions ahead so that if he heard their screams in the morning, he would know to avoid the reunion. I prefer to believe that he simply wanted to spend a night that he knew would be restless alone so as to refrain from disturbing them.

So, here is Jacob, all alone, when he is confronted by a man. They begin to wrestle, and continue wrestling all night long. At daybreak, the man touches Jacob's hip, wrenching it from his socket. Those who wrestle for a spot will tell you that the hip is the pivot point, or core of strength for a wrestler. When the man touches Jacob's hip, he not only incapacitates him, he leaves him with a permanent limp – a reminder of the wrestling match. Now, Jacob is ready to receive the blessing he so desperately needs.

Wrestling with God is a different process for each person. My wrestling match left no physical scars. In fact, most people didn't even know I was wrestling because the match took place inside me. My former pastor frequently shares his story of wrestling with God. He had been raised in a non-Christian home. Friends tried repeatedly to guide him to Christ. His wrestling match ended as a high school senior, a drunken mess, vomiting on the lawn of a pseudo-friend's house after a night of partying. His wrestling match left no physical scars, but he will tell you that after that night, he was a man who had been blessed by his Lord.

For others, the wrestling match is much longer and more physical. One woman told her support group that as a child, she had prayed to be “used by God for his purposes.” In college, she was struck by a serious illness that left her with chronic pain. Her marriage was not the happy one she had hoped for, but it did leave her with the gift of a daughter. Her daughter was injured in an accident. She suffered for three years before she died. Now, the woman faced the closing of her day care that served inner-city

children. The day care would close for lack of funds. At the end of her confessions, one member of the group responded, “The mistake you made was to pray to God to ‘use me for your purposes.’”

Jacob’s story shows us that change is possible. We make choices in life, but God also chooses. God chooses to wrestle with us. God chooses to come to us, wrestle us to the ground and demand that we cry “uncle.” In crying “uncle,” we ready to accept that blessing that can only come from God. In her poem, “Treasures,” Martha Snell Nicholson describes the process this way:

One by one God took them from me
All the things I valued most
Till I was empty handed
Every glittering toy was lost.
And I walked earth’s highways
Grieving in my rags and poverty
Until I heard His voice inviting,
“Lift those empty hands to me.”

And I turned my hands toward heave
And He filled them with a store
Of His own transcendant riches
Till they could contain no more.
And at last I comprehended
With my stupid mind, and dull,
That God could not pour His riches
Into hands already full.

Wrestling with God is a different process for each person. It is necessary to leave us ready to receive the blessings. We are stubborn and difficult persons. We have to learn to let go of what is not important and to open ourselves to receive the blessings.

“A man found the cocoon of the emperor moth and took it home to watch it emerge. One day a small opening appeared, and for several hours the moth struggled but couldn’t seem to force its body past a certain point.

Deciding something was wrong, the man took scissors and snipped the remaining bit of cocoon. The moth emerged easily, its body large and swollen, the wings small and shriveled.

He expected that in a few hours the wings would spread out in their natural beauty, but they did not. Instead of developing into a creature free to fly, the moth spent its life dragging around a swollen body and shriveled wings.

The constricting cocoon and the struggle necessary to pass through the tiny opening are God’s way of forcing fluid from the body into the wings. The ‘merciful’ snip was, in reality, cruel. Sometimes the struggle is exactly what we need.” (Craig Brian Larson)

We are all at different stages in our relationship with God. Many of us have already wrestled. Some of us are in the middle of that wrestling match right now. Some of us have not begun to wrestle. Regardless of where we are, like the emperor moth, the struggle is necessary. We are a sinful people. God promises that when we turn away from sin, we will be blessed. But, we need to wrestle in some way to wrestle

away from the grip of sin. Wrestling with God is a different process for each person. But, it is necessary to leave us ready to receive the blessing of our Lord. Amen.