

Grappling with God
A Sermon
by Shelly Davis

Text: Genesis 32:22-31

With the biblical Jacob—

- son of Isaac and Rebekah,
- brother of Esau—
- ancestor of the twelve tribes of Israel—

with Jacob—

there always seems to be a whole lot of things
going “bump in the night.”

You may recall that in an earlier story in this first
book of the bible we call Genesis, on another
auspicious night, Jacob pulled up a stone and used it
for a pillow;

- where he had a vision of a ladder (or better
translated, a ramp) between heaven and earth
that featured angels ascending and descending
upon it;
- and that night Jacob received an amazing
affirmation from God—
 - in God’s own voice—
 - that absolutely everywhere Jacob might go,
God would always, *always* be with him;
 - Though I have no evidence to support my
theory I often wonder if Natalie Sleeth had
this story in mind when she wrote the song
we sing as our children and youth depart
worship for Sunday School each week ...

“may the love of God surround you,
everywhere, everywhere, you may go.”

- *That was clearly a very active night for Jacob!*
- And in response to that particular night of unusual visions and voices,
 - Jacob chose to repurpose his pillow-like stone as a pillar to mark the very spot where he encountered God and
 - Jacob renamed that spot Beth-el (house of God), so that others would recognize that place as sacred, as holy, as inhabited by God.

Today's chapter in Jacob's story

- actually stands between two divine appearances at Bethel (Genesis 28:10-22 and 33:9-13).
- and also serves as a narrative threshold between
 - Jacob's *preparation* for a reunion with his brother Esau—from whom he had fled—
 - and their *actual* reunion, that immediately follows Jacob's nighttime adventures of today's scripture reading.

On the night featured in our scripture for today—
after sending everything and everyone in his
accompanying caravan on ahead—
Jacob is very much *alone*.

- perhaps Jacob needed one night of complete solitude to gather himself—his head, his heart, his hope—before seeing his brother Esau again.

(Sibling relationships are often complicated, and Jacob had every reason to fear that his reunion with his twin brother Esau would be highly problematic.)

- chances are Jacob was anxious, pensive, maybe even a bit jumpy—
- when out of nowhere, a stranger grabs Jacob in a half nelson and the wrestling match is on—even until daybreak.

Though our narrator does not tip to it right away,

- we may already know, and
- it is pretty clear, that
- the stranger grappling with Jacob in this story is God.

Yet unlike the story earlier in Genesis, when Jacob more passively encounters the voice of God in his sleep;

this is a very physical, material, energetic, sweat-drenching encounter with a God who wrestles every bit as much with Jacob—*and with us*—as Jacob and we wrestle with God.

Yet when we read or hear this story that we commonly refer to as “Jacob Wrestling with the Angel or with God,” we tend to miss the clear initiative that the stranger—who is God—takes in this altercation.

- Jacob is not praying.
- Jacob has not called out to God.

- It is a grappling God who clearly takes the initiative to wrap Jacob up in this sacred scrum.

And whether or not God knew it would be so difficult—

- perhaps not possible?—
- to prevail against this very able opponent—
 - as the day was about to break—
 - remember, it was believed that no one could see the face of God and live (Exodus 33:20)—
- as the day was about to break, God struck Jacob on the hip socket and put it out of joint to gain an upper hand.

Then God said—God said—

“let me go, for the day is breaking.”

- What is it that this grappling God wanted from, or with, Jacob in the first place?
 - acquiescence?
 - acknowledgment?
 - access?
- Is God’s request to be let go:
 - an attempt to forgo God’s end of the covenant?
 - a choice to withhold even more wrestling for yet another night?
 - God’s desire to save Jacob’s life by not letting Jacob see the divine face?

Jacob, now seemingly aware of who this grappling partner is,

- *refuses* to grant God's request to be let go and instead
- says, "I will not let you go until you bless me."

"I will not let you go until you bless me."

I wonder how many times any of us has been in a veritable wrestling match with God and

- refused to grant God's request to be let go and
- inquired, implored, no,
- *insisted* God grant us a blessing.

In the dark of night,
filled with anxiety, fear, or an eerie silence.

In the dark night of our soul,
seemingly empty of meaning or grace or hope.

What if God also initiates a relationship, or chooses to reconnect, with us in precisely such moments?

Back in Genesis, Jacob,

- the one whose birth name means heel catcher, supplanter,
- still wrestling with God and now tagged with a hip out of joint,
- [as the dawn begins to break,] Jacob insists, "I will not let you go until you bless me."

God responds, “First, tell me your name.”

The reply is simple, “Jacob.”

And then God says, “You no longer will be called Jacob, but Israel, [that is, the one who strives with God] for you have striven with God and with people and have prevailed.”

Then the one who *never* seems to cease striving, says,
“Please tell me *your* name.”

And, as is so often the case, God replies not with an answer but with another question,
“Why is it that you ask my name?”

And with that, a divine blessing is given—
and biblical scholar Terence Fretheim suggests it is,

- “as if God is saying through God’s actions,
- “I am a God of blessing” and my actions speak louder than my words.

[Terence E. Fretheim, *The Book of Genesis, The Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. 1].

Now I am certain I am not the only one in this gathering today who has, or is, or will continue to wrestle with God.

- Sometimes I am the one initiates a wrestling match with God:

- Why, oh why was my colleague's wife and young mother of their three children one of those who went to work in the World Trade Center on 9/11 and never came home?
- Why, oh why did my sexual orientation create hurdle after hurdle for living out my call to ministry until I was well into my forties?
- Why, oh why did the young adult son of our dear friends take his own life?
- Why, oh why was my big brother so ill with an alcohol use disorder that his memory began to fail him at age 53, landing him in a nursing home for the rest of his life?
- Why, oh why won't more people choose to stand up and refuse to comply with each new authoritarian move advanced by our president and this administration to:
 - Limit free speech,
 - Limit free assembly,
 - Denigrate and deny education,
 - Pit neighbor against neighbor and sibling against sibling . . .
- Sometimes it is the grappling God who initiates a wrestling match with me:
 - I planted the seed of a calling to ministry in you when you were an eight-year-old child and it took you until your late forties to fully live that out?—*Well there is that sexual orientation issue, but perhaps I digress. . .*

- You, you in the comfortable middle class American life, what have you done lately for those of my children who are poor through absolutely no fault of their own?
- For the umpteenth time. . . I will remind you that when I name and celebrate any part of my creation—day, night, animal, plant, human being—including you, I call it “good,” *not perfect*, but good.
 - Your perfectionism is
 - part arrogance,
 - part hair shirt, and
 - actually, inhibits your growth and development in my sacred image.
- You, you preacher and teacher of my extravagant welcome and radical justice, why does your walk so seldom keep step with your talk?

Beloved ones of God, I believe wrestling with God—regardless of who initiates the wrestling—is the heart of a faith rooted in:

- relationship and covenant;
- thinking and questioning;
- growing and changing.

This is true for individuals like you and me and communities of faith like this United Congregational Church.

And each one of us must take this grappling God seriously to even step on the mat.

- Sometimes it will be when things go bump in the night.
- Sometimes it will be when we are all alone.
- Sometimes it will be when we recognize real differences between us and among us.
- Sometimes it will be when we least expect it.

We may not emerge from any of our wrestling matches with God with a hip socket out of joint, *but we will be changed*—again and again.

- Faith and life are *not* static.
- They are dynamic and *always* on the move.
- And thanks be to God,
 - the face of God and
 - the love of God are always, *always* with us,
 - to guide us,
 - to accompany us,
 - to wrestle with us, and
 - to bless us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.
