

I've thought a lot over the years about the Genesis story of Jacob wrestling in the middle of the night with a stranger. As I read it again this week, I recalled those nighttime wrestling matches I've experienced, those nights when I lost sleep struggling with decisions...nights when I agonized to understand why life had gone awry...when relationships were falling apart. I recalled wrestling with mistakes I've made or hurtful things I've said or done. While reflecting on Jacob's struggle, I woke up too early one morning this week, struggling with how to talk about Jacob's story, knowing it may connect to many of our own restless nights of turmoil.

You may recall Jacob's story; he had been running from his problems for many years. He had tricked his older brother, Esau, into giving something that belonged to Esau by deceiving their father, Isaac. Rather than facing his deceptions, Jacob ran away, and in his escape, he met Rachel, who he discovered was the love of his life. Rachel's father agreed that if Jacob would work for him for

seven years, then Jacob could marry Rachel. So, he did. The seven years seemed to fly by, and soon Jacob may have forgotten how he tricked his brother and their father, for now life seemed great. He had a job and a future wife.

The day of the wedding finally arrived. His bride wore a veil, and it must have been a dark evening without moonlight, and remember, they had no electric lights. That evening he took his new bride into the wedding tent, but the next morning when the sun rose, Jacob discovered that he had been tricked, for instead of Rachel he was married to her older sister, Leah, for as her father explained, "In our country we marry the oldest sister first."

The girls' father offered another deal. Work for another seven years, and you can marry Rachel too. Jacob the trickster had been tricked himself, but during the 14 years he had children with his wives and accumulated much livestock, so he decided to sneak them out in the middle of the night after his time was up.

Jacob and his family eventually came to the River Jabbok, where the next day Jacob would meet his brother, Esau. Jacob sent everyone ahead of him, and there by the river alone, he wrestled with a stranger all night long until daybreak. The story is surrounded in mystery. Was the wrestler another person, a messenger from God, or a dream?

I imagine Jacob was wrestling with the decisions of his life, the mistakes he had made, how he had tricked his brother, and the possible consequences when meeting his brother after all these years.

When the morning light began to appear, the stranger tried to leave, but Jacob held on tight, wanting to not only learn the identify of this stranger, but to also get a blessing from the wrestling match.

“I won’t let you go until you bless me,” Jacob told the stranger.

“OK. Well then, what’s your name?” asked the stranger.

“Jacob.”

“Here’s your blessing: No longer shall you be called Jacob,” which in the Hebrew language means “the one who grabs the heel,” for in the story of the birth of the twin brothers Jacob had grabbed Esau’s heel. The wrestler told Jacob, “Now you shall be called Israel,” meaning the one who wrestles with God.

From this wrestling match, Jacob leaves with a wounded hip, preparing to meet his brother. Jacob sent ahead elaborate gifts to his brother Esau, hoping to win his favor. And when they meet, Esau ran to meet Jacob, embraced him.

“Good to see you, Jacob. What’s all this stuff?”

“Gifts for you, my brother, to find favor with you and let you know I’m sorry about the past rift between us.”

“I already have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself.”

“Please take these gifts,” Jacob pleaded. “I would feel a lot better.” So, Esau took the gifts, the brothers exchanged stories about their lives, and they went their separate ways. Although the

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wrestling with his brother ends in this story, Jacob's family continued to wrestle in the following chapters of their lives.

One author reflecting on this story of Jacob's wrestling match suggested that

we wrestle in our messiness. Jacob is no saint. But God willingly grapples with him, nonetheless. We don't need to clean ourselves up. We ought to come as we are.<sup>1</sup>

I think that's a view that Alexander Campbell would have agreed with, for in the 1800s he wrestled with the common practice of admitting only certain people to communion. Back then, one would have to recite several creeds from memory in order to gain admittance to the Table, but one day Alexander encountered a man begging in the streets, pleading to partake of communion even though he couldn't pass the test. At that moment, Alexander realized that the practice of keeping people away from the Table was not God's vision for the church, so Alexander refused to take communion that morning. It's as though Alexander

had wrestled with a stranger that day while hearing someone pleading for God's mercy.

In the movie *Wrestling with God* that documents his life, Alexander continues to wrestle with decisions, eventually leading him to walk away from the established church and begin a renewal movement with his father Thomas, which later became known as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the branch of the church we are part of today. Without Alexander's struggle, we might not be here today, celebrating an open Table where everyone is welcome.

How many of you have wrestled lately, possibly tossing and turning in the early hours of the morning, waiting for the sun to rise? Maybe you're wrestling with a financial decision. You could be wrestling with a relationship. Maybe an illness has you wrestling with decisions about your health. A transition in your life may keep you wrestling at night with decisions.

Often, we find ourselves wrestling against our own kind of stranger alongside the Jabbok River,

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wondering how we will get through the difficult struggle. We may even feel lost in the struggle, wrestling to find a way out of a situation, as was the case with

a traveler who had been wandering about in a forest for several days, unable to find the way out. Finally, the traveler saw another person approaching in the distance. The traveler's heart was filled with joy, who thought, *Now I shall surely find out which is the right way out of this forest.*

When they neared each other, the traveler asked the other, "Will you please tell me the way out of the forest? I have been wandering about in here for several days, and I am unable to find my way out."

Said the other to him, "I do not know the way out either, for I, too, have been wandering about in here for many days. But this much I can tell you. Do not go the way that I have gone, for I know that it is not the way. Now come, let us search for the way out together."

One rabbi commented on this ancient story, "So it is with us. The one thing that each one of us knows is that the way we have been going until now is not the way. Now come, let us join hands and look for the way together."<sup>2</sup>

I think this story reminds us that when we find ourselves lost or wrestling to discern a new path in life, we do not have to travel the path alone. This community of faith comes along beside us, offering guidance, helping us wrestle with the decisions we face. And of course, we know that God struggles with us, feeling our turmoil as we face difficult decisions in life, for throughout the Bible God has promised to always be with us.

So, when you find yourself wrestling, reach out your hand and discover that you're not alone in the struggle, for God stands beside you, along with the rest of us, the Church.

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick Miller, "What Does Wrestling with God Actually Mean??" June 19, 2018, [www.everysquareinch.net/what-does-wrestling-with-god-actually-mean/](http://www.everysquareinch.net/what-does-wrestling-with-god-actually-mean/)

<sup>2</sup> [www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/wrestling-with-god-chris-surber-sermon-on-bible-truth-125191](http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/wrestling-with-god-chris-surber-sermon-on-bible-truth-125191) (adapted)