

**Christ Presbyterian Church  
Edina, Minnesota  
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Faith that Wrestles with God  
Genesis 32:22-32**

It is a great privilege for me to stand here today with the Commitment Class. All year long these students have learned and asked questions. They have fought and wrestled with intense topics. They have sat with their small group leaders and built walls of faith around themselves. It has been a privilege to get to teach them and now to show them off so you can see who they are and what they've done and where they are going next.

We are in a series called Faith and Doubt. When I think about what leads to our doubts and our questions, I think sometimes it's a big-picture thing and sometimes it's small and intimate, more emotional and more tied to our lives. When we don't get the answers we want, when our worlds are collapsing around us and we can't see God anywhere in it, when ferries overturn with hundreds of teenagers on board or earthquakes shake third world countries or over 200 girls are kidnapped from their elementary school by extremists, you wonder where God is. But sometimes it's in those more personal moments of our lives, where we are praying for healing and it doesn't come, or we are praying for a child not yet conceived, or a spouse who isn't here yet. Sometimes it's when we can't see any room for reconciliation in a relationship, when unforgiveness blankets our souls and we can't move past it. We wonder if God is involved, if God is good, or if He is even there, and if we can have faith in the midst of our doubts or questions.

This year the Commitment Class kids had two weeks where all they did was ask questions. Pastor Crosby came in and all they did was shoot questions for him to answer. We never move forward unless we question. Questioning and doubting means we're putting forth the effort to figure something out. I think we need to get comfortable with the doubt that's in our lives. Doubt is a good thing. Questioning is a good thing. I think it means that we are willing to walk forward. We are willing to wrestle stuff out and do whatever it takes to get an answer, even if it means questioning our source of life. I would go so far as to argue that it allows us to have a living and active relationship with Jesus Christ. I don't believe doubt equals stagnation. I believe it equals commitment, the same commitment that these kids are professing.

Our story in the Bible this morning is the story of Jacob from Genesis. If you remember, Jacob is the son of Isaac, the twin brother of Esau. He had a few issues in his life, a few problems, a few things that went wrong. Then he had this unusual, kind of bizarre encounter where he got to wrestle God. We are going to pick up the story in chapter 32.

<sup>22</sup> Later that same night, Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his 11 children; and he crossed the Jabbok River. <sup>23</sup> He sent them all ahead across the stream along with everything he had; <sup>24</sup> but Jacob stayed behind, left alone in his

distress and doubt. In the twilight of his anguish, an unknown man wrestled with him until daybreak. <sup>25</sup> When the man saw he was not winning the battle with Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket, and Jacob's hip was thrown out of joint as he continued to wrestle with him.

Man: <sup>26</sup> Let me go; the dawn is breaking.

Jacob: I will not let you go unless you bless me.

Man: <sup>27</sup> What's your name?

Jacob: Jacob.

Man: <sup>28</sup> You will no longer go by the name Jacob. From now on, your name will be Israel because you have wrestled with God and humanity, and you have prevailed.

Jacob: <sup>29</sup> Please, tell me your name.

Man: Why do you ask what my name is?

Right then and right there the man blessed Jacob. <sup>30</sup> So Jacob called the place Peniel because as he said, "I have come face to face with God, and yet my life was spared."

In his book *Wrestling with God*, author and pastor Greg Laurie describes Jacob's life like this:

. . . Jacob was a very flawed human being, like you and me. He had a heart for God, but at the same time he had a tendency to be dishonest, conniving, and downright ornery. He'd spent most of his life wrestling with other people, figuratively speaking—his father Isaac, his brother Esau, his father-in-law Laban, and even his two wives. So when it was time for a truly dramatic, life-changing encounter with God, the Lord came to him as a wrestler.

He had to deal with his fears, doubts, stresses, his past. He had to face them. John Ortberg says in his book *Know Doubt: The Importance of Embracing Uncertainty in Your Faith*, "When people of faith are not willing to sit quietly sometimes and let doubt make its case, bad things can happen." Jacob was alone in the darkness. He had none of his possessions or children or wives around him, nothing to distract him. He was a wealthy farmer and had a lot of stuff, but he had sent everything ahead and was left alone in the dark to deal with his past, his pain and his doubts. A man Jacob didn't recognize came along and wrestled with Jacob. Jacob didn't know who he was but he was game because he was in such a place that he was willing to duke it out. He wanted to figure out who he was and what he was doing and why he was going back to where he came from. He had left his home country and gone to stay with his uncle and found his wife there. The last time he had seen his brother, Esau, Esau had told him, "I am going to kill you if you come back." Now that was where he was headed. He was facing everything and so he wrestled with God. In this midst of it, he refused to give up.

I don't know how many of you know a lot about wrestling. I was forced to learn about wrestling and I say that with all love. I did not grow up in a family that had anything to do with wrestling.

My dad was a football, basketball, and baseball player. We did golf and soccer, but we had nothing to do with hockey and nothing at all to do with wrestling. When I was in Nebraska to go to school there, I started volunteering for an organization called Youth for Christ. They assigned me to work with students from a school that had won State in wrestling more times individually and as a team than I can count. When I got down there and was trying to do things with the kids that they liked to do, I realized I needed to get to know the sport of wrestling. I had to learn what a reversal was and what a takedown was and how you get points and why you can't just pin someone and when you have someone on their back, isn't that a pin? Not necessarily. You have to get your opponent in the correct position in order for it to be a pin and in order to win the match.

Wrestling is intense. It's right there in your face and you can't give up because in a split second, one wrong move can change the way the match is going. In a split second, one wrong move and you can lose. It is intense and it is quick. You have to keep going in order to do anything worth any value, in order to move forward, in order to win. So this is what I spent my winter doing. [Photo shown.] This is the State Championship Wrestling Meet in Lincoln, Nebraska and as you can see, it is packed with people.

Jacob wrestled with God. He fought God face to face and wouldn't let up. I think sometimes we think of this as though Jacob wasn't respecting God or revering God but I don't think that's true in this text. I think Jacob very much had a respect and a reverence for God. God met him in the mess. He met him and said, "Okay, let's figure this out." I thought maybe the word wrestling in Hebrew didn't actually mean wrestling the way we think of it. I thought maybe it meant having a really intense conversation but it doesn't. In Hebrew it means *to grapple, to wrestle*. It is that intense and Jacob wrestled all night long. Hosea gives us a little bit more insight into this match between Jacob and God. In Hosea 12 he says,

<sup>3</sup> Even from the womb, he fought with his brother by grabbing his heel;  
when he grew to be an adult, he struggled against God.

<sup>4-5</sup> He wrestled with a heavenly messenger and won;  
he wept and begged for his help.

Jacob was committed to figuring out his questions and his doubts, his distress, his fears, his past, and he was going to do it with God. The word *wept* in that passage is the Hebrew word *bakah*, which means *to weep bitterly, bewail, lament*. Jacob was in tears with God, pleading for that blessing, pleading for that answer, and he wasn't going to give up. Verse 4 specifically says that Jacob struggled with the angel and overcame Him. He wept and begged for His favor. He was pleading for God to meet him, for God to answer him. He didn't take this lightly. This was intense and he desperately wanted to figure it out.

One of the commentaries I read through last week put it like this. "According to his past, Jacob was always clever and sneaky enough so he never felt the need to trust in God alone. . . . Jacob was reduced to the place where all he could do was hold onto the Lord with everything he had. Jacob couldn't fight anymore but he could hold on, which wasn't a bad place to be."

There are so many stories in Scripture where people are persistent with God, where they wrestle with Him in different situations and fight out their doubts and distress with Him. They don't let go and neither does God. The persistent widow, the Canaanite woman, who believes

that even a tiny bit of leftover power from Jesus is enough to heal her daughter, the blind beggar, Job, Paul—they all had tenacity and persistence and commitment to seeking out God.

God held Jacob's destiny in His hands and Jacob wanted to know that destiny so he fought God. He had long struggled with his brother Esau, with Laban, his father-in-law, and as the text says, he was distressed and doubtful, so he was committed to having it out with God. Disabling his hip socket wasn't a form of punishment or hatred from God. It was God showing Jacob that no matter how much he fought Him, God was still God. He wanted Jacob to learn and got down into the dirt just like He did to breathe life into Adam. God got into the mess with Jacob but God is still going to win because He is the Supreme Being. He could disable him at will and Jacob needed to surrender to that.

Ultimately God blessed Jacob. He blessed his fight. He blessed his commitment and gave him a new identity that was founded in Him. God changed Jacob's name, which is God's way of acknowledging a transformation. He named him Israel, which means *God prevails*. Jacob found exactly what he was looking for, exactly what he had been questioning his entire life. His true identity came through a life-changing experience with the Living God. Jacob trusted God enough to fight it out with Him. In the midst of his distress and doubt, Jacob trusted. He was committed. He fought for an answer and he got it.

I don't think the opposite of faith is doubt. I think the opposite of faith is apathy. Apathy creates indifference and lethargy. You don't do anything when there is apathy. Doubt and questions create movement. They create commitment. It means you are *in* if you have doubts so it is fitting that this is the story we talk about on Commitment Class Sunday. I would encourage you this morning to be okay with your doubts, to be comfortable with your doubts, to be okay with your questions and to seek whatever it is that God may be calling you to face.

Wrestling is a little bit different for us than it was for Jacob. It is not fighting it out with God all night long, physically having God in front of us. So what does it look like for us? I think it's that active engagement of surrender. I think it's sitting in the process, which sometimes takes a long time, and that is okay. I think it means owning our true feelings and like Jacob, being willing to face them. Our God is a God who saw our deep desperation, the deep mess that we got ourselves into. He wasn't willing to just let it be. He loved us so much that He left heaven and came down to earth to live a perfect life and take our place on the cross.

We've talked about this so many times this year, haven't we? God left heaven for us. He stood in our spot so that we could have fullness of life even with our questions and our doubts and life everlasting. He has our true identity in His hands and He wants us to know it. So for whatever questions or doubts or stress or fear you have, whether it's some big question like whether or not He exists or could He truly be good in a world with so much evil, be willing to make the commitment to move forward with Him. Maybe your concerns lie in more personal, intimate circumstances where mine are, wrestling with trying to figure out if God is really good to me, if He really wants what's best for my life, what are those things He wants for me and being willing to actively engage with Him.

Wherever our doubt and distress lie, God is there. Just like with Jacob, He is inviting us to walk with Him. Maybe right now for you, that looks like fighting, but He is with us. He is in the mess with us. Like the story concluded, Jacob understood that he needed to surrender to God and that he needed God to bless him and guide him and show him the way. Be comfortable in your

doubts and in that process because I believe He will meet us there and I believe, like Jacob, He will bless us and He will show us our true identities. Let's pray.

God, thank You for who You are. Thank You that You are willing to get into the mess with us and wrestle it out with us. You are a personal and relational God and we are so grateful for that. I pray, Father, that we would look to You and acknowledge You and want to be in it with You as well. God, thanks for Commitment Class today. Thank You for these kids and their leaders. In Your Name, we pray. Amen.

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.*