

Advent Lutheran Church
Wrestling With God
November 10, 2024
Genesis 32:22-31

Years ago, I received a phone call from a distressed church member demanding to see me. She informed me that the time and location didn't matter as long as it was that day. And, she did not want to talk about why we needed to meet.

Now you should know that she was not the kind of person who lived her life with a strong sense of urgency nor someone I'd ever experienced as anything but calm.

When we sat down together a few hours later she wasn't herself. She looked all around the room but could not look at me. Her voice was softer than expected and the pace of her words was awkwardly slow. As she told her story, she relaxed, her voice steadied, and she looked directly at me.

Siblings in Christ, this woman had come to tell me that the impossible had happened. She could not deny it. But she also could not find the strength to tell anyone else.

She shared that while most people thought she had her life together it had actually been unraveling for quite some time. She'd been wrestling with the situation for months and growing increasingly frustrated with God in the process. She lacked clarity about next steps, until . . . Until, God intervened.

The night before, God interrupted her routine bedtime prayers, speaking to her in an audible voice. Friends, she had been calling out to God all along, but never expected God to actually answer.

When she heard God, everything changed.

Whatever your beliefs may be about how God speaks, I hope that you remain open to being surprised. And, perhaps in ways that transform your understanding of who God is and how God is at work in the world.

In this morning's Old Testament reading we encounter Jacob's story or, rather, an episode in it. You remember Jacob, right? He's the twin who was best known as a trickster for stealing his older brother's birthright. After running away in fear many years ago, he's now heading back to reconnect with Essau. And, on the night before this happens, he finds himself all alone.

Jacob's anxiety is at an all-time high as he wonders how Essau will receive him. Suddenly, out of nowhere, a stranger appears and attacks him. They start to wrestle. And they continue to wrestle. Neither can make much headway. Minutes become hours. Eventually, the sun begins to rise.

Jacob demands a blessing and he receives one wrapped up in a new name, Israel. Just as incredibly, he realizes that he has been wrestling with God – and his limp provides visible evidence of this epic experience.

Now you and I know that people don't come face to face with God. We have read the Bible. We have been confirmed. We know the rules. And, yet, God can and sometimes does surprise us as God clearly did for Jacob.

When Jacob saw God, everything changed.

I, too, have wrestled with God.

A month ago I shared on social media that I was celebrating my Happy to Be Alive Day. This is a personal holiday I observe each year on the anniversary of the day I nearly died.

I'll spare you all the details, but want you to know some of what I endured at White Rock Center of Hope. Late in the day after we had finished serving neighbors in need and after most of our volunteers had departed, someone evaded our security measures, found me in my office, and assaulted me. His language and actions were clear: he was there to kill me.

Mercifully, after landing many blows to my head and chest, he paused, I screamed, and someone heard my cry for help. When he heard their footsteps, he ran away.

Like Jacob, my body bears witness to that encounter. I'm not the same person physically. I'm also not the same person spiritually.

During my recovery I did what many survivors do: I reflected on my life and reevaluated what it was that I wanted to do with however many years I have left to live.

I wrestled with God. I don't know any other way to explain it.

While Jacob and God wrestled all night long, I managed to hold on even longer, stretching the wrestling match over several days.

While God didn't speak to me in an audible voice and didn't show up in a physical form, God clearly reaffirmed the call to ministry I first received as a teenager – a call that had led me to seminary and emboldened me to serve nine congregations.

A few days after the wrestling ended, I entered into the ordination process. Then, about a year later, I completed that journey and was ordained to ministry in the United Church of Christ at a service held at my home church: Cathedral of Hope.

Now, I recognize that this step of faith not only changed me, but also made possible my current ministry as your interim pastor.

When I fully trusted in God, everything changed.

This week has been hard. So hard that for the first time as your pastor I changed the title of my message in the middle of the week to "Wrestling with God." Well before I knew what I would say, I knew I needed to speak honestly about this often unspoken aspect of a more spacious Christianity.

Whatever your experience has been this week, I need you to know that this week has been incredibly difficult for many. I've spent most of my time listening to and seeking to provide safe

space for people who are wrestling with God and who frankly are wrestling with how welcome they truly are.

Many people in our midst are still processing, still wrestling, still despairing. Women, immigrants, those with pre-existing health conditions, and LGBTQ+ folks are asking hard questions for which no one has satisfactory answers.

The wrestling continues.

As I think about the wrestling all around me, I find myself returning to earlier stories of wrestling, including

- My church member all those years ago wrestled with God for months and received a blessing in the form of hearing God's voice and knowing how to move forward.
- Jacob who wrestled with God all night long and received a blessing in the form of seeing God and receiving a new identity that started with a new name.
- My own difficult wrestling with God that lasted several days and ended as I received a blessing in the form of trusting God and receiving a new identity through ordination.

And yet, so much wrestling continues without resolution.

Who are we? We are the baptized children of God. And we are reminded of Martin Luther's example that whenever life became too much, he would remind himself that he was a baptized child of God.

Who is Advent? We are a community of faith that just a few weeks ago adopted a new purpose statement that begins "Advent is a growing church where ALL are welcome."

May our actions affirm that we are who we claim to be. Amen.