

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 2, 2026
The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Frazier
Genesis 23:22-31

There are moments in life when we feel as though we are wrestling in the dark. We wrestle with fear about the future. We wrestle with guilt from the past. We wrestle with unanswered prayers, strained relationships, disappointment, grief, doubt, and uncertainty. We may look around and see other people who appear to have an effortless faith, while our own spiritual lives feel more like a struggle than a victory. If any of that describes you, then Genesis 32 offers perspective, maybe some comfort and hope. It tells the story of a man who encountered God not in a moment of ease, but in the middle of a struggle.

Jacob arrives at the Jabbok River carrying a lifetime of baggage. The next day he will meet his brother Esau for the first time in many years. The last time they were together, Jacob had deceived Esau and stolen his blessing as firstborn. Now Jacob hears that Esau is out there with four hundred men. Fear grips him. He sends gifts ahead. He divides his family for protection. He tries to manage the situation as best he can. Then, in the darkness of the night, he finds himself alone.

Often, our deepest encounters with God begin when we are brought to a place of aloneness. We spend much of our lives distracting ourselves from the questions and fears that lie beneath the surface. We stay busy. We make plans. We seek control. But eventually there comes a moment when the

noise quiets and we are left alone with our thoughts, our anxieties, and our need for God. It is there, in the silence, that Jacob's struggle begins.

The text tells us that a man wrestled with Jacob until daybreak. The passage is mysterious. The identity of the wrestler is not immediately explained. Yet by the end of the encounter Jacob realizes he has met God in a unique and life-changing way. What is striking is that God does not simply appear and give Jacob a comforting speech. God wrestles with him. The encounter is intense, physical, and exhausting. It lasts through the entire night.

This image challenges some of our assumptions about faith. We often imagine that faith means having everything figured out. We think faith means certainty, confidence, and easy answers. But Scripture suggests something different. Sometimes faith looks like wrestling.

Many of us know what it means to wrestle with God. We wrestle when prayers seem unanswered. We wrestle when tragedy strikes and we cannot understand why. We wrestle when God's timing is different from our own. We wrestle with questions for which there are no easy solutions. We wrestle with our failures and regrets. We wrestle with doubts we are afraid to admit aloud.

Yet this story from the book of Genesis reminds us that wrestling with God is not the opposite of faith. In many cases, wrestling is evidence that faith is alive. Jacob does not run from God. He holds on. Even in confusion, he remains engaged. Even in struggle, he refuses to let go.

One of the most encouraging truths in this story is that God meets Jacob in the struggle itself. God does not wait until Jacob has solved his problems. God does not wait until Jacob has become spiritually mature. God does not wait until Jacob's fears disappear. Instead, God comes to him right in the middle of his weakness. This is good news for us. We might think we have to get our lives together before we can approach God. We believe we must first overcome our doubts, conquer our fears, or clean up our failures. But God meets people where they are. He meets fearful people. He meets confused people. He meets broken people. He meets struggling people.

As the night continues, the mysterious wrestler merely touches Jacob's hip and dislocates it. Suddenly the contest changes. Jacob realizes he is not wrestling an equal opponent. The one before him possesses power far beyond his own. Throughout much of his life, Jacob has relied on his cleverness, determination, and ability to control circumstances. He has manipulated situations to get what he wants. He has trusted his own resourcefulness. But now God brings him to the end of himself.

Many of us resist this process. We prefer strength to weakness. We prefer control to dependence. We prefer self-sufficiency to surrender. Yet God often does His deepest work in the places where our strength fails. There are lessons we can learn only through weakness. There are dimensions of God's grace we discover only when we realize we cannot save ourselves. Sometimes the very struggle we are trying to escape is the place where God is teaching us dependence.

And yet Jacob does something remarkable. Despite his injury, he refuses to let go. He says, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." His strength is fading, but his determination grows stronger. The struggle becomes less about winning and more about just holding on. This is a beautiful picture of mature faith. Mature faith is not always powerful. Sometimes mature faith simply refuses to let go of God. It says, "I don't understand what You are doing, but I will stay with You. I don't see the answer yet, but I will keep trusting You. I am wounded, but I will not stop seeking Your blessing."

Then comes the turning point. The wrestler asks, "What is your name?" At first glance, the question seems unnecessary. Surely God knows Jacob's name. But names in Scripture often reveal character and identity. Jacob's name was associated with his history as a deceiver and schemer. Before transformation can occur, Jacob must honestly acknowledge who he is. He must face his true self.

The same is true for us. Real transformation begins with honesty. We cannot experience God's renewing work while hiding behind masks. We must bring our true selves before God. We must confess our fears, our sins, our doubts, and our failures. We cannot become who God wants us to be until we stop pretending to be someone we are not.

After Jacob gives his name, God gives him a new one. "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel." This renaming is significant because it represents a

new identity. Jacob entered the night defined by his past. He leaves the night defined by God's purpose. The struggle has transformed him.

This teaches us something profound about encounters with God. God's goal is not merely to change our circumstances. His greater goal is often to change us. We come to God wanting solutions, but God seeks transformation. We ask him to remove the struggle, while he seeks to shape our character through it. We pray for changed conditions, but God may desire changed hearts. The greatest blessing Jacob received that night was not simply protection from Esau. It was his new identity.

This is true for every disciple. When we encounter God, we are not merely given information. We are changed. The fearful find courage. The proud learn humility. The wounded discover grace. The guilty receive forgiveness. The lost find purpose. God's presence transforms the people who encounter Him.

Yet the story contains an important detail. Jacob leaves with a limp. He receives a blessing, but he also carries a wound. The encounter with God does not erase all signs of struggle. In fact, it leaves a permanent mark.

We might wish God's blessings came without scars. We want God to solve our problems and restore our comfort. Yet many of God's greatest servants carried reminders of their struggles. St. Paul wrote that he bore on his body the marks of Jesus. The limp in Jacob's walk became a testimony. Every step

reminded him of the night he met God. His weakness became evidence of grace.

Many of us have spiritual limps as well. We carry reminders of losses endured, prayers prayed, failures overcome, and battles fought. We may view these marks as signs of weakness. But God can transform them into testimonies of his faithfulness. The scars of struggle often become the places where God's grace shines most clearly.

Finally, the passage tells us that the sun rose as Jacob crossed over the river. Throughout the Bible, light often symbolizes hope, renewal, and new beginnings. Jacob enters the night fearful and uncertain. He emerges into the morning transformed. The struggle is not the end of his story. The dawn arrives.

If you find yourself in a season of wrestling, remember that the night does not last forever. God is at work even when you cannot see it. The struggle is not meaningless. The questions are not wasted. The tears are not forgotten. God often accomplishes His deepest work in the darkest hours. The dawn will come.

So what does this ancient story from the book of Genesis teach us about our own struggles? It teaches us that God often meets us in the very places we would rather avoid. It teaches us that faith sometimes looks like wrestling. It teaches us that weakness can become the doorway to faith. It teaches us

that God desires not only to bless us but to transform us. And it teaches us that when we truly encounter God, we may leave with a limp, but we will also leave with a blessing.

May we have the courage of Jacob. May we bring our fears, doubts, wounds, and questions before God. May we refuse to let go of God in the darkness. And may we discover that the God we struggle to understand is also the God who transforms our struggle into blessing.