

Punched by an Angel
Gen. 32:22-32
September 6, 2026
Rev. Dr. Kory Wilcoxson

When I was a kid, I wanted to be a professional wrestler. I idolized guys like Rowdy Roddy Piper and Brutus Beefcake and the Ultimate Warrior. So, in my 20s, I trained for four years to be professional wrestler. Your laughter at that statement doesn't do much for my self-esteem. But it's true! I never body-slammed Andre the Giant or held Hulk Hogan in a headlock, but I dedicated four years of my life to becoming a wrestler. Now my resume says I spent that time in seminary training to be a pastor, but in reality, I was becoming a wrestler.

I didn't expect that when I entered seminary. I thought since I had given my life to serving God, things would get easier. What I learned, and what I imagine most of you know, is that being a person of faith doesn't mean an absence of struggle, but an invitation to struggle.

Jacob knows struggle; he's spent his whole life doing it. His name means "the one who deceives," because he tricked his older brother Esau out of both his inheritance and their father's blessing. Esau threatened to kill Jacob, so Jacob went on the run. He spends his life scheming, conniving, manipulating to get ahead.

Fast-forward 20 years: Jacob has two wives – that kind of thing was OK back then - eleven sons, one daughter, and a relatively good life. One day God tells Jacob, "Go back home and I will be with you." Jacob takes his family and heads back to his homeland, which also means a reunion with his brother Esau. Jacob sends a scouting party ahead to see if there are any surprises waiting for him, and he learns that not only is Esau rushing out to see him, but he's bringing four hundred men with him. Do you think Esau might still be holding a bit of a grudge? Jacob knows more struggling is ahead.

This impending meeting with his brother is weighing heavily on Jacob's mind when he lays down to sleep the night before. He sends his family to the other side of the Jabbok River so he could be by himself, but he isn't alone for long. Jacob does indeed have another struggle, but not with Esau. Instead, very abruptly we are told that someone wrestled with him until daybreak. The big question here is: who was it? The original Hebrew says it was "ish," which simply means "a man." Jewish commentaries say it was an angel. Jacob himself believed it was God.

That would be only appropriate, since Jacob has been struggling with God all his life: struggling for control, struggling to succeed, struggling to get the upper hand. In this battle, neither the ish nor Jacob can overcome. Instead, they battle to a stalemate, and the man gives Jacob's hip a wrenching blow, leaving him wounded.

This story took on special meaning to me during my last year of wrestling through seminary. I preached on this same passage for a class in the fall of 2000, and in the spring of 2001, when I should have been sweating my way through Professor Burrows' ethics class, I was instead lying in a hospital bed with what doctors were calling "abnormalities in my brain." The week before, I had my first symptoms that would lead to my diagnosis of multiple sclerosis. You know what those symptoms were? Weakness in the muscles on my left side, including my leg. One of the ways MS works is it keeps you from lifting up your foot when you walk. The result...is a limp. Through seminary I had wrestled with

God for understanding, and now as I prepared to leave for ministry, I was leaving with a actual limp.

I was scared. Scared of my own body, scared of what the future held, scared for my family, scared about finding a job. Like Jacob fretting over his reunion with Esau, our moments of struggle are when we are most afraid of what is to come, when we feel most alone. But it is also the exact time when, if we are vulnerable enough, we encounter God face-to-face and open ourselves to transformation. God shows up.

In fact, I would submit to you that transformation ONLY happens through struggle. I've yet to meet someone who was lying around on their couch, snuggled into all their comfortableness, and then said suddenly, "Hey! I've been transformed." No, transformation happens when we're willing to become vulnerable, when we're willing to step into that ring and grapple with the essentials that make us who we are. Can we wrestle with the beliefs that we've held dear all our lives but now seem exclusionary? Can we wrestle with the image of ourselves as a healthy, fully able person that fades with each birthday? Can we grapple with why the plans we had for our lives and our actual lives are two very different things? It's a struggle to enter the struggle, isn't it? It would be easier to ignore it, not confront it, not open ourselves up to be changed. I know people who are so ossified in their beliefs that there's no room for wrestling, no room for growth. And we all know people who've walked away from faith rather than enter the ring and try to grasp the elusive "ish" we call our God.

But through the struggle, and only through the struggle, comes transformation and blessing...and more. I think Jacob undersold his adversary. Jacob only asked for a blessing, and God had something even greater to give him. As the sun starts to come up, the stranger asks to be let go. Why didn't Jacob let go? He's had a sleepless night, he's worn out from struggling, his hip is on fire with pain. Why didn't Jacob let go? Barbara Brown Taylor says it's because Jacob got hold of someone who "smells like heaven," and the manipulator in Jacob knew there was something to be gained. "I will not let you go until you bless me," he says. Once again, Jacob strikes a deal that leans heavily in his favor. Once again, Jacob living up to his name, "the grasper," "the deceiver."

As if to confirm Jacob's identity, the man asks him, "What is your name?" That's a loaded question. Jacob has spent his whole life trying to be somebody else. And now God asks him the one question he has been avoiding: "Who are you?" Jacob was asked that before. It was by his blind father, as Abraham prepared to give his blessing to the person he thought was his oldest son Esau. But Jacob gave a false name and said, "I am Esau," and stole what didn't belong to him. This time there is no pretense, no hiding his true nature. This time, he claims the dubious name he has spent his life running from: "I am Jacob," I am the one who deceives.

At that moment, Jacob, who is used to taking things from others, has something taken from him. The ish takes his name. No longer is he Jacob, the one who deceives. He is now Israel, the one who struggled with God and who overcame. He is no longer Jacob the grasper; he is Israel the survivor. No longer does he see himself as others see him, the manipulator; now he sees himself as God sees him, the one who perseveres.

The stranger departs, leaving Jacob with a blessing and a bum hip. Jacob couldn't have one without the other. God's blessing comes through struggle, and the reminder of the struggle is also the reminder of the blessing, like the scar that reminds us of the

successful surgery or the labor pains that bring forth new life. Jacob has experienced what Frederick Beuchner called a magnificent defeat.

Life is not easy. In fact, if you're not struggling with something, you're probably not doing it right. Living life to its fullest means leaning into the struggle of being a person of faith in this world; it means being willing to go toe-to-toe with God in order to seek a greater understanding of who God is and who you are called to be. Beware, you will most likely limp away from the encounter. Beuchner calls God "the beloved enemy," because, as he says, before God gives us anything, God asks of us everything. Anyone who dares enter deeply into life with God walks with a limp. Anyone who has raised children or cared for aging parents walks with a limp. Anyone who has invested themselves in a congregation walks with a limp. Anyone who tries to follow Jesus in their dealings with others or commits to taking scripture seriously walks with a limp. If you dare to wrestle with God as you try and figure out your faith, it's gonna leave a mark. But the limp is the good news here, because it means you survived.

Along with your limp, you'll leave the wrestling ring with something else: a new name, a name that describes you as God sees you. For me, I left seminary with the name "pastor." For you, it might be "teacher" or "leader" or "elder" or "servant." Maybe your new name will be "activist" or "foster parent" or "role model" or "friend." When you wrestle with God, you are transformed, you are no longer the same person. But you have to be willing to scrutinize your assumptions, to ask your questions, to step into the ring. And you are blessed to be part of a church that welcomes the struggle.

Jacob's new name was Israel, for he had wrestled with God and had overcome. But there's more. The next morning, when he went out to meet Esau, his older sibling ran up to Jacob and threw his arms around him in a huge bear hug. Jacob's transformation from selfish trickster to man of God was complete. And Jacob heard another new name: "brother." And he was home. In the midst of our struggles, may we experience the same feeling as we remember that God is holding us close. May we persevere through our struggles, knowing we are not alone, limping away blessed. The limp isn't proof you've lost. It's proof you've survived.