

God Never Gives Up: Israel Wrestles
Gen 32:24-32; 2 Sam 7:1-17

Good morning! When our kids were little we read some books called the Boxcar Children. Do you know these stories? The Boxcar children are 4 orphans who live in a boxcar in the woods! Very cheery—and so safe! What is really annoying about the stories is that the kids are perfect. “Won’t you please pass the peas Henry?” “Oh yes, you are very welcome Violet!” “Look it is almost bedtime, everyone clean up and brush their teeth.” “Hurray!!”

Here are four little kids, living in the wild with no adults around. There is no way actual kids would have been able to cook themselves balanced meals, let alone brushed their teeth and in bed by 8! And most of all, I seriously doubt that they would have been examples for manners. People often imagine that the Bible is full of characters like that—unrealistic, flat, two-dimensional characters who always do the right thing—examples for us to follow. The shocking thing we discover as we *actually* read the Bible is that the people are not two dimensional at all! Even the heroes are complicated people who often do bad things. It is just like, uh, reality! All through the Bible we find people who are fully human, just like us.

We are in the middle of our series looking at the Big Picture of the Bible, called God Never Gives Up. That is the theme of the Bible—God Never Gives Up. The Bible is rooted in history—it tells us true stories about real people, and it presents them in ways that don’t always make them look good! One of the reasons I think the gospels are credible is that they make the disciples look so bad! If you were Matthew or John or Peter’s companion Mark and were making up a story, you’d make the disciples the heroes of it—the ones who recognized who Jesus was before anyone else! But instead we get these stories that show the disciples as slow, dimwitted guys who are always missing the point and misunderstanding what Jesus is teaching.

All through the Bible we meet person after person who is more often an example of how NOT to behave, rather than someone we should imitate. Why do you think that is? Could it be related to the kind of people *we* are—the people God has to work with today?

In our reading from Genesis we encounter Jacob. Jacob is the grandson of Abraham. You remember Abraham, last week Pastor Chris talked about how he followed God's unlikely call to leave home at age 75. Abraham was promised land, children, God's blessing, and most of all—that through him and his family *all the world* would be blessed. Well here is Abraham's grandson Jacob, and the plan does not seem to be going well.

Jacob is a twin, along with his older brother Esau. Jacob came out grabbing on to Esau's heel and his name means Grabber. He is very grabby! He's a cheat and a liar. He was a mama's boy. He tricked his brother into giving him his birthright and then he also cheated Esau out of his father's blessing. Pastor Eugene Peterson calls him "easily the most thoroughly crooked man portrayed in Scripture." EASILY the most thoroughly crooked man! That is impressive! After stealing his brother's blessing Jacob had to run for his life. He ended up living with his uncle Laban—a guy who is almost his match for cheating, tricking Jacob into marrying both of his daughters, but only after working for him for many years.

As we get to today's reading Jacob is finally returning home. After 20 years away, Jacob is coming back. Despite Laban's efforts, Jacob has a big family and has large flocks and herds. He is returning a prosperous man. But as Jacob heads back towards his old home he learns that his brother Esau is coming out to meet him. And he is bringing 400 men with him! Jacob is terrified! Being the brave, moral example that he is, he sends all of his goods and family on ahead, starting with his least favorite wife. Finally, he sends everyone and everything on ahead, across the river, and Jacob stays behind alone, last of all. As night falls on Jacob we have this very odd story—

Jacob wrestles with someone. We aren't told where this person came from or what the fight was about. But we do know that they wrestled all night long. Finally the man tells Jacob to let him go, and Jacob refuses, saying I won't let you go until you bless me. In response to that the "man" gives Jacob a new name—not grabber anymore, but Israel, which means God wrestler. God wrestler. This mysterious God-man blessed Jacob, but also left him with an injury that caused him to limp the rest of his life.

After this encounter Jacob was a changed man—instead of staying behind, hoping that his bribes would placate Esau, or at least that his wives and children would—instead he went

out before his family. Jacob came to Esau first. Then a surprise—we discover that Esau was not still trying to kill Jacob—he was happy to welcome his brother home. Jacob and Esau, after so many years of being estranged, were able to reconcile.

Clearly Jacob's long night of wrestling had changed him. Jacob sensed that the man he was wrestling with was somehow God himself. When Jacob asked for a blessing the man gave him a new name—Israel, or God-wrestler. Then Jacob named the place Peniel, or "God's face" because he had seen God face to face and lived. God confronted Jacob there. Jacob had been running away for decades but now he was finally coming to grips with his past mistakes -- and with his future promise. Jacob—now named Israel-- was finally stepping into his long-predicted role of leader.

Does it surprise you that God's very own, chosen people are called Israel—struggles with God? Or Wrestles with God? It is an apt name, as we see all through the Bible. But why would God choose a people like that? Why would God himself give them that name?

By contrast, Islam means submission or surrender to God. But that is not the name God gave the Jewish people. Why would God call his special people *Israel*—wrestles with God? I think it is because God is ok with our wrestling. He isn't looking for robots, he is looking for people made in his image. God is looking for people who *choose* to love him back, not automatons who can only do what he commands.

Friends, all of us wrestle with God in various ways. That is ok. On Christmas Eve I said that your doubts are safe here. Someone came to me later and shared how much that meant to them—we are all people traveling together on our journeys of faith, not people who have everything completely figured out and all the answers nicely wrapped up. Everybody wrestles.

Let me tell you about Agnes Bojaxhui (Boy-a-jew). For decades Agnes lived a simple and devoted life of faith and service. She moved across the world and served the poorest of the poor. She became recognized as a powerful leader and inspired many. But still, she wrestled with God. In the midst of a long struggle with doubt she wrote: "Deep down there is nothing but emptiness and darkness. My God, how painful is this unknown pain. I have no faith. So many unanswered questions live within me. If there be God, please forgive me."

Wow. The pain, the confusion, the doubt. It is all there. We know Agnes better as Mother Teresa. Now *Saint* Teresa of Calcutta. Yes—even as she was giving her life in service to the poor as a nun, Mother Teresa was wrestling with God. If she can, so can you and so can I. Don't be afraid of the struggle—God can take it. Like Jacob, we sometimes come out of those times of wrestling with a limp. With a reminder of our struggle. Maybe part of what it means to be God's people is that we are willing to engage with God. We don't ignore him, we don't pretend, when you are Israel—when you are a God wrestler—we come face to face with the Almighty and work on our problems.

We see another example of wrestling with God in our second reading today. Here is King David, many many centuries after Jacob. David is one of the greatest heroes of the Bible. But even David, even the man after God's own heart, was a mess. He was a bad husband, an adulterer, sometimes a cowardly commander, an absent father. His failings caused rebellion and heartache. But he still was, in fact, a man after God's own heart and he always came back to God. He was always ready for the struggle.

In our reading we see David wanting to build a temple for God. But God has other ideas. God says, "You want to build *me* a house? I'll build YOU a house!" Then God reaffirms his ancient promises to Abraham. Part of the reason it is safe to wrestle with God is that he is faithful—he keeps his promises even though we do not. Here God promises that he will make David's name great, he will give his people a safe place to live, and most of all, he will establish the throne of David's offspring forever. God says about that offspring, "I will be his father and he will be my son." I will be his father and he will be my son. Right here God is promising us the Messiah, the great King who is coming.

David's response to God's promise is a great example to us. He prays. He talks to God, humbly. He is amazed at the promises God has made, not disappointed that his own plans were rejected. As we wrestle with God, we need to stay open and listen to what God is saying. We need to stay humble. We can be like Jacob and hold on tight all through the darkness—all the way until the dawn comes.

First Pres, the King has come. Jesus is reigning. As we wrestle with God, we are not alone. We can remember how even Jesus had times of temptation, of doubt, of despair and

struggle. Even Jesus cried out “Why have you forsaken me?” But because Jesus won the victory for us, we have him with us, always. Jesus sends us his Spirit to live in us and to empower and guide us—if we let Him. Jesus—God with us-- is with us even in our struggles and doubts.

God changes us through our struggles. Somehow that deceitful mess that was Jacob became transformed to be Israel, the father of God’s people. The grabber grabbed onto God and wouldn’t let go.

Jacob’s struggle that night also shows us what grace looks like. We can’t make ourselves perfect, we can’t fix our problems, we can’t overcome our doubt, but God can. That is what we learn from Jacob’s wrestling match on the banks of the river. God can overcome our problems. He can help our doubts. He can sooth our grief and fear. Most of all, he can change us. He can start transforming us into the people he made us to be. He took Simon, a hot-tempered, mercurial fisherman, and made him Peter—the Rock. He changed Saul from a fanatical persecutor of Christians to the greatest missionary for Jesus. There is no one he can’t change. Not even you. Not your worst fear, not your biggest doubt, not your most horrible secret—none of that is bigger than God. None of those things can drive God away or stop God’s love from remolding you. God will send you out with a new name, a new identity, and a new future.

Friends—God wants to give you a new name. Beloved Daughter, much loved Son. He is calling us home. Jesus came to open the way for us. Our struggles and doubts are real, but they don’t have the last word. The last word is God’s. The last word is blessing. God blesses us even as we wrestle with him. And he transforms us.

God loves you. That is the basic truth of reality. He loves you just the way you are. He loves you just the way you are. His love is not conditional. It doesn’t depend on you, or on your striving, or on your good works. He loves you for who you are, not for what you’ve done.

And he loves us too much to leave us the way we are. He doesn’t leave us in our mess. We are like drowning people, thrashing around in the water. God is ready to grab us and to pull us out. Our God is a rescuer, a savior. He is Immanuel, God with us—the messiah. He can handle your worries, your doubts, your fears and your wondering. Go ahead and wrestle with him. Along the way he may set you on a new path, just like he did for Jacob.

Let's pray: Lord Jesus—thank you for coming to rescue us even in the middle of our mess. Thank you for being willing to struggle with us and even carry us when we can't do it anymore. Lord—we give you our doubts, our fears, even our hopes and dreams—and we trust that your plan is even better than we can imagine. Help us to walk with you, give us new names as part of your family, and help us to be that blessing to the world that you made us to be. In the strong name of the Messiah, King Jesus, we ask it. Amen.