

**Sermon: Wrestling with Angels**

**August 30, 2009**

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**Reading: Jacob Wrestles With God (Genesis 32.22-31)**

That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maidservants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking."

But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

The man asked him, "What is your name?"

"Jacob," he answered. Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel [which means "he struggles with God], for you have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed."

Jacob said, "Please tell me your name."

But he replied, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, [meaning "face of God"] saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."

The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.

Who of us has not spent a long night wrestling with the unknown? The "man" in this story is commonly understood to be a messenger of God, an angel, but when Jacob asks his name, he merely replies, "Why is it that you ask my name?" He is Mystery, the Unnamable, so evenly matched with Jacob that he might be his twin, his double... his own soul.

Maybe one reason I like this story is that I happen to enjoy watching wrestling. Not the Hulk Hogan kind, with the body slams and stomping on each other's extremities and flinging each other against the ropes, although that does raise some pretty arresting images in the context of this story: Jacob and the angel busting chairs over each other's heads. But what I appreciate is that ancient, slow and dignified kind of wrestling, where two opponents embrace each other like lovers, leaning into each other and using balance, weight, strength and sheer stamina to exploit the other's hidden weaknesses. It's a starkly elemental kind of contest, like boxing, but without the blood. It's a very intimate kind of combat. Very sensual, actually.

But the real reason I like the story of Jacob and the angel is that, like any good story, it can be interpreted in many different ways. Just choose the metaphor that's useful to you at this particular moment in your life. Today, I'm talking about spiritual crisis and

particularly the kind of crisis in which you question old beliefs – in which you wrestle with God, whatever you understand God or the Holy to be.

Unitarian Universalism welcomes the come-outer – the person who has struggled with the faith of her childhood and found it no longer adequate to her present understanding of the world. In this room, there are many who have undergone this kind of revolt against old beliefs, and the subsequent doubt and disillusionment – the real pain – that such a transition can entail.

There are many others here who grew up in religiously liberal or exceptionally tolerant families – who simply grew away from old beliefs, relatively painlessly. And still others who had no religious upbringing to speak of – no religion to rebel against. No God to wrestle with.

But we all, I'm quite sure, have had our spiritual struggles, our dark nights of the soul. I call a crisis spiritual if it causes you to reexamine who you are, what is meaningful to you and how you fit into this world. The wrestling can be with God or his messenger. Or it can be with yourself: your guilt and remorse; your fears; rage; betrayal and loss; grief. Striving with your conscience, or ambition, or tradition. Check as many as apply. We know those nights in which the mind whirls in obsessive circles. Those restless nights when, exhausted, we fall into a half-sleep only to awake a few moments later and start the agony all over again, back at the beginning. Those sweaty, lonely and tearful nights in which we wrestle with the angel, the messenger from our deepest and truest selves.

But let's get a little of Jacob's backstory here so that we can appreciate his ordeal and figure out what it may mean to us. Jacob, along with his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac, was one of the Hebrew patriarchs, the fathers of the Hebrew people, who established Israel's identity as a nation in covenant with God.

Jacob had a fraternal twin named Esau. Emerging first from the womb, Esau was entitled to his father Isaac's lands and flocks and blessing. As the elder, Esau had the legal right to become the leader of his father's people, the new patriarch, upon Isaac's death. But Jacob, the younger twin, was something of a trickster – not so different from the trickster figures found in myths from around the world, like Coyote in the stories of the Indian peoples of the American Southwest. At any rate, Jacob, like most of us, is a flawed and morally ambiguous character. While Esau, his father's favorite, was a hunter – a man's man, rough and hairy – Jacob was his mama's favorite and stayed close to home tending his father's flocks.

His first dubious act was to buy Esau's birthright from him in exchange for a bowl of lentil stew. As this incident shows, Esau probably wasn't the brightest bulb, but he's a sympathetic figure nonetheless. Then, at the urging of his mother, Jacob procures his father's blessing –intended for Esau – by disguising himself in Esau's clothing, covering his bare skin with lamb's wool to mimic Esau's hairiness, and successfully fools the blind Isaac. Poor Esau is out of luck, as Isaac has only one blessing to give. Then

Esau takes a couple of wives that his parents disapprove of, causing Isaac to instruct Jacob to travel abroad to find wives from a different branch of the family. This he does, and to cut a long story short, Jacob after twenty years abroad, has become the husband of two wives, father of many children, and owner of much livestock. His wily nature has made him wealthy and successful.

After some more trickery, he returns home to his father's lands. It is the night before his homecoming and we find him alone, having sent his family, flocks and servants ahead. He has been warned that Esau is coming with a force of four hundred men to welcome him home. Naturally, he wonders what kind of vengeance Esau will seek. This is when Jacob – alone, fearful, uncertain and perhaps conscience-stricken -- encounters the angel.

The man, or angel, or manifestation of God, appears without explanation, and, without explanation, the wrestling match begins. As the hours pass, Jacob comes to know the man well, his strengths, his strategies, his weak places... And the angel, or God, or vision --Jacob's enemy and partner in struggle -- knows him. Is this Being a dream, perhaps, or a projection of Jacob's internal struggle? As the long night wears on, Jacob is tested and comes to know himself. It is the turning point in his maturation. As dawn breaks, the match comes to an end. It's a draw, as Jacob refuses to relinquish the struggle without first receiving the holy being's blessing. The angel gives its blessing, along with a new name, to Jacob. The new name is Israel. "He strives with God." Jacob's twelve sons will go on to father the twelve tribes of the nation of Israel. But Jacob sustains an injury. He will never again be the trickster, the careless, indestructible youth. He has accepted the mantle of leadership, his fate, his purpose.

This is what happens when we wrestle with the angel. This is the nature of spiritual crisis. We emerge scarred, changed.... and wiser than before.

What angels, what manifestations of your spirit have you wrestled with through the dark nights of your soul? What do you wrestle with when you wrestle with God?

In all likelihood it is not the God of the Hebrew Bible, the supernatural being, the father who protects and punishes and tests and rewards. But it may indeed be a messenger of the Holy, if the Holy is what is best within yourself, your longing for spiritual health and wholeness.

It may be the God of your childhood, as you put him to the test of reason and maturity. It may be the values of your past that you strive with, seeking out their strengths and their weak places. It may be a love lost through death or betrayal; a lost sense of purpose; an uncertain future; lost youth; lost health. All of these are variations of a crisis of faith. What they have in common is this: You can no longer depend on what you thought was rock-solid. The world no longer makes sense in the same way. You've lost your sense of orientation, your center. You feel the foundation on which you've built a life, a philosophy, an identity, shifting under your feet.

Someone described a loss of faith to me this way: It was as if everything she knew or thought she understood, her assumptions about the world, were contained in a box in her mind. The box sat on a shelf, along with all the other boxes in her mind – her experiences, her relationships, her decisions, her hopes. Now she had discovered that her faith box was filled with useless junk. She had to take it off the shelf and sort through it and throw a bunch of stuff out. But in the process, all the other boxes on her shelves would tumble down and have to be rearranged – a daunting, even impossible –seeming task. Everything she relied upon had to be re-evaluated.

I've never had that kind of overtly religious crisis, but I have had shocks, disillusionments, revelations, that caused me to question what I thought were givens in my life, that left me feeling disoriented, despairing, bereft of anything solid and dependable. How do you survive this kind of crisis? How do you hold on through the night, wrestling with your soul, refusing to be vanquished? And what blessing do you demand? What is the reward for this kind of suffering?

Well, as with any kind of loss, you allow yourself to feel what you feel: pain, depression, fear, sadness, confusion. Don't be alarmed. You're experiencing a normal part of life, of growth. Do your best to treat yourself gently, as you would a good friend who was ill.

In the beginning, hopelessness and emptiness alternate with anger – anger at whomever or whatever you feel duped you, betrayed you; anger at yourself for your gullibility. The temptation is to become cynical, to refuse to believe or trust in anything at all. Alternatively, you grope around for new certitudes. Your resistance to conversion is low.

Avoid the rebound commitment, the rebound conviction or conversion. Desperate to control the spiritual chaos of disillusionment, you may grab onto the next belief system, the next promise of comfort, before you have examined it in a calmer light. Don't set yourself up for one crisis after another because you are so afraid of not knowing that you are willing to believe almost anything.

Not right away, but in time, you will open yourself again, a little; your defenses will drop once more, just a little; and you will allow yourself to see what has taken root in the empty place inside you.

You will find there freedom, authenticity, and depth of understanding. These are the blessings that your struggle with the angel has left you.

The knowledge of your own toughness is another blessing. You no longer need fear your own weakness, for you have striven with the spirit and you have prevailed.

Comfort with not knowing – another blessing. Not only is it all right not to know; it is inevitable and even cause for celebration. Not knowing keeps you alive. Having wrestled with the angel, the shallow certainty will never again suffice.

And, with time, you are able to pick through the box of lost certainties and gingerly, tenderly, pick out those that continue to have meaning to you. Like the photograph of an old lover, you will find that the remnants of old faith may have their value. They have made you who you are. They made sense at the time, given what you knew and what you had to work with. They were doors into your soul. Doors that no longer open to you; doors that no longer lead to where you need to go; but doors that served their purpose. Thus, reconciliation is another blessing.

We are all stumbling toward truth, opening doors that lead to dead ends, growing wiser on the journey. With every disappointment, we paradoxically grow stronger, knowing that we will survive the questions. “Why is it that you ask my name?” says the angel. In truth, the answer doesn’t matter. All answers are temporary, useful only until a better one comes along.

This is the heart of our faith. The very willingness to wrestle with the questions, the doubt that makes us appear flaky or shallow to some of our more orthodox neighbors, is our depth and our strength. We enjoy the freedom to believe what changing evidence suggests to us. We embrace beliefs that are authentic because they have been tested and are freely chosen. Beliefs that are hard-won and yet ones we are willing, even committed, to adjust or even discard as our understanding of reality evolves.

Wrestling with the angel is not easy work. While, ultimately, the struggle is a solitary one, we are made stronger by the support, kindness, challenge and acceptance of others in this struggle. That is why we come together in houses of worship, in communities of seekers such as this one.

Our wounds heal, for the most part, but we can imagine that Jacob’s hip continued to pain him from time to time, maybe when it rained, or when we felt himself becoming too cocky, too complacent. And this is one more blessing that we demand and receive from the struggle: the reminder of pain, of doubt. The reminder to be compassionate toward the spiritual convictions of others, knowing that, if they are lucky, the time will come, when they, too must grapple with certainty. If they are lucky, they, too, will emerge free to not know, free to change and choose, to be tough and resilient, and confident in their unknowing.

Esau, by the way, greeted Jacob graciously. He had no interest in vengeance. Perhaps we saw in his brother a changed man, a man who had paid the price for his arrogance, a man who had, as Jacob said, seen God face to face and had survived.

May your nights be peaceful. And when they are not, may you be strong and stubborn and hopeful. May you ask for and accept the love that surrounds you. May you have the wisdom to demand a blessing, and may you receive the blessing you require.