

“Rooted in Struggle”

Third Sermon in a Six-Week Series

Genesis 32:9-13, 22-32

New Revised Standard Version

**This manuscript is a guide; because of time, not everything you read printed here is actually included in the spoken sermon.*

Finding inner serenity and peace is all the rage these days. Whether it be through meditation or deep breathing or yoga or centering prayer, we all want to find that “peaceful easy feeling” that the Eagles sang about (the band, not the football team)...that *“peaceful easy feeling where no one lets us down and we feel like we are standing on solid ground.”*

But what if we could change the way we view struggle? What if being Rooted in Struggle isn’t about being tangled up in struggles to the point of suffocation and death but rather about being held and embraced in the midst of our struggles to the point of being blessed and seen by God?

In today’s story, we see the wounds of struggle, but also the wisdom too.

But to get to today, we need to backtrack just a bit. Last week,

in Genesis 18, God appeared in the form of three strangers and promised to Abraham and Sarah that they would have a child. A year later, in Genesis 21, their son was born, and they named him Isaac. When he was 36 years old, Isaac’s mother, Sarah, died. While Isaac was in a field praying one day, a caravan came along, and he met Rebekah who was filling her water jug at the well. Isaac and Rebekah were married. Fun fact: Isaac was the only one of the patriarchs in Genesis who had only one wife. (Bonus points for Isaac!)

For 20 years, Isaac and Rebekah were childless but eventually they had twins, Jacob and Esau. Our story today is about a wrestling match that involves Jacob as a grown man but you should know that Jacob’s been a wrestler since birth. Jacob and Esau were wrestling in the womb. Esau came out first, but

Jacob was gripping his brother's heel. This event gives Jacob his name: *ya'acov* (Jacob) which means "Supplanter" or "holder of the heel" which can also be translated to mean "deceiver," which foreshadows quite a bit in Jacob's life, not least of which is the fact that Jacob deceives his elderly, ailing father and tricks him into giving him both the birthright and the blessing that were, in fact, Esau's right by birth.

That's a whole other story, but let's just say - it sets the stage for today's story. Because Jacob's mom, Rebekah, learns that Esau wants to kill Jacob and so she helps Jacob flee to the land where her brother lives - Haran. And Jacob ends up working for his Uncle Laban for 20+ years - you can read about their tumultuous, doubling deceiving relationship in Genesis 29-31 (I'm telling you the, the Bible is action packed with really juicy stories - that rival the best of Hollywood - you should check them out!)

In the course of those years with his Uncle Laban, Jacob acquires 2 wives, 2 maids, and

a whole lot of people working for him and livestock too (Genesis 30:43).

God sends Jacob a message in a dream that, after all these years, it's time for him to return home. So Jacob takes flight again, but this time, he's not empty handed...he has his entourage of people and animals with him. There was just one catch in this whole homecoming plan: he has to cross the path of his brother, Esau. And the prospect of facing his brother scares Jacob. Big time. He believes that Esau still wants him dead. And for good reason.

In his fear and anxiety, Jacob sends some messengers on ahead of him to talk with his brother, and you know, see how things are - a kind of "testing of the waters" (Genesis 32:5-6). What he learns confirms his fears. Esau has gathered an army of 400, and they are ready to meet him. This does not make Jacob feel good. So Jacob divides his entourage into two camps, sending one convoy ahead of him with gifts in hopes of appeasing Esau (or maybe as protection or a buffer for himself!) Whatever the

reason, it's clear that Jacob doesn't want to be on the front lines.

Jacob comes to the boundary between the land of his Uncle Laban and the land of his Brother Esau - the Jabbok river. It is a literal boundary he must cross, and a metaphorical one as well. He knows that his fate awaits him on the other side of that river. And he is scared. It's life or death for him. We know from the prayer that he prays in verses 9-13 that Jacob is afraid. He flat out tells God that he knows Esau wants to kill him and then he reminds God about what God should do for him (Do you ever do this in your prayers? Tell God how you want God to answer your prayers?) In any case, in this prayer Jacob reminds God of the promise that God made to him: *"I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted because of their number,"* (32:12). In other words, *"Remember God - I can't die - I have a lot more offspring that you need me to make."*

On the night before Jacob is to meet Esau he sends his wives

and kids, the people and things that mean the most to him, across to the other side of the river so that he is alone.

He is alone. Alone with his fear. Alone with his regret. Alone with his thoughts. Alone with all the "what ifs" and "if onlys" that tend to come out in droves at night. It is a moment of crisis for him - literally and spiritually. And before this moment of being alone can even begin to sink, all of the sudden he's *not* alone anymore. A man wrestles with Jacob until daybreak. We don't know where this man came from and at first, we don't know who this man is. Could it be a bandit or a stranger? Could it be that he's wrestling himself, like in a bad dream? Could it be Esau who has crossed over the river to take care of business even before morning comes?

Whoever it is - it is quite a match. An equal match in fact. Because Jacob not only holds his own, he's "winning" or "prevailing" enough that his opponent strikes him a hard blow on his hip.

In our ROOTED scripture discussion this week, John

Anduri reminded us that as a sport, wrestling matches consists of three two-minute periods. Six minutes total. And afterward, both wrestlers are usually spent. This puts this wrestling match in perspective because it was probably longer than six *hours* long! It lasted all night. A relentless struggle.

We find out at the end of the passage, that it is God with whom Jacob has been wrestling...at least, that's who Jacob determines it is, which makes sense, since you're not supposed to see the face of God directly or you might die and this opponent of his is quite concerned with this wrestling match being over before daybreak.

Have you ever been in a wrestling match with God? A struggle that just seems like it won't end? You're giving every ounce of yourself and no matter how hard you fight it just seems like the struggle won't end or the situation won't let up or the prayer won't be answered? Like you just can't catch a break? Maybe even God wants to end the struggle...like in Jacob's case when the man strikes Jacob on the hip because

he wanted it to be over and says, "*let me go, for the day is breaking...*" (v 26) but maybe you are stubborn...and like Jacob...you keep fighting, demanding an answer, demanding some relief, demanding a blessing: "*I will not let you go until you bless me,*" (v 26).

I suspect we all have known struggles like this.

Maybe it's a struggle with someone else - a loved one - a relationship that's been breached. A struggle where you are giving your all, trying to desperately to be heard and seen and understood and all the while probably struggling so hard that you can't fully hear or see or understand the person you are struggling with. Fist fights are one way to struggle with a person. Or screaming matches or intellectual debates or simply slinging insults. (Twitter seems to be the new wrestling ring of our day.) The silent treatment is another... quietly building a case of subtle resentments and disappointments is another. There are many ways we hurt one another - some much more overtly than others.

Maybe it's a struggle like what Greta Thunberg feels...along with the 4 million other people who marched for action against climate change in 163 countries on 7 continents on Friday¹...a struggle that feels so urgent and imminent that nothing is more important than to keep wrestling and to keep striving for change. *"We have been born into this world, we are going to have to live with this crisis our whole lives. So will our children and grandchildren and coming generations,"* Thunberg said. *"We are not going to accept this. We are striking because we want a future and we are going to [struggle] and carry on...I think if enough people get together and stand up for this then that can have a huge difference, to put pressure on the people in power, to actually hold them accountable and to say you need to do something now."*²

¹ Eliza Barclay and Brian Resnick, "How big was the global climate strike? 4 million people, activists estimate," *Vox* (21 Sept. 2019), accessed on Sept. 22, 2019 at <https://www.vox.com/energy-and-environment/2019/9/20/20876143/climate-strike-2019-september-20-crowd-estimate>.

Greta is not going anywhere. She's in the struggle for the long-haul. You know these struggles, too...maybe your issue isn't climate change but it's something...something that you feel is worth fighting for, advocating for, volunteering for, debating for.

Or maybe it's the opposite of a global struggle...maybe you're dealing with something much more solitary. An internal struggle with yourself...with the cycles of addiction or with a suffocating depression that won't let you come up for air or with a chronic illness where all you can feel is the shooting pain causing you to limp and there's no blessing in the mix that you can feel. At least, not yet. It's just darkness. And exhaustion.

During such times of struggle it can feel like all is hopeless, all is lost, and sometimes like God is working against you, and not for you, as the Apostle Paul promises us in Romans 8:31. *"If*

² Morgan McFall-Johnsen, "2 striking photos taken just over a year apart show how Greta Thunberg's climate strike inspired millions," *Business Insider* (20 Sept. 2019), accessed on Sept. 22, 2019 at <https://www.businessinsider.com/2-photos-show-how-greta-thunbergs-climate-strike-inspired-millions-2019-9>.

God is for us, then who can be against us?" Paul writes. Well, it can certainly feel at times like a whole lot of people are against us - or like the world is spiraling in on itself. Or like our own little family is falling apart. Sometimes struggle just feels like an utterly broken heart - shattered by grief. Other times struggle feels like no one understands us, who we are - the core of our identity, and the very thing that we feel like we have to hide is the very thing that would set us free if we could share it with the world. But we don't, because we are afraid. Until we do...and then, when we do...when we share that thing which has been an internal struggle for us for so long - sometimes it's met with grace and love...and sometimes we're just met with even more struggle and more misunderstanding and more hurt from others. And the struggle continues.

I love this text. You know why? It saved me...saved my faith.

This is one of my favorite passages of scripture because unlike a lot of things in the Bible that seem foreign to me,

struggle is something I can understand. I get it. One of the darkest times in my life was when I was in college. I had come through a very serious neck injury in which I was bedridden for a while, but the recovery was long and wearing a half body brace around campus while taking strong pain meds and trying to focus on my studies and make friends was hard. It actually led me to start volunteering with hospice, because I wanted to help people who had to lay in bed for long periods of time. I knew what that was like. Talk about dark nights of the soul. At age 19, I wanted to be around other people who felt like they were dying, because I had felt that way too...and still felt that way at times.

I recovered from that neck injury physical. But spiritually and psychologically it will stay with me forever. I don't have a limp like Jacob, but I do have a deep sense of gratefulness for being able to walk and move with ease. But despite coming through that, just months later one of my closest friends from high school was murdered. Brutally. It was seemingly inexplicable at the time.

Emily's murder involved shooting, stabbing, and burning. She had to be identified by her dental structure.

I had lost grandparents before, but never a friend this close to me. And never had I been so close to such horrific violence. Seeing a murder story on the news about your friend is surreal. My grief was guttural. I vomited when I found out she died. I cried and cried and cried. With friends and by myself. I also laughed with friends as we told stories and went through pictures to plan for her funeral. I helped her mom and our pastor plan the service. I read scripture in her service - my first funeral planning process and my first role of leading in a funeral. I will never forget the opening words my pastor said at her service, *"None of us wants to be here. And none of us would think of being anywhere else."* In that moment of struggle when we were all so confused and hurting and many of us mad at God and mad at Emily and mad at the world, we also knew we needed and wanted to be in church, as close to God as we thought we could get. The

grief has lasted years, and it intensified during her murder trial. I had nightmares. I got depressed again. I still carry the grief with me. I still wonder what her life would be like today. And I still revel in all the wonderful memories we shared.

Three weeks after Emily was murdered, 9/11 happened. I don't mean this to sound like I know it will sound, but 9/11 was somewhat relieving to me because finally the rest of the world was walking around in a fog of despair and grief, just as I had been for three weeks, and I didn't have to pretend anymore that things were okay - because things weren't okay. You know when you are grieving and your whole world has stopped but everyone else is walking around as if everything is normal, but it's not for you? That's the way I had felt. And now everyone felt the way I felt. The world wasn't okay. Everyone was hurting. Everyone was questioning. Everyone was angry and grieving and doubting and confused. And everyone was compassionate and helpful for a few days too. Beauty and tragedy often come together.

You'd think that faith in God would have helped me get through that time, and looking back on it, I can say that it did. But in reality - in the lived eral time of those months and years - it was doubt and questioning that I clung to most fiercely. After breaking my neck, I had transitioned from being a pre-med major to being a Religion and Philosophy major. My whole life I had been good at math and science - I was good at finding the "answers." But all the sudden answers seemed less satisfactory to me, and I wanted to relentlessly pursue the questions, which was what religion was all about.

So I was studying the Bible and theology passionately and academically in school and yet I became more and more disenchanted with the idea that God could care about me and my life if all of this had happened in my life. Not in a 'woe is me' kind of way. Because it wasn't just my suffering. It was everyone suffering. All I could see around me were people suffering and dying...people struggling. I became more and more involved with activism on campus and learning about

world issues, maybe as a way of not fully dealing with my own issues. In any case, I struggled and struggled and held up my questions before God and my professors and my friends and my pastor. Lucky for me, no one really tried to answer my questions for me. Thank God. Because my questions weren't answerable. The people closest to me in my life just let me hold the questions there. That was probably my salvation. To be able to struggle through that long, long night with the questions and just to keep struggling as I asked them over and over and over again. No one told me stop asking them. And I didn't have to apologize for asking them.

A few years later when I was still struggling, but not quite in the darkest thick of the struggle, I read this passage and studied it in divinity school. Genesis 32. And it was like the light bulb came on.

This passage finally clicked it all into place for me. All this time, I had been trying to find ways to get out of the struggling and to set it aside, to bury it and to solve it and to

prevail against it. I just wanted it to be over and done with so I could have faith again. But boy did God show me a different understanding!

I finally had a moment where I came to understand the significance of the blessing that the man gives Jacob as they're wrestling.

Jacob demands a blessing. He's not apologizing for his pain or struggle...he's in it...and he wants an answer, a balm. The man, who Jacob believes is God, asks him, "What is your name?" And Jacob says, "*Jacob, Ya'akov, Supplanter, Deceiver, Heel.*" It's been a fitting name for Jacob because he's pretty much been a "heel" his whole life, especially to his brother Esau.

And the man says, "*You shall no longer be called, 'Jacob, Ya'akov, Supplanter, Deceiver, Heel,' but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed,*" (32:28). Israel. *Yis'rael*, which literally means, "*one who strives or struggles with God.*" **Jacob is named as a Struggler and as a Striver.** It's like in that moment, God sees Jacob

for who he is...not as one who wants to deceive and hurt others but as one who is just struggling...with himself, with life, with his brother, etc. And God names him as a "*struggler/striver*" and it's a *blessing* not a curse! And not only that, but Israel *Yis'rael* is not just Jacob's name, but the name of all of God's people, *all of God's children*...the Israelites are the people of God...and Jesus himself comes from this lineage of Israel, of Strugglers/Strivers. And when I learned this, it was like the biggest lightbulb of my theological life went off. (*poof!...mind blown!*)

God could choose to name God's people anything in the world and God chose to name God's people as "strugglers and strivers." And - to call that a blessing. What?! This was a watershed moment for me in my faith journey because it meant that it was okay to be a Struggler and a Striver. I'm normal. In fact, by virtue of our name, as God's children we are *all* Strugglers and Strivers. Having strong faith is not about living a carefree or worry-free life. Faith is not the opposite of struggle or the opposite of

doubt. Struggle and doubt are part of faith - a key part in fact...so key that it's part of our identity! We're not supposed to live lives free of struggle or suffering. That's not what life is about. Rather, it's **in** the struggle that we meet God, or as Jacob puts it when he names the place Peniel, "*For I have seen God face to face and yet my life is preserved,*" (32:30).

To me, this story has forever changed how I understand scripture and how I understand Jesus' journey to the cross and even my own salvation, my own saving. The saving comes not *from* struggle, but *in* struggle. I've always been one who struggles with theology and doubts and ideas and what's the right thing to do or to think in life...my life is lived in grey (not in black and white) and to realize that God names and blesses God's people as strugglers and strivers freed me from feeling like all this struggle was a bad thing or that I lacked faith for feeling this way. It helped me realize that all the struggling was not leading me away from God, but it was the closest I've ever been to God, in fact. It's a myth that being a Christian makes life

great. To be a Christian is to understand life as struggle.

As a pastor, I've heard your stories too and I know that your stories also speak this truth. This is how faith is for so many of us. It is in the struggle that we realize just what really matters in life and just how much we need and feel God's presence. We need God when we are suffering and struggling. We think we can get away with living an okay life without God when things are peachy keen. But pretty soon things aren't going to be peachy keen. And there is freedom and deep faith in realizing that the life of faith isn't about escaping struggle to find some kind of tranquility or serenity but rather it's about searching for God in the struggle, and maybe even realizing it's God that we're wrestling with and that's okay. God can take it. In fact, that's where God wants to be, as close to us as God can get.

I think God does want us to have those moments of peace where we can feel like we are okay and all is going to be okay. One of the last gifts that Jesus gives his disciples before he dies is peace: "*My peace I*

give to you, my peace I leave with you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid,” (John 14:27).

I think Jesus gives this assurance of peace because he knows that many moments are not going to feel like that. They are going to feel like Jacob on the banks of the Jabbok. And we're going to walk away limping. Forever. With a scar that people can see. And we'll have to talk about that scar...we'll have to tell the story of that night on the Jabbok river...and the question is - how will we tell that story? Will it be a story of anguish or a story of blessing? Will the wrestling and struggling be something that we describe as a time when we didn't have faith or when we couldn't see God OR will we describe that time as one of the most real faith moments of our lives?...One of the times when we were so close to God we almost couldn't stand it?

To be ROOTED in Struggle is who we are as children of God. “*Yis'rael*”, One Who Strives/One Who Struggles.

That is our name. God could've given Jacob a whole host of new names...something that meant Faithful, or Perfect, or Peaceful, or Happy...and God chose, for the name that would come to represent all of God's people, the name *Israel* - *One Who Struggles/One Who Strives*. God's people are Strugglers and Strivers. This is good news for those of us who find ourselves in a wrestling match right now...whether it's with ourselves, with God, with a family member, or with the world's leaders on policies around climate change. Struggling and striving. That is our name, that is our blessing, as children of God.

In a very faithful way, when we wrestle with God, we are holding onto God so tightly because we believe in God's promises and because we are lamenting that they are not true for us or the world right now. Wrestling with God is a faith-filled act. And even more than us holding onto God in these moments of struggle...God is holding onto us.

You know what the most beautiful part of this passage is for me? Somehow in the midst

of Jacob's struggle, even though it's not easy, it scars him for the rest of his life, after all... Jacob/Israel somehow sees God: *"So Jacob called the place Peniel, for I have seen God face to face and yet my life is preserved."* And then - get this! - he uses this same Hebrew word for seeing God's face, just a few verses later in Chapter 33.

After his night long struggle, Jacob does, in fact, meet his brother Esau - and his four hundred men! And do you know what happened? *"Esau runs up to meet Jacob and embraces him, and he falls on his neck and kisses him and they weep together,"* (Genesis 33:4). It is a moment of inexplicable reconciliation and reunion. And Lord knows, God must have been working in Esau's life too to get him to a place where he could forgive Jacob. But it's in this moment of reconciliation that Jacob also sees the face of God, for in verse 10 he says, *"for truly, since you have received me with such favor, to see your face is like seeing the face of God."*

This is the good news: The face of God is revealed both in the Moment of Struggle *and* in the Moment of Reconciliation.

I have come to believe that anything really real and transformative in our lives comes in and through struggle. When things are going good, it's really hard to change or to let ourselves be changed. But when we are struggling, we know we must change. And that's when Christ steps in. And reminds us he's there...and invites us to look at his life...for a different way to live. It's not going to be easy. Following Christ is actually a way of inviting Struggle to come into your life, because nothing about following Jesus is easy - it's all about pushing beyond our comfort zones, and paying attention to people we'd rather ignore, and giving away money we'd rather keep, and going places we'd just as soon avoid, and forgiving people we'd just as well hold a grudge against, and loving people we really have no reason to love. The gospels are no fairy tale. And neither is the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, the Story of God's people...we see from the beginning in this

story, how the people of God,
are Strugglers and Strivers and
how seeing God in the struggle
allows us to see God in the
Healing and in the
Reconciliation too. We can't
have one without the other.

These are our roots, my friends:

- We are Rooted in our
Origins of being Co-
Creators, made in the Divine
Image of God, made from
both the breath of God and
the dust of the earth.
- We are Rooted in Promises
that God will be faithful,
even when we struggle to
see those promises fulfilled.
- And we are Rooted in our
identity as Strugglers and
Strivers...and that identity,
we're told, is a blessing.

So keep wrestling through the
night and struggling through
your life. Don't be afraid to
demand that blessing. And -
don't be surprised when that
blessing doesn't miraculously
heal you, but rather causes you
to limp. We walk around in the
world showing both the
wisdom of our struggles...and
our wounds too.

And through all the wrestling
remember...that Daybreak
always comes.

Where do you see the face of
God?

Whether in Struggle or in
Reconciliation or somewhere in
between...God is there...God
is always there. There is
nowhere where God is not.

Thanks be to God for that!

Amen.