

## **Struggling With God**

Rev. Dr. Robert C. Angus

Genesis 32:22-31 “You have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed.”

Several years ago I led a group of clergy to see the archeological and biblical sights in Jordan. On our first day driving north to Jerash we crossed the river Jabok. I had remembered the name from the story of Jacob but suddenly here we were at the river. Actually it's more like Rock Creek, not a big river but in the Middle East any stream of water is important.

The guide reminded us of the story, how Jacob, on his way back to Canaan, sent his family, flocks and entourage across the river to travel on ahead. Staying behind alone at in the dark, he encountered someone or something who wrestled with him all through the night. He tried to find out what or who it was by asking his name, but his opponent refused to tell him. When Jacob seemed to be prevailing in the struggle his opponent dislocated his hip but Jacob hung on anyway and would not let him go. It was part of the cultural mythology that spirits or supernatural beings had to retreat into the darkness when daylight came, so when day began to break Jacob hung on and asked for a blessing, the blessing was given and with it Jacob was given a new name, Israel, which means “one who strives with God.”

*I'm curious about how many of you remember the Bible stories about Jacob and his brother Esau and his later sojourn with his uncle. Raise your hand if you do.*

The story of Jacob, one of the Jewish patriarchs, is not a very ethical one. Jacob cheated his twin brother out of his birthright and then deceived his father into giving him the blessing. Because his brother threatened his life he had to run away north and find refuge on the farm of his uncle in Harran, in what is now present day Turkey. Life wasn't easy there and when he fell in love with his cousin Rachel, his uncle made him work fourteen years before he got her hand in marriage. He was forced to marry her older, less attractive sister, Leah, first.

Over the years through trickery and deception Jacob was able to increase his flocks and become wealthy at his uncle's expense. His cousins were rightfully jealous and when things got tense Jacob took his family and flocks on the long journey back to Canaan his home land, the land we know as Palestine.

Well aware of the past problem with his brother Esau, he sent a large gift of flocks and cattle ahead hoping to appease his brother's anger and get his forgiveness. As Jacob neared Canaan he learned that Esau was coming to meet him with an army of 400 men. Jacob was afraid that Esau's threat that he would kill him was still on Esau's mind.

Throughout the story of Jacob we learn of a man who had little ethical or moral sensibilities. He got what he wanted by whatever crooked means was available. A crafty, cynical, man, Jacob was not someone you would have trusted.

The man Israel who emerges the next day from his overnight wrestling match with the divine being is a changed man. He was to be forever reminded of the struggle he went through by the painful limp that was to be with him the rest of his life. The man Israel, whose descendents are the Jewish people, turned out to be a better man than he was before.

The struggle at the Jabok between Jacob and the divine being was a transforming event. It revealed a man who was persistent in the face of almost overwhelming odds. Who, even when he was seriously injured, would not give up until he received a blessing from his supernatural opponent. He never got the name of his adversary but he realized that he had struggled with God and prevailed. A struggle which must have brought to his mind the many wrongs he had done and the need for forgiveness if his life was to continue. He received the blessing and a new name which would be carried by his descendents.

No longer the deceitful, crafty, Jacob – he was now Israel the leader of his tribe and a people who would become a great nation. He was to go on and be reconciled with his brother Esau who forgave him with an unexpected graciousness. The struggle Jacob had with God symbolized the struggle that the people of Israel were to have with God over the centuries. Time and time again they turned away from God, disobeyed his commandments and when things went bad they complained that God had forsaken them. Time and time again God reached out through the prophets to call his chosen people back to a faithful relationship but just as often they went their own way. The struggle was to keep God's favor while putting their allegiance in power and might. Israel's high point came during the kingdoms of David and Solomon. For most of their history they have been under the domination of other rulers and empires.

What does this story have to say to us? Are there not times when all of us also struggle with God? Not in a physical way of course, but in our minds and spirits?

How often I have heard people who were going through a really difficult time say, "What have I done to deserve this?" Many other times when a spouse or child was suffering pain I have been asked, "Why does God allow such suffering?" Why did God allow my child to die?

Perhaps some of you have thought the same thoughts, have felt like crying out demanding that God give some answer to your pain. When going through such experiences some people may question the very existence of God. In such moments our struggle with God is very real.

I have a friend who claims to be an atheist. He says that for him the very concept of God does not make sense. "Where in the universe can God be?" he asks. "From what our telescopes reveal no one has found a heaven for resurrected souls." Unfortunately in simply dismissing the idea of a divine being he has been unwilling to take on a serious struggle with God.

God is a spiritual reality far greater than the universe we know or how many other universes there may be. God created it all! When I see the beauty of the earth and the heavens I believe that it is not accidental, it has been created for a purpose and for our enjoyment. I can relate to the writer of Psalm 19:

"The heavens are telling the glory of God:  
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork."

The amazing pictures of nebulae and galaxies taken by the Hubble telescope show the startling beauty and color of God's creative work in the far reaches of the universe. When I read of the life of Jesus and his self-sacrificing love, he reveals the true nature of God, and I know that God is a God of love and compassion.

It was Jacob's persistence through the night, even after he was injured that made him prevail. The lesson to be learned is that we must be persistent and hold on until we receive the blessing. God rewards us with faith, but there are times that we must struggle for it.

We struggle with our reason to overcome simplistic concepts of God in order to come to an understanding of God that we can really believe in. Our struggle with God becomes painfully real when we have done something of which we are ashamed --- even when no one knows --- God knows.

Sometimes we cry out to God in anguish when we feel forsaken or betrayed. We read such cries in the book of Psalms, one which gave rise to Jesus' cry from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" we also hear the words of

scripture, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for my whole life long.” And the words of Jesus, “Do not let your hearts be troubled, you believe in God, believe also in me, in my Father’s house there are many rooms, if it were not so would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?”

Over the centuries men and women of faith have struggled with God through their doubts and fears, they have held on in that struggle until they have received the blessing of faith, comfort and hope. God does not leave us in our struggle, God remains faithful in all our relationships and grants us his peace.

As we come to terms with our failures, our sins, and our suffering we come to terms with God. The God who never forsakes us, the God who is always present with us, the God who bears our pain as Jesus bore his pain for us on the cross. Amen.