

The One Who Strives with God

Genesis 32:22-31

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I grew up in a Southern Baptist home. My grandfather was a deacon. My father was an army chaplain endorsed by the SBC. My mother even served as the Director of Children's Ministry in a SBC church before being fired for not being a man. To say that I knew the ins-and-outs of Southern Baptist Policy is an understatement.

By age six, I knew it well enough that I was able to con my own mother. At school, we had to take accelerated reader tests. Some of you may remember those. I was in first grade and every week we had to take a test for a book we had read.

That same year Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's stone movie came out in theaters. My mom taught an 11th grade girls Sunday School class. Laura Anne was one of the girls in her class and she convinced my mom to let me go with her to see the movie.

We went on a Saturday and the following Friday when I got in the computer lab to take our reading test, I realized I had not read anything. So, I was scrolling through the tests available for books to see how I could fake it. I did not want to have to tell my teacher I didn't read it. As I was scrolling, I saw that there was a test for Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone. I decided to try my luck and I ended up making a 100.

What I didn't realize is that the Harry Potter books were a 3rd through 5th grade reading level. My teacher immediately called me over to discuss this. She knew me well enough to know that I could not have read a Harry Potter book by myself.

So she asked at first if my mom had read it to me and I said no, I read it by myself. My teacher nodded her head and I went back to my seat.

When the other kids went to play for recess, Ms. Orgra called me over to inform me that she called my mom during lunch to inquire about the Harry Potter book. Hours later, after sitting with this knowledge all day, knowing that my mother knew I looked my teacher in the face and lied to her, my teacher who was also a family friend, I walked outside to the car rider line.

I saw my mom pulled up and I slid into the backseat of our Ford station wagon. My mother did not say a single word. The car ride home was silent.

When we got into the house, my mom immediately said in her most Georgia accent: "Just what exactly was it that you were thinking?"

I knew I had to be quick. I mean I was about to get a spanking and who knows what toy would be taken away, so I thought in my head, "Well, I love Jesus and I gotta do this anyway at some point so..."

I started crying and repenting from my sins. "I am a sinner and I need Jesus in my heart. I don't want to lie anymore!"

I started crying so hard. I'm not sure what my mom was thinking, you can ask her later, but we said the sinner's prayer together and that is the day I became a "Christian."

Now, was that a moment of true transformation?

No, I wouldn't say that my life was changed then. I mean it was in the sense that instead of getting in trouble, it became a celebration. Then, yes, that day was changed.

It was not however a transformative story.

It is not a great testimony of me meeting God face-to-face or being radically changed. In our scripture today, we see that Jacob has a transformative moment that even grants him a new name. This is not the first time that we see Jacob have an encounter with God. Remember in Genesis, chapter 28, when Jacob has the dream about the ladder. However, this encounter is different. Jacob wrestles with a man all night long.

They do not stop until daybreak.

And when Jacob asks for the man's name, he gets no answer.

My first question in this text is always who is this man Jacob is fighting?

A quick google search will give you a ton of answers:
God.

An angel.

A vampire — not even joking about that. This is a real theory some people believe.
Or himself.

I don't think it matters exactly who the man was, except for us to note that there is a divine connection between Jacob and this man wrestling. Our most transformative moments in life usually stem from challenges in life. The term a lot of poets and Christian mystics use to describe these moments is the "Dark Night of the Soul."

For psychology nerds, another modern term used for this is the death of the ego.

These are not little everyday challenges like traffic or being late to work, but life defining challenges that change your being. Something that shakes you to where you can never return to life as it was before. Jacob was having a life changing moment.

Jacob was preparing to meet with his brother Esau, the brother who was angry at him for tricking him out of his birthright. Jacob had just heard that Esau was traveling with 400 military personnel. Jacob only had his wives, his children, and his servants. Jacob sends everyone and everything away to gain some solitude.

The scripture does not say why but I imagine that it is due to the fact that he needs to mentally prepare for what is about to come. Jacob is alone and a man comes by and they wrestle until day break. He is wrestling with probably a mix of the divine and himself. No, I am not saying the man was Jacob and God mixed.

What I am saying is that Jacob had an internal struggle with himself, as well as a physical struggle with the man. This is often the case with dark nights of the soul.

We start by having challenges thrown at us or wrestling that we have no choice but to face.

Typically this struggle is the catalyst to change our beliefs, giving us new insight, and more compassion towards fellow humans. The struggle reveals truth to us in ways we have not seen before. And when we take that struggle to God and wrestle with God about the whats, the whys, and the hows: asking the questions, reading scripture, yelling at and with God, crying.

When we embrace wrestling, we become transformed by the grace and love of God.

It is not pretty.

As a child, I always heard God's love being talked about like a gift being wrapped up and presented nicely to you. That once you received that love then everything would be happy sunshine, when in reality I have not seen that always be the case.

When Jacob is fighting, the man injures Jacob's hip, so that Jacob has a limp for the rest of his life. At day break, the man tells Jacob to let him go. And Jacob says he won't until the man blesses him. This is when Jacob's name becomes Israel.

Israel means one who strives with God.

Not only did Jacob have a physical reminder of what had occurred, but his name was changed so everyone would know what happened that night.

Now, just because Jacob has a name change and a limp does not mean that he isn't still the same person. In Genesis Chapter 37, Israel will pull another fast trick on his brother Esau.

When people hear being transformed by God's love, I think they believe that means they lose who they are. And that is not true, the bible tells us that we are made in the image of God, that we are fearfully and wonderfully made. God created us to be our truest selves.

Now that is not an excuse to act out or to have bad behavior and blame it on that is how God made you. God may have made you to be a creative thinker and storyteller, but

that does not mean that it is okay to make up a story about the woman down the street and gossip to everyone about her. It means that God made you for a unique purpose.

And sometimes, our dark nights of the soul are what bring us to our truest selves.

I know from personal experience that my biggest life changing moments were at 17, 22, and 24. These moments defined my life.

I am sure you now are thinking of some of your own life defining moments, challenges, and wrestling. My moments and wrestlings helped form me and show me who God has called me to be, made me to be, and the life God has dreamed of for me.

And there will be more moments for you and me.

Beloved, we are in one of those moments right now. I believe our society as a whole is in a dark night of the soul. We are collectively wrestling with a virus, wrestling with unjust systems in our country, prejudice, racism, classism, and our own convictions on these issues.

Our collective society is being transformed. We are having a divine encounter. To quote *Hamilton* the musical: "Look around, look around at how lucky we are to be alive right now."

You may say, "Hold up pastor Katie... lucky?!"

And i would say, "Think about it."

Beloved, we have the chance to challenge our own beliefs and embedded prejudices, to lean into God's love and truth. We have the chance to lead by standing up for that love and truth, to demand justice for others, to wash our hands, to show compassion to our neighbors.

We can only do these things if we first wrestle with ourselves and with God. Then we can collectively wrestle with the issues at hand. We can collectively go through the dark night of the soul, to do so and not lose our faith or who we are, but to make our society better, to make our church family stronger.

And we may have a limp or two afterwards. It may not be perfect or all sunshine and rainbows. Wrestling is messy. But we cannot lose sight of God's love. And we cannot turn a blind eye to what is happening around us.

So I ask you what will come from this wrestling? Who will I be? Who will you be? And who will we be as a church when all is said and done?

Amen.

