

PRAY.

If you'll find the insert with the message notes on it, I'd like to ask you to write down a couple of questions. Question 1: What am I wrestling with? Question 2: What do I want from God? At the end of our time together today, you will have the chance to come back to these questions and respond to them. The goal is to get those things we're wrestling with to the cross and to encounter Jesus there.

This month, that's what we're talking about. As we move toward Easter, I want to look with you at some stories that show us what it looks like to have an authentic encounter with Jesus ... because that's what we're after. It doesn't seem to matter whether you are a non-believer or a follower ... we're all here looking for a real encounter with a real God. I'm thinking some of us in this room have never had that ... and then, for some of us, it has been so long since we've had a personal encounter with God that we've forgotten that that's the goal. So I'm praying for two things this month ... that God will meet us here ... and that we'll be ready for him.

(SHOW WRESTLEMANIA PICS ONE AT A TIME) So ... I want to test your wrestling knowledge. Do you know who this is? (SCROLL THROUGH THEM AS FOLKS GUESS)

How about this one? (SHOW JACOB WRESTLING) This is the *real* Mr. Wrestler #1 ... maybe the very first professional wrestler ever recorded. His name is Jacob, and he was born wrestling ... literally. His mother, Rebekah, was pregnant with twins and as they were coming from the womb, Jacob ... who was not the first to come out ... grabbed his brother's heel, almost like he was trying to pull him back so he could get in front. I don't know what you call that move in the wrestling world but that's how Jacob and Esau came into this world ... Jacob grabbing his brother's heel.

Now, in the Hebrew world your name was everything. They didn't flip through baby books looking for cute names. Clearly, if you are going to name a kid Mordecai or Shelumiel or Pedahzur, you'd better have a good reason for it. In that world, the name your parents gave you had a serious meaning behind it and the assumption was that this name laid a destiny on you.

So this baby's parents named him Jacob, which means something like "to grab from behind." It has a sense about it of scheming or cheating people, which is *not* the nicest name to give your kid, but that's exactly who Jacob became. He became a guy who wrestled with his brother, who wrestled with God, who wrestled with everything. As a young man, he conned his brother out of his birthright as the older son. He deceived his father, too. Then a few years later, he scammed his uncle who was to become his father-in-law. Jacob had a way of dropping bombs into every relationship. He had two wives who fought with each other, no real home and a miserable life.

And that's where he was the day he wrestled with God. I want to ask you to close your eyes and hear the story from Genesis 32 (BRAD/ STEVE READS)

*Genesis 32:22-32 -- 22 That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. 23 After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. 24 So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. 25 When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. 26 Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." 27 The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. 28 Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with*

*human beings and have overcome.” 29 Jacob said, “Please tell me your name.” But he replied, “Why do you ask my name?” Then he blessed him there. 30 So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.”*

Now ... this is an Old Testament story ... but there’s a world of “Jesus” in there. The story begins with this: Genesis 32:22-24 - *22 That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. 23 After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. 24 So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak.* It begins with all the stuff Jacob brought to that wrestling place. When he got there, he had all his people and all his stuff. It sort of reminds me of that story in the New Testament of a time when a very rich man came to Jesus and asked him, “What must I do to get eternal life?” And Jesus told him if he was serious about that, he needed to let go of his stuff. That guy walked away sad, but Jacob must have sensed that God was close ... so he sent all his stuff on ahead ... and by the time “the man” shows up to wrestle with him, Jacob is alone. The point is: Sometimes God will not show up until we are completely stripped down ... to nothing but our SELF.

And this is what Jesus taught his followers. He said (Matthew 16:25-26) - *25 For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. 26 What good will it be for you to gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul? Or what can you give in exchange for your soul?* In other words, if we’re hungry for an authentic encounter with Jesus, that encounter may begin with sending some things on across the river. We may have to give up some illusions we’ve been carrying, and we may have to get honest with ourselves about what isn’t working. Jesus says, if you want to find your life ... your destiny ... you are going to have to let go of some things.

The point is this: *Sometimes God wrestles with us not to take us apart, but so he can put us back together again.* I'm just wondering ... if you're wrestling right now ... is there something you need to send on across the river ... so you can encounter Jesus?

(Genesis 32:25-26) - *When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. 26 Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."*

Which is the best line in the whole story. It is so bold. That is Jacob doing the one thing he has known how to do since before he was born. He may have failed at life on a lot of levels, but at least he knew how to hang on.

And wow ... that speaks to me. I have to tell you ... this is the part of the story that got me this week because I am great about wrestling with God, and I'm just like you. I feel like I've failed on so many levels. I get to that place where I just want to throw my hands up and give in. You know? But I read Jacob's line this week – "I will not let you go until you bless me." – and I *get* that kind of hunger. I *get* that. And maybe you do, too. So maybe we both need to make that our prayer. "Jesus, I will not let you go until you bless me." And I guess the second part of that prayer is, "Lord, help me let go of anything that stands between me and your blessing."

It makes me think of how they catch monkeys in Africa. Do you know how they do that? They cut off the top of a gourd, so the opening is just big enough for a monkey's hand to fit through. Then they put some treat inside and put the gourd where a monkey can get to it. And the monkey comes along, reaches in for the treat but once he grabs it, he can't get his hand out. And the monkey doesn't have sense enough to let go of the treat to get his hand out ... so now he is a monkey with a big gourd on his arm, which is an easy target for a hunter.

What is it Jesus said? In order to save your life, you have to lose your SELF.

I'm guessing this is a pretty common crossroad for a lot of folks. We want God's blessing over our life, our marriage, our family, our job ... but we've got all this junk attached that is standing between us and an authentic encounter. So we're left with the question: What am I going to hold onto? My stuff, or God? I asked you to write down a question at the beginning of the message: What am I wrestling with? Maybe another way to put that is: What am I holding onto?

Here's how the story unfolds so far:

1. Jacob sends his stuff across the river. So its just him and God.
2. God wrestles with Jacob to put him back together again.
3. In the wrestling, Jacob sees what he's missing. He needs a blessing and asks for a blessing.
4. God gives the blessing, and it is in the form of a new name. He tells Jacob who he really is.

(Genesis 32:27-28) - *The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. 28 Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with human beings and have overcome."* Here is this guy who has lived for his whole life with a name that has been like a straight jacket. He has been bound up in this identity that has brought only shame and brokenness to his life. And what he wants more than anything is a new name. A second chance. Which is exactly what *Paul* says happens when we encounter Christ. He says (2 Corinthians 5:17) -- *"If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has gone. The new is here!"* This is what it means to encounter Jesus. It means getting something new.

God names him *Israel*, which means, “the one who strives with God” (32:28). So he goes from being a wrestler to a struggler ... which somehow doesn’t seem like much of a leap ... but it is. Because from there out, Jacob and his people will be known as the ones who never let go of God. And listen to this! The name “Israel” can also mean, “God strives.” Which means God won’t let go, either. So Jacob’s people will be the people God never abandons. And here’s the great news! By faith, *you* are Jacob’s people! *You* are one God will never abandon!

Come to the cross this morning with *that* great truth wrapped around you, Mr. Wrestler! God is not about to give up on you! Even if it takes *years* for you to get from “wrestler” to “struggler,” God will not let go. You may get it wrong the first ten times. You may have to start over ... and *over and over* ... but God is not about to give up on you.

Beth Moore says, “When we struggle through a crisis with God all the way to the blessing, we are gloriously redefined.”

(Genesis 32:29-30) - *Jacob said (to God), “Please tell me your name.” But (“the man”) replied, “Why do you ask my name?” Then he blessed him there. 30 So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.”* Jacob did that thing Jesus talks about. He decided that hanging on to God was more important than his very life, and he took that gamble and in the bargain he ended up with a whole new identity.

Two really huge punchlines to this story. First, that thing about Jacob’s hip. Do you remember? In that wrestling match, God knocked Jacob’s hip out of joint, so for the rest of his life, Jacob walked with a limp. Which is so much what we all worry about when we think about an encounter with Jesus. We worry, “What will happen to me if I get that close? If I go

with God, what is he going to ask me to give? Maybe I don't want to walk with a limp." But here's the thing: Have you ever met a person ... encounter or no encounter ... who isn't walking with a limp? At least, limping with God has a point to it. Which limp would you rather have? One limp is a disability and the other limp is a blessing. If I have to walk with a limp, I think I would rather walk with a God-given limp.

That's one punch line. Here's the other one. After Jacob wrestles with God and gets his blessing, he goes on across the river and meets up with his brother ... the one he'd swindled all those years ago ... and makes his peace with him. Jacob's first act as Israel ... the who is hanging on to God and who God is hanging onto ... his first act as that new creation is to reconcile with his brother. Don't lose that point. An encounter with God leads to forgiveness.

What are you hanging onto? What are you wrestling with? What do you want from God? What is the name God wants to lay on your life?