

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

1045 Old Academy Road  
Fairfield, CT 06824

Telephone: 203-259-5596



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Sermon Title: Wrestling with God

Scripture: Genesis 32

Pastor: Rev. Alida Ward

My son, Andres – and before I go on, let me assure you that there is nothing any child of a minister likes more than hearing their name in the first sentence of a sermon – **Not!** But anyway – my son, Andres, who is headed into his senior year of high school, a couple years ago announced to David and me that he was taking up a new athletic pursuit. I gotta give him credit – I avoided organized sports like the plague when I was in high school, fearing injury, embarrassment, or ... no, that's pretty much it, injury and embarrassment. Andres is considerably more adventurous than his mother, and in his sophomore year of high school decided to give wrestling a try for the first time.

I thought this was a great idea. From a mother's perspective, wrestling seemed like a nice, safe choice. There were no little balls to hit you in the face, no sticks that people would be whacking you with, no large men in helmets hunting you down, no epees – I think that's what they use in fencing, right? – no epees poking you in the ribs. You just kinda did what every kid runs around doing with their cousins, right? -- pushing each other around a little on sofa cushions until someone gets tired.

That's what I thought, anyhow. Which meant, of course, that the first wrestling match I attended as a parent was a somewhat traumatizing experience for me. There was my son, my child, down on the mat, and somebody was trying to hurt him, it appeared – twist his head around backward and wrap his leg around his neck. Or so it appeared. I wanted to run down to the mat immediately and pull that awful boy off my son immediately. “How can you STAND this?” I said to the mom next to me, who then nervously moved away from me a bit. Now, granted, Andres seemed to be doing to the other kid what was being done to him. But I, I didn't like it one bit. Wrestling was waaay more intense than I had realized.

Well, wrestling, real intense wrestling, is exactly what happens in this scripture passage. It's an extraordinary story, one that has captured the imagination of artists and poets and writers and preachers over centuries: Jacob wrestling with the Angel. Jacob, that is, wrestling with God.

You remember Jacob – he was the one born with a twin brother, Esau, and since Esau popped out first, he was therefore the oldest son, and in line to receive his father’s inheritance. But when the boys were in their teens, Jacob cleverly tricked his legally-blind father Isaac, by sneaking into his tent when the sun was low and visibility bad, convinced him that he was actually Esau and wheedled the inheritance money out of him right then and there. Esau, needless to say, had been furious, and Jacob had had to leave the country but *quick*. And now the years have gone by, and Jacob is on his way home, headed home to see his brother Esau after twenty years, because some little voice had told him to. Some little voice had told him it was time to make things right – or so he thought, anyhow.

Now, just a mile or so from Esau’s house, he wasn’t so sure he’d heard right. ‘Cause the word was that Esau was preparing less than a warm welcome for him. So Jacob had sent his family, his entourage, off without him, and there on the banks of the River Jabbok, the only thing still separating him from Esau, he lay down to sleep by himself. He lay there in the dark agonizing over the choices he’d made and the choices that lay ahead, struggling to understand whether he was doing the right thing, the faithful thing, questioning whether that little voice urging him forward had really steered him right.

And suddenly in the darkness, the story says, in the darkness there was with him a man who grabbed him and pinned him, forced him to wrestle, pushed him and held him. And they wrestled through the darkest hours of the night until the sky began to lighten with the coming dawn. And when Jacob had almost pinned this mysterious opponent, the man touched his hip and threw it out of joint. But Jacob still wouldn’t let go – “not until you bless me,” he gasped to the wrestler, “not until I have a blessing.” So this man, this wrestler, held Jacob and blessed him, and said “Jacob, I give you a new name: you are now Israel, the one who has struggled with God and man and has prevailed.” And with that the wrestler disappeared, leaving Jacob alone again as the sun lifted above the horizon. *I have seen the face of God*, Jacob whispers to himself. *I have seen the face of God*. And as the dawn breaks, he picks himself up and heads down the road, limping but no longer afraid, to find his brother Esau.

What *is* this story? In the midst of a tale about brothers and birthrights and feuds, families and money, what is this story doing here, this odd little scripture about Jacob struggling through the night with someone he somehow knows in the end is God?

A Rabbi I heard once said this was one of the most important stories there is in scripture, because it says this: it says that God allows, God *invites*, human beings to wrestle with God, You are allowed to struggle directly with God. “Think of it,” she said, “think of *when* this story was written down. All around then were Gods who were terrifying and remote, Gods you could not approach except through oracles and shrines – it was a world where humans

and Gods did not interact, and along comes this story of a God who allows you to struggle with him, who invites you to.” A God who is willing – literally, in this case -- to wrestle things through with us.

I’m with the Rabbi on this. This is one of the most important stories. It reminds us that we worship a God who allows us to question, who urges us to wonder, who is willing to struggle with us, and wrestle with us through what is hard and frightening and mysterious and puzzling. We worship a God who invites the questions, is not afraid of the doubts, who says “bring it on.”

The preacher Rob Bell, who is pastor of a huge church, Mars Hill Bible Church in Grand Rapids, has written what I think is a pretty wonderful book called ‘Love Wins’ (in fact, I’m planning to lead a study series on it this Fall). It’s a wonderful book, but it’s gotten him in a heap of trouble; because he’s a leading evangelical, and his book dares to question a lot of the conventional evangelical beliefs about heaven and hell and what it means to be saved. And whole lot of people have questioned his, well, his *right* to question.

So here’s what he says, in the book’s preface: “I know some communities don’t encourage open, honest inquiry. I know lots of people have voiced a concern or raised a question only to be told by their family, their church “We don’t discuss those things here.” But I believe the discussion *itself* is divine. Jesus himself responded to almost every question he was asked with – a question. There is no question that Jesus cannot handle, no discussion too volatile, no issue too dangerous.” In other words, Rob Bell is saying, this is a Jesus who invites us to wrestle. This is a God who invites us to wrestle.

That’s what we believe here, that’s what we believe here at Greenfield Hill. That this is a place where it’s okay to question, to ask, to wonder, to disagree, to doubt, to be sure, to doubt again. Because this is the place where we worship a God who invites us to do all those things, to wrestle and struggle just as Jacob on that dark night of the soul wrestled and struggled. God can handle it, just as God had no trouble handling Jacob that night.

Rob Bell has gotten flak for daring to question. Well, I am no Rob Bell, but my one and only live TV interview as a pastor nailed me on exactly the same topic. Actually, I wasn’t yet a pastor. It was my last year at seminary, I was working as a student minister at First Church, New Haven, and since we were the biggest oldest church on the Green, our minister got called on a lot to kind of be ‘the voice of Protestantism.’ To represent. Only on this particular day he was on vacation when the phone call came in from Channel 8. Diane Smith, Channel 8’s popular anchor, wanted a panel of ministers on her ‘Live at Five’ show, to debate the hot new movie of the moment, “The Last Temptation of Christ.” This was 23 years ago, people, some of you were probably still in middle school, but let me remind you, this was *big*, there were pickets outside movie theatres all over the world. ‘Cause “The Last Temptation” raised the question about whether Jesus really wanted to go to the cross, or whether in fact he was tempted just to be an ordinary guy, with a wife and family.

The Pope was furious, pastors and priests across the country were calling for boycotts, and Diane Smith wanted a token mainline Protestant for her panel to discuss this, live. On finding that the regular minister was on vacation, she asked if there was *any* other minister, and so our helpful church secretary volunteered me, the student minister.

And so it was that I found myself, sitting in a TV studio two hours later with two really really angry pastors, loaded for bear. Diane's hair looked fabulous; I was wishing I'd *brushed* my hair. I also couldn't figure out how to keep the little earphone thing in my ear, so as the cameras went on, I was sitting there, I kid you not, like this (*finger in ear!*)

And so the debate was on. And basically what the other pastors said was this: We don't like the movie. We don't like how Jesus is portrayed, all *questioning* and stuff. And we definitely don't want our congregations to see it because they might start asking questions too. And that, *that*, would be the end of their faith. "I see," said Diane. "And you, Miss um – Miss – and you, what do you think?"

"Well," I said, finger still in ear, "it kind of worries me that these guys are so afraid of people asking questions and having doubts. It seems to me that the way our faith grows stronger is by doing exactly that, right? Doubting and searching and asking and wrestling with things." "Well," said the pastor sitting next to me, "maybe after you've actually *graduated* from seminary and are a *real* pastor, you might see things differently." Ouch.

Well, I *am* a real pastor now. But I don't see things any differently. I still think that faith is something that grows and strengthens and changes. And I still think that the way that happens is through doubting and questioning and struggling and wrestling. Wrestling through the dark nights of the soul with God who is willing to be our partner in the struggle.

Last week, the Mitri family led our early service. Their theme was 'change'-- change in our lives in all its many and varied forms. And in the concluding piece of the service, Mike Mitri, one of our Deacons here, talked about what happens when *faith* goes through changes and challenges. He spoke of a particular grief that had struck at his family. "Without even consciously realizing it," he said, "I blamed God. Or I lost God. Or whatever. God and I had a major falling out. My faith changed. .... So, what happened? Well, time went by... And I changed again. I realized that I missed God. I missed the feeling of having faith, of believing in the inevitable triumph of goodness as a manifestation of our essential selves, as formed by Grace, by Love, by God. I missed praying. And then we found this church on the hill and committed to it, this church that encourages you to be who you are, and to believe how you believe, and to honor the best nature of yourself, and I haven't looked back. My faith is restored. And although I have been tested, and may be tested again, I am able to relate once more to the unchanging goodness that God represents. And I am once again able to draw strength from this

fundamental relationship. And I am once again free to enjoy and explore my faith.”

What Mike said touched us deeply, because that’s exactly what David and I want this church to be for you: a place where you are permitted to be who you are, a place where you, where all of us, are free to enjoy and explore our faith. A place where we are invited to wrestle with God.

Remember the last thing that happens in Jacob’s story? The angel blesses him. The angel, God, Christ, touches him and *blesses* him.

May we always remember that in the asking is the finding; in the questioning is the answer, and in the wrestling, *in the struggle*, is the blessing. Amen.