

Genesis 32:23-31
January 28, 2024

It's 1 a.m.

You can't sleep.

You read for a while but you couldn't focus
dozed off at midnight for a while
but only for a while
and now here you are again, wide awake.

You open your YouTube app on your phone and search for guided meditations,
and a gentle voice tells you to imagine you're under the swaying branches of a palm tree.
You do not find this soothing.

It's 2 a.m.

You can't sleep.

You remember Mom's hot milk from when you were a kid,
and you go and open the fridge and stare at what's there,
and wonder if warming up some fat free half and half will do it,
but you kinda doubt it.

You find a Spotify playlist called Go To Sleep –
you're glad it works for someone, but those Tibetan chimes are not doing it for you.

It's 4 a.m.

You are not going to sleep tonight.
You drank the fatfree half and half,
read the entire Op-Ed page in the Times,
and watched old episodes of The Office,
but nothing's putting you to sleep tonight.

Through the window, you see not the *dawn* yet,
but more darkness,
and you know the darkness will be your companion for a while.
You lie there wondering how on earth you're going to get through the
next day.

Why are you awake?

Maybe it's Sunday night and Monday's looking pretty scary.
Maybe you can't stop replaying that thing you said that you wish
you hadn't said,
or can't stop wondering whether you should have done what you
did, or why you *didn't* do what you should have.
Maybe everything's just a *lot* all of a sudden.

We've all been there.

We've all been there on a night when sleep was not to be found.

And that was Jacob.

That was Jacob.

Jacob was awake at 4 a.m.,
and he knew sleep was a lost cause.

His eyes were wide open, his heart was pounding,
and alone in the quiet darkness his mind was all noise.

And he was struggling, he was struggling.

He wasn't sure anymore that he was doing the right thing.

What was he doing?

Well, he was on his way home.

Jacob was headed home to see his brother Esau after twenty years,

because some little voice had told him that it was time to make amends.

At least that's what he thought the little voice was telling him to do, but now, now, just a mile or so from Esau's house, he wasn't so sure he'd heard right.

Esau was the brother he'd treated like dirt 20 years ago, stole from, lied to.

For twenty years, Jacob had been on the run from home, lied to and lying when he had to, stolen from and stealing when he had to.

And somehow he'd thought the time had come to go back home, but as he lay there in the dark

a sudden terror gripped him

for what the morning would bring:

a confrontation with a brother probably still furious at him.

And as he lay there, afraid,

agonizing over the choices he'd made and the choices that lay ahead.

suddenly, in the darkness, the story says,

in the darkness there was with him a figure who

wrapped his arms around him, aggressively,

pushed him and held him.

wrestled with him. Yes, *wrestled* him.

And they wrestled, the story says,

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 combatant,

the figure touched Jacob's hip with his hand

and threw it out of joint.

But Jacob still wouldn't let go.

Jacob said this:

*I won't let go until you bless me,
 I won't stop wrestling until I have a blessing.*
 So this figure, this wrestler,
 held Jacob and blessed him,
 and said "*Jacob, I give you a new name:
 you are Israel,
 the one who has wrestled with God.*"
 And with that the wrestler disappeared,
 leaving Jacob alone again as the sun lifted above the horizon.

And as Jacob stands there in the dawn,
 he says *this place I will call Pen-i-el*
 Pen-i-el ... the face of God.
For it is here that I have seen the face of God.
 And he picks himself up
 and heads down the road,
 limping but no longer afraid,
 to find his brother Esau.

It's a mysterious passage,
 this strange and moving little story
 of a unnamed night time wrestler,
 and a blessing in the midst of struggle.
 It's only ten verses long,
 but it's so intriguing that poets and painters and authors and
 theologians
 have been drawn to this story over and over through the centuries.
 What is it, this odd little story about Jacob
 struggling through the night with someone that he somehow knows
 is God?
 I have seen the face of God, he says, with great wonder.

I have seen the face of God.

A Rabbi I heard once said that 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 them back then there were Gods who were terrifying and remote,

Gods you could not approach except through oracles and shrines, 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 -- to wrestle things through with us.

Yes. Yes. That’s the God I believe in.

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.

A God who invites the questions, and isn’t afraid of our doubts, who says “bring them on.”

Now, not everyone thinks that’s how it works with God.

Not everyone thinks you should question, wonder, doubt, wrestle.

The most flak I’ve ever gotten as a pastor was when I said just that – that you should questio.

Actually, I wasn't quite a pastor at the time – so this was a loooooong time ago.

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, we got called on a lot to kind of be 'the voice of Protestantism' whenever there was some big religious news story.

And, spring of my final year, there was such a story .

A movie called "The Last Temptation of Christ" had just come out.

This was so long ago, a lot of you weren't born yet,

but at the time this movie was a big crazy deal,

because it dared to raise the question of 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,

mega-churches across the country were telling their congregations they'd better not be seen at this movie,

and there were in fact huge protests at theaters showing it.

So Channel 8 in New Haven

decided to put together a panel of pastors to talk about this, live.

Our senior pastor was on vacation,

so when they called, the church secretary offered me up, the student intern.

And so it was that I found myself in a TV studio with two really really angry pastors, loaded for bear.

I couldn't get a word in edgewise at first.

These guys went on, loudly,
about how appalling this movie was,
and how dangerous it would be for Christians to see it –
dangerous, they said, because it might make people have questions,
and having questions would be the end of their faith.
Finally the interviewer shushed them and asked me what I thought.
And I said that I thought anything that made us think hard
and ask questions about our faith was actually a *good* thing.
I said that I believed that faith *grows* through our searching and our
asking and even our doubting.
I'd like to say it was a mic drop moment,
but no.
The clergy dude next to me turned to the interviewer and said
“I think this young lady might feel differently if she was *actually* a
pastor and not just a seminary student.”
Ouch.

Thing is, I became an actual pastor and I *didn't* feel differently.
Then and now, I saw that faith is something that grows and
strengthens and changes
and the way that happens is *through* doubting and questioning and
wrestling.
Wrestling through the dark nights of the soul with a God who is
willing to be our partner in the struggle.
Faith doesn't become ours because someone hands it to us.
Faith becomes ours because we have made it so,
and we make it so by asking the questions,
by calling out to God on those dark nights,
by wondering and searching,
by wandering away and wandering back.
The faith of each person here looks a little different,

because it is our own conversation with God,
no one else's.

And that conversation only happens when we ask and
we wonder and we wrestle.

Five years ago now,
a beautiful voice of faith passed away, much too soon.
Rachel Held Evans was a Christian writer, blogger, author,
whose reflections on her faith journey touched thousands of people.
She had grown up in a deeply conservative Christian setting,
and she loved her faith, and loved her Jesus, loved her Bible,
Then she started asking questions,
questions about what she'd been taught,
and what she'd been told about being a faithful Christian woman.
And she started writing and blogging
and she was told that she had no business asking these questions.
She got in hot water with the powers that be in evangelical
Christianity,
literally labeled a heretic, for leading God-fearing people astray.
But for the thousands reading her essays,
Rachel Held Evans was the voice of everyone
who had ever tried to chart their own path of faith,
and follow Christ down a different road than what they'd been
taught.
By asking the questions. By asking questions.

And this scripture passage, this passage we've read today,
well, it was one of her favorites.

She wrote this about it:

*If I've learned anything from thirty-five years of doubt and belief,
it's that faith is not passive intellectual assent to a set of propositions.*

It's a rough and tumble, no holds barred, all night struggle, and sometimes you have to demand your blessing rather than wait around for it.

After Rachel Evans died, just 37 years old, one of her friends said this about the blessing of her life: “[The gift Rachel left] for the world was her gentle encouragement to **keep** wrestling, to keep asking questions, to keep seeking. [Because] the love underneath all of it is worth chasing.”

That's what I see in you, in this church.

I have listened to you,
been led in worship by you,
read your devotions,
prayed with you,
walked with you.

I know how you work on your faith,
and I know that *you* know God's Love is worth chasing.
I'm looking at a whole congregation full of people who know,
like your pastors, that it's okay to question,
to ask, to wonder, to disagree, to doubt,
to be sure and then doubt again.

Because we worship a God who invites us to do all those things.

Remember how this little story ends.

The God who wrestles with Jacob
is also the God who holds Jacob and blesses him,
surrounds him in the end with utmost love.

That's how it is for us.
no matter how we wrestle with the questions,
no matter how we struggle, wonder, doubt, ask,
we are held and blessed by a God whose love for us is without end.
That Love that is worth everything.

Oh, and – just a little postscript.
In case you're wondering what happened when Jacob finally got
himself to his childhood home
and met up with his brother.
The Bible says that his brother Esau welcomed him
with a hug to end all hugs.
And that Jacob looked at him and said
“to see you, my brother,
is like seeing the face of God.”

His journey ends with Love.
So, too, with all our journeys.
Amen.