Sunday, August 1, 1999
WRESTLING WITH GOD
Genesis 32:22-31

The sport of wrestling has been in the news a lot lately. Wrestling matches, as seen on television, are increasingly popular. Jesse Ventura, the wrestler who is now the governor of Minnesota, calls pro wrestling “ballet with violence.” In a recent survey of the top TV programs, eight of the top 15 programs on cable television were wrestling matches.

Wrestling is also a metaphor used to describe dealing with problems. I hear people talk about “wrestling with temptation,” “wrestling with the devil,” or “wrestling with a difficult decision.” However, I don’t often hear about “wrestling with God.” Yet according to the Bible story, that’s what Jacob did. Here’s how the Bible describes it: “Jacob was left alone; and there was one who wrestled with him until daybreak.”

Here’s the background of the story:

Jacob’s father was Isaac, and his mother was Rebecca. He had a twin brother named Esau, but Jacob and Esau were as different as brothers can be. They differed in appearance and personality. The Bible describes Esau, the firstborn twin, as a “hairy man"—a man’s man. He liked the outdoors and was a skillful hunter. He was his father’s favorite. Jacob, on the other hand, is described as a “smooth man.” He was more feminine and his mother’s favorite. He preferred to stay indoors and learned what was then considered “women’s work.” The Bible describes him as a quiet man.

Although twins, Esau was technically the oldest, having been born first, and thus he would become the head of the family upon Isaac’s death. However, Jacob, following his mother’s advice, took advantage of his brother’s weakness and his father’s failing eyesight to obtain Esau’s birthright and blessing. That’s a story for another sermon.

The deception Jacob practiced with his mother’s help only widened the chasm between the brothers. The story in Genesis states: “Now Esau hated Jacob ... and he said to himself ... as soon as it is possible I will kill my brother.” Rebecca discovered Esau’s plan and quickly arranged for Jacob to flee to her relative Laban, far away, promising to call him back when Esau’s anger subsided.

While working for Laban, Jacob fell in love with Laban’s younger daughter, Rachel. He loved her so much that he agreed to work for Laban for seven years to marry her. But when the time came, Laban tricked Jacob by substituting his older daughter, Leah, as the bride. Jacob only realized the switch after the ceremony.

Persistent as ever, Jacob agreed to work another seven years to marry Rachel. One of the most beautiful lines in this story from Genesis is: “So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her.”

The story of Jacob wrestling with God takes place as he is returning home. He is now rich beyond his youthful dreams, but still unreconciled with Esau, through whose land he must now travel. Jacob hears that Esau is coming to meet him with 400 men. Fearing the worst, Jacob sends servants ahead with gifts of livestock to placate his brother, but he still fears for his life and his family.

It is in the midst of this turmoil that Jacob is described as wrestling with God. The story of that night by the river, as he prepares to meet his brother, is rich with symbolism and metaphors. Biblical scholars tell us it weaves together many ancient themes.

The struggle takes place in the evening by a river, as day turns into night. Ancient people believed spirits and deities often appeared near rivers and at night. Nightfall marked a time when the clarity of daylight gave way to darkness, dreams, and visitations from the spirit world.

Many of us today do most of our worrying at night, when we can't sleep or when we wake before dawn. Our minds race in the darkness, and our deepest fears surface. We wrestle with problems, decisions, and memories that seem to fade in the daylight.

Surely, you've had this experience — tossing and turning, fighting with yourself or a shadowy figure. Sometimes, it's a struggle with the burdens of your mind, contending with memories you wish you didn't have and fears too deep to name. What will tomorrow bring?

Like Jacob, you may be wrestling with God without realizing it. You might be wrestling for forgiveness, grace, peace, or some other blessing that will sustain you when the sun rises and the demands of the day come calling.

Wrestling with God can take many forms. Jacob seeks reconciliation not only with Esau but also with himself. Esau may represent Jacob's shadow, that part of him that connived so ruthlessly, a part he fears as much as he fears Esau.

Each of us wrestles with God in our own way. Whenever you struggle to find your purpose in life, you are, in a deep sense, wrestling with God. Every time you face a crucial decision, you are wrestling with God.

Isn't it true that some of our greatest conflicts are internal? Our greatest enemies are often within. Our deepest wounds may be self-inflicted. So, what is wrestling with God, if not coming to grips with ourselves — with God's strength helping us? Wrestling with God is facing what we prefer to flee, admitting what we'd rather deny, and letting the alienated parts of ourselves confront each other.

After all, we are each created in the image of God, which means that the Spirit of God is always a part of us, even when we are unaware of it. Many of our internal struggles are, in the deepest sense, wrestling with God. Will our selfish will or God's will guide our lives?

Not only do we sometimes wrestle with God, but God is always trying to communicate with us. God gives us messages through other people, through friends and even enemies, and through our internal struggles. Every human being has conversations with God of one sort or another. The scientist searching for truth is in communication with God. The problem is we're not always aware of it.

That night by the river, Jacob decided to stop running from his demons and wrestle with them until they yielded a blessing. Previously, he had tried to solve his problems by running away, a strategy common in our younger years. Now Jacob was learning that running only delays what must eventually be faced. He was ready to change. He accepted that the only way out is through, that the good news comes from facing the bad news, not avoiding it. This was a

midlife crisis of sorts for Jacob. Many people wrestle with God at such times. He had made his way in life, but something was still missing.

Some of you may recall the ancient myths of dragons turning into princesses, demons turning into angels, and mysterious nighttime figures turning out to be God. Because we are created in the image of God, God desires us to become whole and holy, to reconcile with ourselves so we can reconcile with others. That is the order of things, for we sin out of our hurts. We wound others because we have been wounded. We try to take others' blessings because we haven't accepted the one blessing we truly need — the blessing of God.

Though nighttime struggles are always mysterious, Jacob had matured. He was no longer an escapist. A new quality emerged in him that must also emerge in us: persistence. He said, "I will not let you go until you bless me." In other words, "I will not let go of this experience, this soul-searching, this inner wrestling with God, until I have learned all that I can."

Sometimes we let go of difficult struggles too soon, before we've learned what we need to from them. Some experiences are so earth-shaking, so painful, that we try to escape them too quickly, and in doing so, we miss their blessing.

This quality of hanging on has practical consequences, too. Jacob used his strength and determination to get the job done — just as millions of us do every day. In 1990, Herb Stein, reflecting on 50 years of economic analysis, told visiting Russians that the basic reason for our prosperity is that 120 million Americans get up each morning and go to work to do their best for themselves and their families — and previous generations did the same for two centuries.

We need to be just as persistent in our pursuit of spiritual blessings as we are in our pursuit of material ones. We need to hold on to our struggles until we've learned all we can from them.

There's another metaphor in this story of Jacob wrestling with God. As a result of the struggle, Jacob's hip was put out of joint, and he walked with a limp. What does this limp signify? It's a reminder that Jacob can no longer run away from himself or from God. His limp indicates that he can now trust in God's strength, not just his own. As the Apostle Paul later said, "God's strength is made perfect in weakness." A wise person once said, "Yes, faith in God is a crutch — but who says you don't limp?"

After this wrestling with God, a new humility began to appear in Jacob. He was now ready to confess his wrong to Esau, ask for forgiveness, and start anew.

No one lives a full life without some form of brokenness — whether physical, mental, or both. What matters is what we learn from our struggles.

Jacob was now free to return home. At peace with himself, he was ready to make peace with his brother. Having wrestled with God, he was ready for the promised land — the serenity that lies on the far side of conflict, the simplicity that lies on the other side of complexity.

And, having wrestled with God, Jacob was ready for a new name, one that would be carried by descendants as numerous as the sands of the sea.

Here's one more truth from this story for our own lives. In that nighttime wrestling match between Jacob and God, who lost and who won? The good news about wrestling with God is that no one loses. Everyone wins. Amen.