Have you ever wrestled with God? I hope you have. I bet you have. I know I have. Jacob wrestled with God through the night as he awaited his meeting the next day with his brother Esau, who had an army, and who was not happy with his brother Jacob. And for good reason. It’s worth taking a little time to re-familiarize ourselves with some of the details of this story told in Genesis.

Basically, as far as Esau was concerned, Jacob was a heel. In those days names had meanings, names had power, names defined people. Esau means “hairy” and describes Esau as he came out of the womb. Jacob, his twin, with whom he had struggled in the womb, came out with his hand gripping Esau’s heel. And so his name was Jacob, meaning “he who takes by the heel, or he who supplants.” This heel grabbing was just the beginning of things to come.

After describing their birth, Genesis says this about the twins: “When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob.”

The first thing Jacob the heel did to his brother was steal his birthright. Esau came home from having been out in the field so hungry that if he didn’t eat soon he was going to die. Jacob was cooking stew and Esau asked for some but Jacob would only feed Esau if he signed over his birthright. And so he did, and so Jacob supplanted Esau as first born.

It happened again as Isaac, their father, lay dying. With the help of his mother Rebekah, Jacob tricked Isaac into giving him Esau’s blessing. He wore Esau’s clothes, put animal skins on his hands, and when his dying father asked him who he was, he lied and said he was Esau, and so got his father’s final blessing. Jacob the heel, Jacob who supplants, stole his father’s dying blessing from his twin.

Esau had had enough and threatened to kill Jacob, so Jacob fled. He stayed away for twenty years, during which time he got tricked himself, by Laban, into serving Laban for many years and marrying two of his daughters. He then tricked Laban in return, he became wealthy, and went back home. As he is returning, messengers come to let him know that Esau is coming to meet him with 400 men.

As we pick up the story this morning, Jacob has sent his possessions, his flocks, his servants, his family, his entire household, across the river towards Esau. We don’t know why; perhaps to appease Esau, perhaps to get Esau to feel sorry for him; we don’t know. But tonight Jacob, on the night before he is to be face to face with his twin brother whom he cheated, sits alone. Jacob the heel, Jacob the supplanter, Jacob the cheat, after twenty long years, is alone and afraid, and he wrestles, all night, with God.

What a great story! The humanity just oozes from this story. I love this story.

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Scholars have debated for years about “what’s really happening” in the Jacob story.  Is he attacked by robbers?  Does he have a panic attack?  Is the stranger really Esau in disguise?  For me, it doesn’t matter.  It doesn’t matter because *all* of the epic battles of our lives — our battles with guilt, shame, fear, doubt, grief, or unforgiveness, our wrestling matches with family, friends, enemies, community, church, or creed — are ultimately battles with and about God.  It is with God, and in relationship to God, and in God’s all-encompassing presence that we fight the fights that bend, break, and remake us.  It is in God’s company that we face down the demons within and around us.  It is God alone who brings us to the ragged edges of our own strength so that finally, *finally,* we’ll surrender, and allow ourselves to be saved.  Whether we recognize the stranger as God or not, God is always the one we struggle with.  God is always the one who battles with and against us — not for our detriment, but for our transformation.[[1]](https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#m_-8624963035484544639_m_-2723604625977200067__ftn1)

She goes on to say this:

If you’re like me, Jacob’s God is not the God you grew up with.  As a child and a teenager, I thought of God as terribly fragile. Easily offended, easily upset, easily put off. My job as a good Christian girl was to obey the rules and keep this delicate divinity happy at all costs. One false turn, one impertinent question, one sullied bit of doctrine — and God would shatter like a fine china teacup knocked off a table.

What a contrast to the God who spends an entire night by a muddy river, duking it out with Jacob.  This is a God who wants to *engage.*  A God we can throw ourselves against with the full weight of our thoughts, questions, ideas, and feelings.  A God who invites our rigor, our persistence, our intensity, and our strength.  This is a God who doesn’t let go.[[2]](https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#m_-8624963035484544639_m_-2723604625977200067__ftn2)

Jacob the Heel, Jacob the one who supplants, finally wrestles with this stranger who is God. And God doesn’t let go. Jacob is never the same. He leaves this encounter with a limp, a new name, and a blessing. He is now named Israel, “the one who strives with God.”

I want to leave you with a poem by Steve Garnaas-Holmes entitled “Dark God” and which begins with a line from our reading from this morning:

*Jacob was left alone;  
           and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.*                                 —Genesis 32.24  
We trust a dark God  
who seizes us in lonely places,  
who comes to us in travail,  
who births us only in great labor.  
Faith is no mere greeting card but a wrestling,  
an awful confronting of both doubt and assumption,  
a tangling with what is in which neither can prevail.  
The Mysterious One uses barred holds,  
offers invisible becomings.  
There is no struggle in which  
blessing is not enfolded in the mystery.  
There is no tribulation in which  
God is not reworking the clay.  
Limping, we become a new person with a new name.  
  
Therefore the prayer of the faithful  
is not that things go well,  
but always and only this:*“I will not let you go unless you bless me.”*[***[3]***](https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#m_-8624963035484544639_m_-2723604625977200067__ftn3)

[[1]](https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#m_-8624963035484544639_m_-2723604625977200067__ftnref1) Thomas, Debie. “The Limp and the Blessing.” *Journeywithjesus.net*, 26 July 2020, [www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay](http://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay).

[[2]](https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#m_-8624963035484544639_m_-2723604625977200067__ftnref2) Ibid.

[[3]](https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/" \l "m_-8624963035484544639_m_-2723604625977200067__ftnref3" \o ") Garnaas-Holmes, Steve. “Dark God.” *Unfoldinglight.net,*July 30, 2020,

<https://www.unfoldinglight.net/?fbclid=IwAR2yrn4H4u7zGngVwzNTZ9JIXBJ31NeroyiRrjwHlS91tUb_ZjaZLXCJBtE>.