**31st July 2011**

**Genesis 32.22-31**

I once punched someone and wrestled them to the floor. In my last church in Warrington I was called out to a man who was threatening suicide. His wife had just left him and taken their young daughter with her. He had sunk into a dark depression and was talking about ending his life. He had called round to a friend of his but neither of us was getting through to him. Suddenly he jumped up and grabbed his car keys saying he was going out in the car and would drive into the near by bridge killing himself and anyone who happened to get in the way. Restraint seemed in order and so I wrestled him to the floor by the side of his car and in the ensuing scuffle threw a few punches. With the help of his friend we were able to bundle him into a car and drive him straight to a mental health unit whereupon he was duly sectioned. I was the aggressor but my purpose was merciful.

Today we explore a story in the Old testament about a wrestling match where god is the aggressor but his purpose is merciful.

Over the last month we have been looking at the story of Jacob. Jacob was a man on the run.

Deep-seated family hostilities characterized Jacob's entire life. Because Isaac and Rebekkah played favorites, he and his fraternal twin Esau grew up hating each other. Jacob also swindled Esau of his family birthright, which entitled him to a double share of the family inheritance. Later, he and Rebekkah lied and connived to swindle the family blessing from his blind and dying father. When Esau threatened to murder him, Jacob fled to his uncle Laban in Haran, the very place his grandfather Abraham had departed. Jacob married his cousins Rachel and Leah, and eventually fathered thirteen children with them and their two slaves, Zilpah and Bilhah.

Sick of his father-in-law's manipulations, Jacob fled Laban, only to encounter his long lost and embittered brother Esau. The consummate deal-maker, Jacob concocted a bribe and sent a caravan of gifts along with his women and children across the river Jabbok. Perhaps that would pacify his brother's murderous threats? Physically exhausted and deeply anxious about Esau, alone in the desert wilderness, shorn of all his considerable worldly possessions, powerless to control his fate, Jacob collapsed into a deep sleep on the banks of the Jabbok River. With Laban behind him and Esau before him, he was too spent to struggle any longer.

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Only then did his real struggle begin. Fleeing his family history had been bad enough; wrestling with God Himself was a different matter altogether. That long, lonesome night an angelic stranger visited Jacob. They wrestled throughout the night until daybreak, at which point the stranger crippled Jacob with a blow to his hip that disabled him with a limp for the rest of his life. The word in Hebrew for ‘hip’ refers to the whole midriff area of a man – in other words he was hit below the belt!

By then Jacob knew what had happened: "I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared" (Genesis 32:30). In the process, Jacob the Deceiver, for such is the meaning of "Jacob," received a new name, Israel, which likely means "He struggles with God." Most important and unlikely of all, at the conclusion of that riverbank struggle, we read that God "blessed him there" (Genesis 32:29).

The picture of Jacob wrestling one lonely night with the God man in the gorge of Jabbok has fired the imaginations of poets and mystics down through the ages. Many see it as a heroic struggle in which Jacob, crippled and exhausted, overcomes the divine resistance to his longings and succeeds in extracting what he wants from God. It becomes the model of prevailing prayer: who among us will prevail in prayer as Jacob wrestled with God.

But it is not Jacob who was the aggressor. Jacob did not wrestle with God but God initiated the struggle – God was the aggressor – God wrestled with Jacob.

If a person hits you - you have two choices. You can hit them back or you can run away. If on the other hand a person wrestles with you you have no such choice. Whether you wish to flee or fight back you are obliged to wrestle to. Jacob did not wrestle because he chose to - but because he was obliged to. What does it all mean?

Jacob has been struggling against God all his life. The conflict by the Jabbok symbolises his life long struggle in trying to resist God’s goodness and snatch it for himself.

Frederick Buechner characterizes Jacob's divine encounter at Jabbok as the "magnificent defeat of the human soul at the hands of God." Similarly, in her book [*Scarred By Struggle, Transformed By Hope*](http://www.journeywithjesus.net/BookNotes/Joan_Chittister.shtml), the Benedictine nun and writer Joan Chittister uses the Jacob story as an example for a "spirituality of struggle." In Jacob's story she identifies eight elements of our human struggle — change, isolation, darkness, fear, powerlessness, vulnerability, exhaustion, and scarring. Did not St Paul himself describe being "harassed at every turn — conflicts without, fears within" (2 Corinthians 7:5)? But God does not leave us there, says Chittister, and in each human struggle there is a corresponding divine gift available to us — conversion, independence, faith, courage, surrender, limitations, endurance, and transformation. "Jacob does what all of us must do," writes Chittister, "if, in the end, we too are to become true. He confronts in himself the things that are wounding him, admits his limitations, accepts his situation, rejoins the world, and moves on."

In our culture at large and in our churches too, the myths of Superwoman and Superman live large. We celebrate wealth, power, strength, bravado, confidence, prestige and victory, beginning with SAT scores at primary school, college admissions, first job, and first address. We fear weakness, failure, struggle, and doubt. Even though we know that a measure of vulnerability, fear, discouragement and depression accompany most normal lives, we construe these as signs of failure or even a lack of faith. In real life, naive optimism and the rosy rhetoric about achievement are a recipe for disappointment and discouragement. Sooner or later reality catches up with most of us.

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Contrary to cultural propaganda about achievement, the human struggle is never easy, and certainly not the struggle with God Himself. But the struggle is never devoid of divine presence and blessing. After Jacob’s wrestling match comes his reconciliation with his estranged brother Esau. But because of the wrestling match Jacob is a changed man.

A new person is called forth from the old Jacob. Jacob has faced God, has been touched by God, has received a blessing and been renamed. Earlier he had prayed to be rescued from his brother Esau; now he gives thanks that he has survived the much more dangerous encounter with God.

His encounter with God has prepared him to meet Esau. When he sees his brother in chapter 33, verse 10 he says ‘To see your face is to see the face of God’. The new character of Israel is now apparent. Courage replaces cowardice as Jacob himself strides ahead of his family to meet Esau. Humility takes the place of arrogance as he bows down seven times before his brother. And penitence prompts him to attempt to give back the blessing out of which he had cheated Esau. Through his experience at Peniel, Jacob has been reborn as Israel.

Esau too has been changed and no longer wants to kill his brother. Their reconciliation after so many years of hatred is one of the most beautiful in scripture, possibly alluded to by Jesus in the parable of the Prodigal Son and taken up by Paul when he talks about god’s work of reconciliation on Christ. But his new birth at Peniel didn’t completely obliterate the past or completely change Jacobs’s character; the new Israel still had features of the old Jacob. He doesn’t entirely trust Esau warmth; the old fears and suspicions are still there as he refuses to accompany him onwards in journey to Seir. Instead Jacob returns to Canaan.

Is God wrestling with you?

Have you ever tried wrestling with lumbago or a slipped disc? If you should ever find yourself in Jacob’s situation, let me tell you what you will do. You will cling. You will hang onto your opponent with desperation. Either you will cling or you will fall. And so through his pain and sweat Jacob’ realises that he has no other choice and no other hope and his tenacity is at least turned in the right direction ‘I will not let you go until you bless me’. These are the words that God has not heard. There have been plenty of promises in the other direction: God’s promises of protection to Jacob, of decedents and land – but only now does Jacob realise his helplessness and his need of God and Jacob pledges ‘I’ll not let you go’.

There is the foolish person who says 'well I guess there is nothing left to do now except trust the Lord’. Trust should come first not last.

-A first-grade teacher seated her students in a circle. She asked them what they wanted to be when they grew up. One by one, each child got up and announced, "I'd like to be a nurse like my mother," or "I want to be a banker like my father," or "I want to be a teacher like you, Miss Smith."  
The last child to speak was the most shy and timid little boy in the class. He said, "When I get big, I'm going to be a lion tamer in the circus. I'm going to face those animals with my whip and chair and make them leap through hoops of fire and obey all of my commands." Seeing the disbelieving looks on the faces of his classmates that he could ever act so boldly or bravely, he was quick to reassure them, "Well, of course, I'll have my mother with me."—

God is always with us – seeking to bless.

In what sense did Jacob prevail? Perhaps picture the wrestling as God seeking to help Jacob understand something. Picture him as urging upon Jacob truths that Jacob was unwilling to see. Picture God struggling to convince Jacob that he means him no harm, that his intentions are not malicious but merciful – a bit like me and the guy who wanted to kill himself. I was the aggressor but my purpose was merciful. .Jacob is too afraid. All his life he has learned one lesson: it is safe to trust no one. Jacob must fight his own battles. Proud and deceitful. So he wrestles on, terrified but unyielding. Then suddenly – incredible pain and a useless leg.

When [***Michelangelo***](http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&q=Michelangelo&spell=1) was asked how he got the beautiful statue of David out of an ordinary stone, he answered, " David was in the stone all the time, I just removed the excess. God is chipping away – removing the excess – sometimes it feels like a wrestling match.

Hang on in there. Because ultimately that is what it is all about – hanging in there with the merciful God who always seeks to bless.