

Wrestling Match

A month and a half ago, our son-in-law Bryce Remsburg became a professional wrestling referee with the new All Elite Wrestling league – AEW. You can see him on TV every Wednesday night on TNT at 8 p.m. Bryce has been a wrestling fan since he was a kid, and an indie wrestling ref – not a money-making gig – for years. For him, this is the culmination of a dream. For me, an introduction to a whole new world – one that doesn't hold quite the charm for me as it does for him, although it's great to see him look so happy.

Bryce's kind of wrestling is new territory for me, but Jacob's kind of wrestling is all too familiar. I have long experience of that – the kind of wrestling that happens in the middle of the night, when all your self-doubt rises and questions to which there is no easy answer keep you from your sleep. As difficult as they are, I also treasure those times, because they sometimes become, for me as well as for Jacob, experiences of holy encounter that leave me changed, or at least point me in the right direction. What can we say about these holy wrestling matches? What does Jacob's story have to say to us?

It's not a coincidence that Jacob's wrestling match happens on the night before his meeting with Esau. Jacob had good reason to be anxious. Across the river was a twin brother he hadn't seen for twenty years, the brother he had cheated out of what they both wanted most, the brother who last time he saw him was weeping with anger and threatening to kill him. That context can't be separated from the holy wrestling match. It in moments of our deepest human crisis that we connect most often with the holy.

It's also not a coincidence that this incident happens at night. At night the world sleeps and there are few distractions. At night our guard is down and we are at our most vulnerable. Holy wrestling matches do happen in the daytime – I vividly remember one that happened on a Sunday afternoon – but they happen most often at night, in darkness and mystery and silence.

Jacob, we are told, spent the night wrestling in the dark with someone he couldn't identify – someone that we, who hear this story three thousand years later, still can't identify for sure. Was he wrestling with his shadow self, that side of our personality we rarely see and often struggle with that subtly affects all we do and say? Was he wrestling in advance with his brother as he prepared for the encounter of the next day? Was Jacob, the man who was always a little bit bent, always a little bit crooked, wrestling with his demons? Or was it an angel? Or was it God? The Bible just tells us it was a man Jacob wrestled with that night, and it seems there was something holy about the wrestling, but also something mysterious, shrouded in darkness.

That's the way it is in my own struggles. It's not always clear who the opponent is. It's not always easy to distinguish what's internal, a problem you are making for yourself, and what's external, a challenge that comes to you from a situation or a person over which you have not control. In the spiritual life, it's hard sometimes to tell what's you and what's God. I'm not sure it matters that we know for sure. What matters is the struggle, the learning and the change that comes from the struggle.

There was something primal in Jacob's wrestling match, something physical and basic. Children and puppies roll on the floor, wrestling with each other in play. But this is something more – a serious, possibly even life-threatening, encounter. Physically challenging as it is, there's also an intimacy about the wrestling. Jacob and his opponent are bound to one another even as they fight, as closely connected as Jacob and his brother were when they struggled with each other in Rebekah's womb.

And then, who wins? Genesis says, "When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip, and his hip was put out of joint." A final desperate move or a flash of divine power? Then the man asks Jacob to let him go, as if he could not break free on his own.

If this is God, then how could the Almighty wrestle to a draw with a human? Wouldn't the God automatically win? Or maybe the pin in the wrestling match wasn't what God was looking for here.

Leif Peterson, the son of preacher and writer Eugene Peterson said at his father's funeral that his father had only one sermon, only one thing that he said over and over again in different words. "God loves you. He's on your side. He's coming after you. He's relentless."

This relentless, loving God has come for Jacob who, for reasons that aren't obvious to the rest of us, God has chosen. Jacob is a trickster, a con man, someone who is always looking for a better deal. Even here, he tries to bargain with his opponent for a blessing – the blessing he had already received from his father, but somehow wasn't quite enough. The opponent gives Jacob more than he asks for. He gives him a new name: instead of Jacob, the grasper, he becomes Israel, the one who strives with God, as well as the blessing he asked for. Yet the opponent reserves something for himself. He never tells Jacob his name.

The relentless loving God comes for us as well, whether in the dark of the night, whispered by our bed, or on a sunlit Sunday afternoon. God wrestles with us and wrestles for us, not to win the pin and dominate, but to meet us on our own ground and establish a relationship with us, allowing us to be ourselves and yet at the same time changing us into the person God would have us be.

And so they both go forth from the place of wrestling. In some ways, Jacob is changed forever. He has a new name. He also has a limp. We go out from holy encounters marked forever. But he remains Jacob the trickster nevertheless.

As he goes up from the river in the early morning, Jacob sees Esau coming. Still apprehensive about what Esau will do, Jacob steps in front of his wives and children and bows his face to the ground. But Esau runs to meet his brother and kisses him. They re-establish their relationship on new grounds. They never fully trust each other, they never live together even after this, but they both acknowledge they are brothers, and they go their separate ways.

We too are changed by our God-wrestling. Everything that happens to us leaves a mark that does not go away. Sometimes we are touched so profoundly that we change our names, like Jacob-Israel or Saul-Paul. Sometimes we have to give up something that we valued, and learn to walk with a limp. Sometimes we mark the place where we had the holy meeting, and return there again and again. But when God wrestles with us and for us, this is the thing we walk away knowing – that God loves us, that God comes for us and is relentless, and that God blesses us. Thanks be to God.