

It has always been interesting to me that the symbols of our faith are fire and water. I don't know about you, but I often marvel at the beauty and power of fire and water. I could look at a campfire or the ocean for hours. The interesting thing about fire and water is that they are agents of life, but they are also agents of death. We see this dichotomy in our own baptism. The water of life calls us to die to our sins, and we arise to new life with Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

I chose this picture for you today on the front of the bulletin because I believe it is a beautiful depiction of the interwoven nature of our faith of the waters of baptism and the fire of the Holy Spirit.

It reminds me of the Scripture from Isaiah 43:2: “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.” This Scripture reminds us that God is with even when we struggle to live out our baptismal vows, even when we feel like we are wrestling with God.

I also like this picture because of its symbolism of wrestling. On the right side it looks like the fire it trying to overcome the water, and on the left side it looks like the water is trying to put the fire out. In the middle we see what happens when fire and water combine as one tries to overtake the other. This image also reminds me of our Scripture for today from Genesis 32 when Jacob was wrestling with God.

In our journey of discipleship, we all wrestle with God. Whether it is five minutes or five years, we have all had moments in our faith when we wrestle to understand where God is calling us to go.

When I was younger, I used to view wrestling with God as something negative, something embarrassing, something not to share with my fellow Christians. Now, I have come to the realization that **wrestling with God is not something to be ashamed of because it embodies our desire to know the will of God.**

Usually we find ourselves wrestling with God over important decisions in our lives or in response to something that has happened to us that was unexpected. I know this has been true for my life. During my first year of seminary I wrestled with God a lot. I kept questioning my decision to pursue ministry. I kept wondering why Duke had allowed me into their seminary...I thought maybe they had made a mistake, that maybe I had made a mistake.

So often when life does not go our way, we turn to despair instead of hope, and yet time and time again in the Bible we see that just when people thought it was the end...it was a new beginning to a better life.

God is always bringing life out of death. Discernment is about letting life as we know it die so that we can pursue God’s will and not our own. That is what makes it so hard. Like Jacob we all wrestle with God.

We wrestle with God when we find ourselves at a breaking point. Jacob was at his breaking point. He thought that he was facing certain death. His older brother was coming for him because he had stolen his blessing and birthright and Jacob probably thought his life was over. We find him alone with his thoughts...preparing for his eminent death.

Time and time again we realize that location is important and is in the Bible for a reason. The place that Jacob found himself alone was important because as commentary tells us: “Just as God encountered Jacob when he fled the promised land because of his brother’s anger, so also God now encounters him at the point of reentry...”ⁱ

At this point of reentry there was no turning back. Jacob had already sent his family ahead of him, surely his brother would not kill them and receive their presence as a peace offering.

God initiated this wrestling match with Jacob. At first this may be hard for us to hear. Why would God want to wrestle with Jacob? Does that mean God is going to appear out of nowhere and wrestle with us? Surely God will be the winner so why put up a fight? Instead of being afraid of wrestling with God, we must remember that God wrestles with us in order to continue to invite us into a covenantal relationship.

God is always offering us grace through God’s presence. Even before we are even able to know who God is, God is pursuing us and whispering to us a blessing of love. The moment we profess Jesus Christ with our lips, the Holy Spirit enters our hearts. God is no longer whispering from the outside but speaking to us on the inside.

This is where our wrestling match with God originates.

Anytime we think, say, or do anything contrary to the will of God, the Holy Spirit wrestles with our souls. God wrestles with us because God cares about us. God continues to pursue us and offer us mercy and forgiveness. So, we too are called like Jacob, to wrestle with God.

What is beautiful about this Scripture is Jacob fights back. Before this moment he may have resigned himself that his life was over, that his brother Esau was coming to kill him, but in this wrestling match with God, Jacob found that he still had the will to live.

There is something in Jacob that tells him not to give up, but to fight for his life. He fights all night with this man. Commentary tells us over the course of the night he realizes he is wrestling with God.ⁱⁱ I think Jacob realized it was God because “the man” wrestling with him never gave up.

God does not give up on us. God desires to bless us and give us a new identity.

So often in our time of discernment, we try to distinguish between the voice of God, our own voice, and the voice of the world. When Jacob realizes that it is God that he is wrestling he does not stop. He needs something from God. He needs a blessing.

Call it a last resort, but Jacob did believe that God could save him from the wrath of his brother. He asked for a blessing and God in God’s mercy gave him one. God gave him a new name and a new identity. God named him Israel which means “strives with God” (Gen 32:28) or “God-wrestler” as I like to call him. What did Jacob have to be afraid of now? I mean his name was “God-wrestler.” Surely his brother would not kill him now.

God’s blessing did not come without a cost. Before the fight ended God struck Jacob in the hip socket damaging his hip for life. The way he walked was forever changed, but he was blessed to live another day. You know that Jews do not eat hip meat to this day because of this fight, so Jacob was not the only one changed by this wrestling match? In this new tradition we see that the community of God was called to change as well.

The amazing thing about answering God’s calling upon our lives is that it does not only affect us. Answering God’s calling upon our lives can save other peoples’ lives literally, figuratively, spiritually, and physically.

When we answer God’s calling upon our life, we can have a greater impact on the world, than giving up the wrestling match with God and choosing the easy and safe way out. God is calling all of us to mission and ministry, but are we ready to wrestle with God, to discern how God is calling us forward.

This past summer, I had the honor of meeting with two of our Conference’s Calling 21 interns. They each spent a summer serving at a church and learning all the facets of ministry. I got to sit with them and listen to how God was calling them forward. I got to listen to how they had wrestled with God over the summer until they felt the assurance of making a next step.

I also have the honor each month on the District Committee on Ministry to hear the call stories of our licensed local pastors. Many of which are in their second careers. Those who left the security of high paying jobs and success, to devote their lives to the Lord through becoming a pastor. Their stories are inspiring.

Over the past couple of weeks, I have been blessed to hear your stories, how God is calling you through Bible studies, home visits, and prayers. God still has a calling upon our live no matter how young or how old we may be.

Wrestling with God is beautiful, it is life-giving, it is authentic, it matters, and it is what we have been called to do as the people of God. Wrestling with God is a beautiful practice of discernment...of knowing God well enough to recognize God, of believing in God’s divine nature and power, and knowing that we will walk away forever changed.

So I challenge you church...what is God calling you to do? It is to know the Bible more? We have an upcoming Bible Study you can join. Is it to visit with people in their homes who are in need of care and hope? Is it the ministry of card writing or preaching or getting more involved in church?

God is calling all of us. Like Jacob may we choose to wrestle with God so that we are changed, blessed, and sent forward with hope! In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ Keck et al. The New Interpreter’s Biblical Commentery. Vol. 1. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 1994. P. 565.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.ss