

The Power of Being Named  
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When I was a child, my family got the most adorable blonde lab puppy. He was fearless! The kitchen in the house where I grew up was a little lower than the rest of the house, and you had to step down just  $\frac{1}{2}$  a step to go into the kitchen. And that little puppy just could not seem to figure it out.

Try to visualize this: he would hunch down several feet from the doorway, rev up his engines, tear off towards that step, fly over the edge just like a wrestler flying off the ropes of the ring, and land sprawling on his belly and all fours on the kitchen floor.

And not just that step! He'd leap from anything high—backs of couches, kitchen tables, beds, you name it. The dog loved to fly through the air again and again.

In fact, he reminded us so much of a certain WWF wrestler who my dad liked that we named him Snuka after Jimmy Superfly Snuka.

It has been years since I have seen that circus on TV known as professional wrestling. Even a child could tell it was staged, but it like me was a part of the good old 80s, and I remember vividly wrestlers like Superfly Snuka, Hulk Hogan, Andre the Giant, and Mr. T.

But where I really learned about wrestling was the Olympics. I watched every sport, more concerned about how many medals the American team was bringing home than in the sport the medal was for. Wrestling, particularly, happened to be the only thing of interest that was televised in the middle of the night. I'd stay awake and watch as long as possible so I didn't miss anything important.

I discovered that wrestling is actually a very graceful and skillful sport.

Did you know that wrestling dates back at least 1000 years and is one of our oldest organized sports? But its origins are even older, and it is the oldest known form of hand to hand combat.

The word "wrestle" is also one of the oldest words in the Hebrew language. But it only appears once in the Bible, in today's reading, where Jacob wrestles with a

man all night, only to discover in the morning that he was actually wrestling with God.

When we last left Jacob, he was working in Haram for his uncle Laban. Jacob worked 7 years for Leah, 7 more for Rachael, and then he worked 6 more years for some livestock. Though it seemed like he was the one being taken advantage of by his uncle, who clearly did manipulate him, Jacob also used his craftiness and ability to manipulate to make him wealthy. His family had grown, he had livestock and servants, and he was fairly well off by the time he decided to head back home. So he gathered his household and set off towards the promised land.

On the journey home, Jacob learns that his brother Esau is up ahead of him. It's been 20 years since Jacob stole his brother's birthright and left home. The last time Jacob saw Esau, Esau was angry and ready to kill his brother. So Jacob is, naturally, terrified.

He sends out a messenger, and when the messenger returns, he says: "Esau is coming to meet you, and he's bringing 400 men with him."

400 men! Jacob thinks Esau is finally going to keep his promise to kill him. So Jacob divides his family, flocks, servants, all his possessions, everything into two large groups. Jacob hopes that if Esau attacks one, at least the other half might be safe.

But then, knowing he is powerless to do much on his own in this situation, Jacob does the best, humblest thing he can--he cries out to God in prayer, begging God to spare his family and to remember the promise God made to him to make him a great nation.

It's almost night. Jacob sends his family and all of his stuff across the Jabbok River, then waits by himself on the other side. It probably reminded him a lot of that night 20 years earlier, when he had run away from home and was alone in the darkness, with no family, possessions, not even a pillow besides a rock. Jacob is no stranger to being alone and afraid in the night. Though his circumstances have changed, it has to feel very much like that first night when everything changed. He has to be wondering how far he's really come all these years later.

Jacob tries to get some rest, but in the middle of the night, a stranger interrupts him. As the story goes, Jacob and the stranger wrestle with each other until dawn.

As Jacob and the stranger wrestle, neither one is able to overtake the other. As dawn breaks, Jacob realizes the stranger he is wrestling is actually God!

Jacob asks for a blessing, but what God gives him, instead, is a new name—his old name, Jacob, which means deceiver, manipulator, one who grasps at the heels of others, is replaced by Israel, which means “one who wrestles with God.”

His new name indicates a deeper relationship with God, that he is ever struggling to know God, understand God, and discern God’s purpose and plan for his life.

Jacob learned something powerful that night. He learned that an encounter with God is life changing. He learned that to know God is to wrestle with God. And finally, he learned the power of a name.

As they wrestled, God touched Jacob’s hip, and put it out of joint at the socket. Jacob walked away that morning with pain in his hip, a reminder for the rest of his life that he had struggled with God and was a different person because of it.

Think of others who met God and were changed in profound ways. David, for example, a shepherd boy God called to be King, who killed a giant not by might but by faith.

Or the woman at the well, who went from outcast living a life of sin to passionate witness filled with the love of Christ.

Or Saul, blinded by God on the way to Damascus as he set out to persecute Christians, changed by his encounter with God so significantly that he became the outspoken witness to Jesus Christ that we know as the apostle Paul.

Or in my own life, changed by a call to ministry that led me away from other plans I had for my life towards the uncertainty of pastoral ministry, because I encountered God and knew I would never be the same as a result.

And there are so many others! Many of you could tell me similar stories!

An encounter with God changes you. If you are truly in relationship with God, then you will be a different person. Your heart will be stirred by the struggles of others. Living for yourself will simply be unfulfilling. You will have to make choices that are difficult, choosing between the shiny things of this world and a life of serving others. You simply cannot encounter God and stay the same.

But that change isn't like a light switch, that one day you're one person and the next your another. Jacob is testament to that. Though God changed him and revealed to Jacob a new purpose and a calling in his life, Jacob still wrestled with God.

In fact, part of knowing God is being willing to wrestle with God.

And truthfully, who among us has not spent that long, lonely night alone with our thoughts, wrestling with God in the darkness, struggling to come to terms with ourselves or with God.

My first paid church job was during seminary when I served as the Associate Pastor of a little church in Ohio. My very first sermon was almost finished when news of Hurricane Katrina reached me and I had to rewrite my sermon to address this unthinkable disaster. That's not easy for a experienced pastor, but it was an incredibly difficult task for a first year seminary student.

And I remember how I preached to my congregation how in the midst of disaster we had to trust that God was present and that God could use even a hurricane to reveal something greater about God to us. I told them, in their grief, to be careful not to become angry with God. "Who are we," I said, echoing God's monologue in Job, "to be angry with our Creator?" I urged them to accept this as something we simply could not understand and to use it as an opportunity to love a hurting world.

After the service, an elderly woman congratulated me on the message. But she said, "You were wrong about just one thing."

Then she told me her story. She explained to me how she had in her 90 years of life buried two husbands and a son. She'd survived cancer not once, but twice. She'd lived through world wars, a great depression, and the civil rights movement.

"Sometimes," this woman said, "Anger was all I had to get me through the night. I have screamed at God, sworn at him, cried like a child, insisted that this was too much and I could endure no more." Then she said, "God can take my anger. God understands my pain. God is present with me in my strife. And in that battle I have found peace and grown very close to my God."

This woman knew what it was like to wrestle with God. She had held God at arm's length and struggled for understanding, peace, and a deeper relationship with God. She knew God not in spite of her wrestling, but because of it!

That woman taught a young pastor an important lesson, that being in relationship with God means being willing to meet God right where we are, in our pain, anger, fears, and frustrations.

We learn from Jacob's experience that wrestling with God is part of discovering who we are and who God is.

Whether we are wrestling with the terrible truth of cruel words that have hurt someone, or a doctor's diagnosis, or an unpopular stand to take for the sake of justice, or how we would do almost anything to avoid God's challenge to bring out the best of us, the call is the same--to wrestle God with all our heart and mind and strength, until finally God blesses us with whatever it takes for us to walk forward as the kind of person God wants us to be in the direction God wants us to go.

I'll be honest. In these last few months since the results of November's presidential election and the aftermath of cruelty and injustice I have seen splashed across my news feed, I have wrestled with God. I've wondered where God is in the midst of all of this. I've wondered how God can possibly use a flawed person like me to make any kind of difference in the midst of overwhelming oppression. I have cried and yelled and ranted and been challenged with moments of disbelief and discouragement.

But even as I have wrestled with God and myself, I have been blessed with moments of deep peace, moments when the acts of kindness by ordinary people have reminded me that we change the world not by great displays of justice, but by small acts of great love, not nations at a time, but one heart at a time. This has strengthened my faith and given me courage to keep fighting the good fight, and hope for the future.

When we are willing to wrestle with God, we allow God to shape us into people who can withstand the challenges of this life and inspire others to trust, to have hope, to find faith, and we truly become kingdom-building partners of our Creator.

Finally, Jacob teaches us a lot about our names. In Jacob's culture, a name was important—it was a symbol of who a person was to become. God knew Jacob's

name. He knew it meant that Jacob was a deceiver and a manipulator. God also knew that this was not who Jacob was meant to be anymore.

God's blessing was more than a name. It signified that God would keep God's promises to Jacob. His new name, Israel, was powerful—one who strives with God. He would never be the same.

A few years ago, I led a group of teenagers to Green Bay, Wisconsin on a mission trip. We spent that week at a group residence for seniors, and I met an 89 year old man named Mr. Rost. I instantly felt a connection with this man and while the others in my group were working in the gardens or doing building projects, Mr. Rost and I spent hours talking.

I learned about his life as a dairy farmer and how his wife had recently passed away. I learned about corn, the Green Bay Packers, and about how lonely it was living at the center, even though his kids came to visit him once a week.

On the third day we were there, I started to ask him a question. "Mr. Rost," I began and he stopped me, saying, "Bob. Just call me Bob. After all, that's what all my friends call me." It was a special moment for me—when I was no longer a volunteer there on a mission but a friend who just came to sit on the front porch and share some stories.

There is something really special, really powerful, about knowing someone's name, about being on a first name basis.

We are on that same first name basis with God. In Jeremiah Chapter 1 verse 5, God says, before I formed you in the womb, I knew you." God has known us, and loved us, for eternity. Even in the mystery of this relationship we have with God, even though there is so much we don't understand about what it means to be the created beloved by our creator, we do know that God knows us intimately, and that God calls us by name.

Have you ever been introduced to a tank of fish?

I babysat for a little girl once who had 10 identical fish living in a big aquarium. I remember vividly that first time Ally introduced me to them, one by one, by name. I am telling you, they were identical, each one an inch long and gold in color. Yet, she could tell them apart. They were HER pets. She loved them.

I just saw a bunch of fish. But Ally saw a group of beloved friends, so special that she knew them by name.

Just like that little girl knew every single gold fish individually, to God, each of us in the crowd is different. Every face is a story. Every name a friend.

In Isaiah 49:16, God says, "See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands." Amazing! "We're engraved." Etched permanently. We can't be removed! Your name is on God's hand. And your name is upon God's lips.

That child's tank of named Goldfish meant something to that child. It meant they had a place in her heart.

My puppy Snuka's name meant something to my family. It was his defining characteristic.

Jacob's new name meant something. It was a name that would be remembered by every generation to come.

And your name means something too. God calls you by name. To God, your name means beloved, friend, child of God, partner in transforming the world. Your name means you are special to God. It means you are God's very own.

Jacob, now called Israel, does eventually cross the river, though with a bit of a limp. He meets his brother Esau, who is overjoyed to see him, and God does fulfill the promise he made to him, to make him the father of a great nation. His son Joseph will save the lands from famine. His great, great, and then some grandson David will become the greatest king the people had ever known. And his descendants, Mary and Joseph, will be the earthly parents to the son of God, Jesus Christ, the NAME by which we find life everlasting.

Amen