November 8th, 2020

Springfield Presbyterian Church

I’m Not Even Sure Anymore What Season We Are In.

The 243rd Day of March

Wrestling with God

I. The Wrestling Matches

 With three grown nephews who are relatively close to age to me, I can tell you that we’ve had quite a few wrestling matches in our lives when we were younger. Whether it’s just joking around or frustration, there’s some human compulsion to physically push one another around, to see who has the most strength. Even in the smaller battles, like the classic arm wrestle, it’s a battle of strength rather than wits.

 I can also tell you that I have lost each and every time – the boys are athletic and I really didn’t stand a chance, but I gave it my best college try. Yet in that moment of pure physical action, you do not see each other’s faces, you do not seek to outwit the other with debate – it’s purely a fight of strength and emotion, but physical will and mental endurance.

 If you’ve had a sibling or raised children, you’ve probably seen these wrestling matches in your day, perhaps one’s that you’ve had to pull one sibling off the other. Or maybe you yourself have had some wild and crazy college days where you found yourself in a battle of strength. Or, maybe another option – a martial arts fight where both muscle and mental strength will prevail.

II. Jacob’s Circumstance

 Well, that’s where Jacob found himself one night. This text is nestled between two other challenging texts – one where Jacob leaves out of fear of his brother and the following in which he will dare to come back into the land. He is fearful of his brother, Esau, as the division between them becomes even greater and greater as they grow older.

 The night he started to lay his head down during this trip, something grasps him in the middle of the night. He may have thought it was his brother, Esau, ready to wrestle in a battle to death, but in the pitch dark surroundings, Jacob doesn’t know who he is really fighting – just that he is ultimately fighting for his life.

 The wrestling doesn’t stop with a coach’s whistle or a break, but this fight goes until daybreak, and as the sun rises, the battle ends. This entity that Jacob is fighting calls the match and renames Jacob – Israel. The entity, who we know or recognize as God or the presence of God, in some variation, blesses Jacob and departs from him, leaving Jacob blessed but banged up with a limp from the battle in the night. Jacob has fought for his life, but he’s also fought for his future and in the darkness of that night, the way he would interpret his days to come have changed.

III. Wrestling with God

 While I can’t say that I’ve physically wrestled God or any manifestation of God, I can certainly say that God and I have had some dark nights of mental wrestling. When the night time comes, when the dishes are done and the laundry is folded, my brain does not turn off. As I look to the ceiling of my bedroom, tucked under the covers, my mind begins to process all that it did not have space for during the day.

 The usual questions arise, ones that consistently travel through our lives – “Why does God let bad things happen to good people?” – why does a young person lose their lives to a disease, why is someone injured severely in a car crash, why does faithful servant of many years get plagued constantly by challenges. I’ve asked these questions in all different ways, numerous times, but I have never an answer, and the day I think I do, I know that God will remind me that God is God and I am not.

 I’ve also asked other questions in the middle of the night, I’ve asked why there’s division amongst us, or maybe why we see nations fighting? Or sometimes, the questions get very real and very personal. There have been nights in the last few years, particularly as we have been figuring out this diagnosis where multiple questions have been asked, but generally an outraged wrestling of words have fallen, “How could you do this to me? Why would you let this happen? I serve you, where’s your healing now?”

 And then we rise, the sun comes up, the darkness is shattered, and we might not have answers to our questions, but we have asked the tough questions of the heart and somehow, that is a release, somehow it is cathartic. Even in the light, we sometimes still sit with the questions, but our day shifts and our responsibilities come upon us and we save the questions for another night or another time.

IV. Holiness

 The questions, the wrestle, is a true act of faith. If you are daring to ask the questions, then you are in relationship with God. What I also love about God is that God doesn’t smite me when I ask difficult questions, but there’s room for the wrestle, for the questioning, for the longing. And in the wrestle, I find that I become a person of greater faith, a more whole human, and I grow to learn more about myself and the world around me.

 If you need to wrestle with the questions, I encourage you to – I implore you to do so, because no matter how hard the questions are or how unfaithful we might feel within them – God can handle it. We see it in the text – God does not leave Jacob in the depths of the wrestle, nor will God leave him as his journey continues. The same is true for us – dare to ask the hard questions, get angry, have a bit of fury, allow the space to open up to reflect and encounter God in ways you may have once found unimaginable.

 Some of the strongest people of faith are the ones who have asked the most challenging of questions. When daybreak comes, when the wrestle subsides, we will not have the answers most times, but a sense of peace or a further acknowledgement that the conversation can continue as we grow and learn and find our image of what faithfulness looks like changing and morphing throughout our lives.

 So may you go from this place, asking the hard questions, wrestling with what disturbs you, and trusting above all that God has the power and love to wrestle with us until we see daybreak and clarity again. Amen.