

**Remarks on Courtney Haupt’s Testimony**  
**Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d’Alene**  
**Sunday, August 13, 2023**  
**10am**

Text: Genesis 32:22-31

Theme: Anything but Ordinary: Jacob Wrestles at Peniel (Blessing)

Today we will engage our Scripture lesson differently than usual. We are going to hear a testimony and afterwards I will respond with brief remarks of my own.

A little context for why we are doing this different thing: I sometimes worship at an Episcopal-Methodist church plant called Creators’ Table at the West Central Abbey in Spokane.<sup>1</sup> Every Sunday they begin their community liturgy with a member of the congregation telling a story from their life. The story answers a particular prompt for that season. For example, during Lent the prompt was “Tell us about a time you ugly cried.”

What I admire about this practice is that it reimagines the spiritual discipline of bearing our testimony. John Wesley taught that sharing our faith with others is one of the ways that we receive God’s grace.<sup>2</sup> The individual who shares the testimony receives grace by re-membering – piecing back together – what God has done; the people who hear the testimony receive grace by witnessing an example of God’s presence and power. Testimony is a type of evangelism, which literally means “to proclaim the good news.” We are called to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ by testifying to what God has accomplished in our individual lives – what God has done, what God is doing, and what God promises to do for us and the world.

Public testimony is one of our oldest spiritual disciplines; it fundamentally shaped and grew the early church. Unfortunately, this is a spiritual muscle that we have allowed to atrophy. Maybe we don’t want to be pushy or confrontational, so we avoid talking about our faith with strangers; or maybe we feel like our speech is not eloquent enough to share our experience of God with our neighbors; or maybe we are just afraid of rejection. But for the sake of our mission to make

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.westcentralabbey.org/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.umc.org/en/content/the-wesleyan-means-of-grace>

disciples of Jesus, each of us needs to reclaim this essential spiritual practice of bearing our testimony in public. This fall we will offer a workshop on creatively sharing our testimonies. We will publish more information about that workshop in the coming weeks. In the meantime, I encourage you to pray about whether you are willing to exercise your faith-sharing muscle for the sake of our Gospel witness in the community.

Today Courtney has agreed to bravely bear her testimony to us. Considering our Scripture lesson, she was given this prompt: “Tell us about a time you have wrestled with God.”

Before Courtney begins, a pastoral reminder: Our testimonies are sacred, meaning they are of God. It can be a very vulnerable thing to bear our testimony, which is why many of us shy away from doing it! So, we must receive each other’s stories gently and reverently, like a sacred gift. We are not here to cast judgment or suspicion, but instead to open our ears, minds, and hearts to the way the Holy Spirit uses our unique faith stories to challenge the whole community, encourage our witness, and highlight the truth of the good news we have received in Jesus.

[prayer – May the words of *your* mouth...]

[Courtney’s testimony:

When I had first begun reading over this passage in preparation for today, I was very confused: why would Jacob be wrestling God? Why would he, on his way to Jabbok, have sent over all of his wives, servants, sons, and possessions to the other side and then began wrestling with a stranger who had appeared out of nowhere? Why would God try to physically wrestle the guy? Of course, I think about a lot of the stories in the Bible, with their fantastical absurdity that make us ask: did that really happen? My theological conviction tells me it doesn’t matter, though I know others would disagree with this interpretation. At the end of the day, whether you read the Bible literally or metaphorically, we see in this passage that in some way, Jacob wrestles God and perseveres, which God praises.

I think it is beside the point to question if there was really a man wrestling Jacob, but rather to consider the concept itself of Jacob wrestling with God. We have all, in our own ways, wrestled with God. We continually ask ourselves: why would He choose this person to fulfill his will? Why would He use this method to get His point across? Why would He allow this to happen? To be frank with you all, my simple answer is: I don’t know. That was never the right answer, ‘I don’t know,’ because the right answer is always something along the lines of ‘Jesus’ or ‘God moves in mysterious ways.’

I wrestle with God all the time, because when I hear that phrase, though I know it to be true, I can’t help but roll my eyes and gag on all the obscenities I’d like to lash out with. ‘God moves in mysterious ways.’ It

seems pretty mysterious that God would move in a way that supposedly allows only certain clergy members clear insight of His will and not others. It seems pretty mysterious that the most sacred of Christian texts would be trusted to humanity to be translated to all languages of the earth, a treacherous game of Telephone, and not made clearly known by God Himself. It seems pretty mysterious that God would move in a way that would supposedly anoint a whole race of people to so maliciously hate the demographics from which Christianity was born. It seems pretty mysterious that all the children and teenagers who weren't fortunate enough to lock down their schools in time were only met with "thoughts and prayers," but what can you do? It's a God-given right to own an AR-15, to protect your own and live a prosperous, hard-working life. What is God's plan with dead children? It seems pretty mysterious that the ways I have grown up being taught to think about myself as a Christian are nearly identical to the manipulation of abusers in relationships: you are broken, you are nothing without me, you get to burn in Hell for eternity will all the sinners before you who couldn't seem to understand the simple concept that God is a God of unconditional love and forgiveness except when He's not. It seems pretty mysterious that God would want His followers to travel across the seas to rape, massacre, and destroy communities that can't seem to understand this loving and merciful God.

I had to leave the church to find out for myself what this 'good Christian work' has really meant. What an amazing lie, too. The universal mission trip to Mexico to learn that though their people are poor and helpless at least they're happy? That was once my testimony. Of course this run-down neighborhood we're in for a week will surely reflect the entire country. God, this will look so good on my resume and my Instagram, because who doesn't want a worldly Christian who has spent a whole week 15 minutes away from the Tijuana/San Diego border building a shack and pretending not to notice the photographer taking their picture interacting with a kid whose name you never bothered to learn? Or the wild idea that the entire continent of Africa is frozen in time as some homogenous picture of poverty and unclean water and let's send over our people to fulfill their own vanity projects and perpetuate this eternal image of the white Christian missionary coming down like God Himself to save them just to soothe their consciences. Let's bring God to them, it's not like Christianity was born there. Or the tell-tale "I still love you, I just can't agree with your lifestyle." Everyone knows the biggest sin of all is loving another person. I've had people tell me boys loving boys is on par with murder. Or how about, God made Eve for Adam because God does not see women as equal with men, it's not like Mary was the Mother of God, the Messiah.

It wasn't until I had come face to face with the physical evidence of 'God's will' abroad in Guatemala, where I saw the old ruins of Spanish churches built in the 1500s, that I hit my peak in wrestling with God. One of the churches we visited was the oldest in Central America, the first of its kind, named in God's honor: La Conquistadora - the conquerer. Where others might see Christian antiquity and perhaps archeological beauty, I saw death. I know, from all research and learning and discovering I had to do by myself, whose hands were forced to lay those foundations, whose blood was shed for the paint, and whose lives were stolen for 'God's glory.' Inside that church is a porcelain statue of Mother Mary and which, like the rest of the church, will turn 500 years old next year. When I looked into her painted eyes, I did not see the Mother of God or the sanctity of Jesus come to Earth; I saw eyes that looked upon the worst of humanity, the worst of Christians, the worst of God. Another church we went to, intentionally built over a piece of sacred Mayan land, was much worse. One step into the square leading to its entrance and the atmosphere was sick and heavy with the suffering and dread of all the innocent lives lost. All the millions who suffered the spread of 'God's will' — it was like I could feel their hands clawing my arms and at my throat, deafening me with their mournful, angry cries. The image of the loving, gracious God, whose human form sacrificed his own body and blood for our forgiveness, morphed into a God of death, the ground saturated with blood, bodies crumbled in what was either praying or begging

for mercy, things that had become synonymous. All I could think about how there was no hate quite like Christian love, and if God's will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven, Hell seemed like the favorable alternative.

Words cannot do justice how much I have wrestled with God. I cannot stand up here and say that I know that everything happens for a reason, because that would be a lie. But there is something I know: though I can't understand the reason for so many things that happened in the Bible and in human history, I can see who the person of Jesus was. He was radical in his teachings of love, of forgiveness, of grace. All people, in his eyes, had a place at the table, no matter their class, social stature, gender identity, race/ethnicity, sexuality. I have had to take years to completely uproot my Christianity and allow the soil of my faith to heal from the toxicity it has been watered with. Only then could I plant a new seed of Christianity and slowly nurture it to life again. It's taken a lot of wrestling with God to realize that most of my qualms with God are not with God, but with humanity. What has been disguised as the Gospel and the fulfillment of God's will has really been a potent mixture of colonization, fear, greed, racism, classism, homophobia, misogyny, Neo-colonialism, and an overarching theme of power-hungry people. The character of Jesus is none of those things. Jesus does not impose; he invites. Jesus does not threaten, does not coerce, does not bribe, does not intimidate, and he certainly does not conquer, at least not regarding people. While I was abroad I was also exposed to Oscar Romero's concept of Liberation Theology and I learned Jesus is not at the heart of my grievances. The Jesus in the Bible lived the way he spoke; he fought for the poor, the oppressed, and the forgotten, the fundamentals of liberation theology. He loved fiercely and lived humbly, and he also held his own followers accountable for where they went wrong. I certainly had. He is the one who says to 'come as you are,' not 'come when you're ready,' 'come when you change this about yourself,' 'when you abandon your culture for ours.' I know the person of Jesus, and because of that, I know why I keep wrestling with God.]

Thank you, Courtney, for your brave and raw and vulnerable words today! You speak with wisdom beyond your years. We have been blessed by your presence in our community this summer and by the gift of your voice. [present farewell gift]

Author Sarah Bessey wrote, "God isn't fragile. You cannot break God's love with questions, doubt, anger, uncertainty."<sup>3</sup>

This story of Jacob wrestling God is beloved precisely because of how it depicts God's strength. God does not use His strength to squash Jacob; likewise, God does not use His strength to squash our questions, doubt, anger, and uncertainty. Instead, he engages us firmly in the grappling. I am reminded of part of a poem by Douglas Malloch:

*Good timber does not grow with ease:  
The stronger wind, the stronger trees;  
The further sky, the greater length;*

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=832226564929308&set=a.336888501129786>

*The more the storm, the more the strength.  
By sun and cold, by rain and snow,  
In trees and men good timbers grow.*<sup>4</sup>

It takes some grappling to grow a strong faith and strong testimony. Jacob's nighttime wrestling match parallels his earlier dream encounter with God. Both revelations arrived during a period of deep conflict and distress in Jacob's life. When we left off last week, Jacob had taken two wives, Leah and Rachel, as well as their handmaids, Zilpah and Bilhah, into his household. As the years passed, his wealth and family grew – together the four women gave him eleven sons. And all this success stirred up his uncle Laban's jealousy, and the jealousy of Laban's sons, who saw Jacob as a threat to their inheritance.

God therefore commanded Jacob to leave the home he had made for himself in Haran and return to Canaan (Gen 31:3). The only problem was that Esau was in Canaan. And Esau hated Jacob.

So, when Jacob reached the Jabbok, he was already wrestling with the sins of his past and the shameful way he deprived his brother of his birthright. Once more he found himself fearing for his life. He sent his family across the Jabbok, along with a gift for Esau, hoping to appease his brother's wrath. And then he made camp for himself and waited for Esau's judgment to descend at dawn.

It is here, in the literal and spiritual darkness, that Jacob met God once more. The Scripture says that "a man wrestled with him until dawn broke" (v. 24). It is not until daybreak that Jacob learns the man was God Himself. I think it is interesting that God chose to appear to Jacob as a man. As Jacob prepared to meet Esau, it is almost as if God forced Jacob to confront and wrestle with the worst parts of himself: His arrogance and pride, his disregard for consequences, the fear and regret and shame that dogged his steps for years and years. When Jacob refused to let go of the stranger until he blessed him, I hear a plea for God to forgive the weak and broken parts of his humanity that led him to sin against his brother so Jacob could meet Esau in peace and reconciliation at last.

Courtney spoke eloquently of her own wrestling with God as truthfully wrestling with the worst parts of our humanity. It breaks my heart that the church has so

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<sup>4</sup> <https://discoverpoetry.com/poems/douglas-malloch/good-timber/>

often been the cause of that wrestling by fostering the sinful inclinations of our human nature, rather than being a community of mercy and justice. I am grateful for her witness and the witness of her generation as they continue to call the church to confession and accountability for the harm we have perpetrated in the name of God. What a blessing that witness is to us all! It is not until we have confessed and wrestled with these broken parts of ourselves and our story that we can begin the work of reconciliation that Jesus calls us to.

For in Jesus, we have received the good news of a love that will not let us go, no matter the depth of our sin, no matter the desperation of our struggles. In a very human moment, Paul laments in his letter to the Romans, “The desire to do good is inside of me, but I can’t do it! I don’t do the good that I want to do, but I do the evil that I don’t want to do” (Rom 7:18-19 CEB). We struggle mightily with ourselves and with each other. God knows this struggle. God put on flesh in Jesus Christ to share this struggle with us:

*He was pierced because of our rebellions  
and crushed because of our crimes.  
He bore the punishment that made us whole;  
And by his wounds we are healed. (Isa 53:5-6 CEB)*

Through the blood of his cross, Jesus has made a way for us to be reconciled to God. What else is the cross other than God’s ultimate commitment to wrestle with the broken pieces of our humanity and reconcile them to Himself? In the resurrection, there was victory and blessing for Jesus on the other side of his struggle with humanity. And there is victory and blessing for us, too, when we wrestle with God in the dark corners of our soul and allow Him to bring into the light the parts of ourselves that we do not want to face.

Because in the light there is healing and forgiveness and the possibility for a new way forward. At dawn Jacob looked up and saw Esau approaching him. And after Jacob prostrated himself on the ground before his brother and humbled himself in repentance, Esau raised Jacob brother up, threw his arms around his neck, and forgave him. As the Scriptures say, “Certainly the faithful love of the LORD hasn’t ended; certainly God’s compassion isn’t through! / They are renewed every morning. Great is your faithfulness” (Lam 3:22-33 CEB).

So, keep wrestling, friends. May we be known as a people who strive with God and with our humanity – for the sake of our witness to the reconciling love of Jesus Christ.

Amen.