

There's a story in the book of Genesis that has always perplexed me. It's one of those stories that you come back to time after time because you see yourself in it. It's a story of Jacob, grandson of Abraham and black sheep of the family. This is the man whose name means heel grabber, because he spent his entire life trying to define himself over and against his older brother Esau. The story takes place after Jacob has stolen his brother's inheritance and traded it away for scraps and he's left with no choice but to return to his brother and beg forgiveness.

On his way, Jacob spends the night wrestling with God.

Not an angel; not a prophet. God.

Jacob wrestles with the God of the universe, the one who spoke and made light, who breathed and made life – and Jacob wins.

And his prize is twofold.

He gets a limp for his trouble, and he gets a new name. And in a culture where names carry cultural weight, Jacob the heel grabber, the chaser, the also-ran, becomes Israel, the wrestler. The one who stands toe-to-toe with the God of the Universe. His identity became the identity of the Jewish nation and the people of God took his name for themselves. Israel came to know themselves first as a people who wrestle with God.

This is the identity Jesus and John both saw themselves inhabiting. They were part of the people who wrestle with God. So when John, who is in prison for doing the right thing, sends messengers to go find Jesus and ask him whether John was right to put his trust in him, John is not taking issue with Jesus. John is taking issue with God.

He's calling into question everything he's been told to believe about God. Because he'd been told, from the day he was born, that God had big plans for him. He didn't get to go to parties that his family threw, he didn't get to have fun as a kid. He had to wear itchy camel hair and eat locusts and honey and never cut his hair. And he did all that because he was told that God had chosen him to be the messenger for Israel, that he would be the one who would pave the way for the saviour of the world. And so while he was busy doing that, the king has him

thrown in prison for doing what God told him to do. Where's the justice in that? If God is all powerful, and all good, why do bad things happen to good people? Is God not able to spare John's life? Or does God just not care? Is God a moral monster?

These are the questions behind the question that John actually gets around to asking. John wants to wrestle with God, but he isn't really sure how. He's bought the religious line that's been sold to nearly every generation: all you need to do is have faith. You just need to pray harder and Doubt less. Give better, and do more. If something is wrong, you're the one who broke it and it's up to you to fix it.

Is any idea less in tune with the Biblical witness?

Because Jesus doesn't rebuke John. Jesus responds with mercy, grace, and compassion in the face of John's despair. Because Jesus knows what we are so apt to forget: that despair doesn't mean denial. Jesus response is not an invitation or a challenge to have more or greater faith. It is a call to remember who God made him to be. It is a call to wrestle with God.

In the face of hardship and injustice, Jesus proves his divinity by refusing to give a clear answer. Jesus is not like John because God has been wrestling with his people for millennia. He's danced this dance before, and knows all the steps. To ask people to never sink into despair would be to ask them to be perfect, to never take their eye off the ball, to never fall asleep at the wheel, to never have a lapse in judgement. Jesus invites John to wrestle in his despair because despair is not a destination. Despair is a journey.

To despair is to see a trajectory and ask if that is really where we have to go. Despair is the question of whether or not there is still agency to be had, and as long as a question remains, the faintest glimmer of hope can survive, like a coal buried under a bed of ashes. Despair invokes a better way of being, a more perfect and just world, a world of blessing and not of curses. Despair is only despair if you see the world as it is and yet as it could be at the same time. Despair is an act of Hope, and hope is substance of faith.

Jesus doesn't condemn John's despair. He welcomes it, because in it he knows John hasn't given up. In it, he knows John is still wrestling.

And God wants to wrestle.

Do you think that if God had wanted perfect automatons to worship him and give glory to his name he wouldn't have made them? Creation does that with every molecule of its being. It can't choose anything but reflecting the glory of God. The angels do that as well. Beings made to worship can do no other.

But humanity is different. Humanity is called to love the Lord with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

God has made us to wrestle. So let me offer you some wrestling tips:

When you wrestle with God, fight fair. God is going to fight back. ...

When you wrestle with God, fight hard. God can take it. ...

When you wrestle with God, fight together. Wrestling with God is hard enough when you don't also have to content with loneliness. ...

I'll be honest. Wrestling with God is the hardest part of leadership, because everybody thinks leaders know where we're going; we chart the course and set the sails. Leaders are supposed to convey unwavering confidence in the vision, and to despair is to invite people to check out. At least that's what we tell ourselves.

I decided I would preach through the life of John the Baptist over the summer months, mostly because I wanted to get to this passage. John's questions feel fresh to me. His despair feels real. It resonates with me because it doesn't pretend to have all the answers and is okay with letting the question hang. I find that refreshing.

Despair is something I battle constantly, which is hard to do when it's my job to stand up here week after week and proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. But

Beth will tell you about the anxiety that keeps me up at night, the fear of the future that brings me to the point of tears. I resonate with John because I want to know what John wants to know: have I placed my bet on the wrong horse? Have I put my trust in the wrong place? Have I chosen a career in a dying institution? Will I be able to keep a roof over my family and food on the table? Will there be a church for Elyse to grow old in? I want so desperately for the answer to be yes, I work as hard as I know how to make the answer to those questions ‘yes’, but with John my questions hang in the air: are you the one we have been waiting for or should I expect another?

But what keeps me going is the way Jesus responds to my despair.

He invites me to the table. ...