

# Sermon

All Saints' Episcopal Church

The Rev. Tim Black  
16 October, 2016



**God wants to wrestle. Wrestling with God is a way of being loved by God and loving God. If we persist, though, it changes us for good with a new name and a new walk.**

Great that today we get to spend some time with a difficult character. We are experts on the subject these days (on a national scale, I mean. Here... not so much. So good news. I am not talking about *any* of you).

I am not making any of this up. It's in the bible. Even from birth his credibility is suspect: born a twin to Esau (who is now coming after him, incidentally, to kill him), born grabbing his brother by the heel; his very name implies his character: Jacob-ya acob- means "heel grabber, or supplanter, or swindler."

Working with his Mother, Rachel, he cheats his way into a birthright (and I promise I am NOT making this up) covers his arms with hairy animal hides to fool his poor, blind father (Isaac) into thinking he was Esau (the son he loved more). He even *lies to his* poor blind Daddy and tells him he is Esau.

Wait. It gets better.... He gets the blessing from Isaac... who tells him he will "be the most powerful man among his brothers." Esau gets word when HE comes in for what should have been *his* blessing, and is heartbroken—and homicidal—about what the Swindler has done!

Jacob falls in love... and marries not one but TWO sisters... THINKS he is marrying *one* daughter of Laban, Rachel, and is fooled by Laban into marrying *Leah*, his other daughter... Jacob Works to be able to marry Rachel, too, goes through some weird goat trading with his Father in law, lives through some infighting between his wives, but in spite of it all, heads off on his own, and...

We find him today at a riverbank, running from his brother Esau "coming at him with 400 soldiers" presumably to work out his rage against his brother

I am NOT making this stuff up!

And now Jacob has come to this threshold- a river- one last challenge before entering into a new land. An anonymously-named "man" sometimes called an "angel." A powerful, and worthy foe, draws out of Jacob (a man not too inclined to fight up until now) whatever fight he has left. Whatever conversation that took place that we do not get to hear, Jacob's wiliness and trickster ways no longer work. He has to face this angel... and *wrestle*.

**God wants to wrestle.** Good news, because: God will wrestle with *us* when we are in a fighting mood: when we shake our fist at tragedy, when we scream at the heavens in pain, when we are full up with angst and aggravation—when we get snarky and atheistic, even, God stays with us..

All Saints' Episcopal Church  
634 West Peachtree Street NW • Atlanta, Georgia 30308  
Telephone 404-881-0835 • Facsimile 404-881-3796  
[www.allsaintsatlanta.org](http://www.allsaintsatlanta.org)

God stays with us when we question. When current events cause our cynicism to spike... when religion seems to be the problem, rather than the solution... God stays with us. Whatever “moves” we pull, God has better ones! God says to us, “Bring it on.”

Jesus even gives us a glimpse of this in his parable of the persistent widow. What is valued in her is not her faith or even any kind of righteousness but the fact that she keeps showing up, bugging the judge, asking, nagging. Maybe even verbally sparring.

Jacob wrestles through the night, too. He even faces dislocation- pain- injury- as a result. As we are trying to cross a threshold- a river- to grow up- to deal with change- be it death of a loved on, loss of church as we knew it, a change in what we would call our “faith” we forget that wrestling is hard... and that it *hurts* sometimes.

One of the hallmarks of leadership in any group is that sometimes we have to say and do things that are hard. We have all had one of “those” conversations that we were either on the dealing or receiving end of. We had to confront a family member, or fire someone, or correct or even rebuke. What gets us in trouble sometimes is that we fear the pain of how this will change the relationship so much that we avoid it. We are scared from “getting in the mud,” so to speak.

Jacob *stays in the mud*, though, and the angel/man calls a draw and gives him a peculiar trophy- and he “ya-akab’s” - dislocates- Jacobs hip. Man, that must have *hurt*. Wrestling with God has with it the Holy Peril of changing us for good- giving us a new “walk.”

Author Brene Brown calls this approach to faith.. and life.. and becoming more human “the ruckus... the rumble... and the reckoning...” We get down in the dirt with our struggles—while we are there we rumble with them with curiosity- courage— and lots of help, usually—and then we arise from the fight “reckoned” with them—changed—maybe limping and a little scarred- but more *human*.

She wrote this book in the last couple of years and it *sounds* like self-help hooley, but it is as ancient as Jacob! God is a God who strives with us—however and whoever we are—however we struggle—and always has struggled with us.

And we see, in the person of Christ, that God is a God who not only struggles with us—but who grieves with us , and sits next to us as we shake a fist at the sky, and who joins us in the joys we encounter and who weeps when we separate ourselves from her.

Jacob is given a new name, then, a new identity—no longer a “schemer” or “supplanter” but “one who strives with God- y’israel.” At the end of the struggle we are no longer who we once were.

When we wrestle, the place where it happens becomes holy! Churches that can wrestle *together* and strive and struggle, can be Peniel- a place where we can say “God was (and is) in this place!

By showing up- by being engaged in ministry- by taking part in conversation with our faith community- about the doubts- the difficulties- the tensions that emerge from your deepest self. Our life together is about being in the mud- running towards those messy rivers and asking the names of the angels we encounter—and letting them *change us* and live in to our new name.

Through our striving with God we can reorient ourselves- crossing rivers we meet-journeying together towards whats important- as people who are *real* , *muddy*, *scrappy* –and maybe sometimes walking with limps, Holders of *new* names that

All Saints’ Episcopal Church

634 West Peachtree Street NW • Atlanta, Georgia 30308

Telephone 404-881-0835 • Facsimile 404-881-3796

[www.allsaintsatlanta.org](http://www.allsaintsatlanta.org)

God gives us... like beloved... Child of Mine... Follower of Christ... God is with us to strive... to remember... to get muddy...  
to wrestle.

All Saints' Episcopal Church  
634 West Peachtree Street NW • Atlanta, Georgia 30308  
Telephone 404-881-0835 • Facsimile 404-881-3796  
[www.allsaintsatlanta.org](http://www.allsaintsatlanta.org)