

# The Wrestlers

Faith & Doubt / Greg Boyd

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## Sermon transcript

We were supposed to get back into the book of Luke, starting today this new year. Well, hang on, I know some of you are going through the book of Luke with drawls. You gonna have your Luke. We've only been at this for a year, so it's hard to get away from. And we will get back to the book of Luke, in fact we're kinda coming down the final stretch we've got about another chapter and a half to go, which means we might actually get it done next year, we'll have to see about that. But I just wasn't feeling that this weekend. As we're starting off this new year, there's something else that was kind of on my heart, that I want to share on. And, in fact, it may take up this week and next week. We'll see how that goes. I'm planning on this being a two-part series and here's kinda what led to where I'm at right now.

As we were heading into the holiday season, starting November or whatever, there's just a lot of great things that were happening. I felt so good about the way folks stepped up to the plate and helped out these various ministries to the poor, here in the Twin Cities. And then most recently in Haiti. Felt tremendous about what we did in terms of raising up clean water for Haiti. Almost 3 times what we're shooting for. That is just wonderful, to make that kind of a difference. So a lot of good things going on and there's a lot of joy that we just sang about it. A lot of joy, God's presence is here.

At the same time, this last Christmas season, I don't know if I've ever spoken to so many people who are struggling. A result, there is always this thing in the holiday season, where it kinda stirs up stuff. And so, some of that's normal but my impression was, and I spoke to other leaders in the church and they had the same impression, that there's just an unusual number of people that are struggling with a variety of different things. And I thought it to be good to put that on the table. We want to for sure always be announcing and proclaiming the joy of the Lord, the strength of Lord, the peace of the Lord, the victory that is ours, all that is true and we stand on it. At the same time we live in a war-zone, and people take hits, and they're struggling, and there's doubts, and there's questions. And if we neglect that, if we're not real with that, well, we become sort of Pollyanna-ish, you know, and just kind of have a u y faith. We need to be real with this and so I want to spend a little bit of time talking about this. And in a way talking about the legitimacy and even the value of asking questions, of wrestling with doubts, of wrestling with God. In fact, I wanna entitle this message "The Wrestlers".

It's based on the story of Jacob in the book of Genesis. This is Gustav Dorø's famous portrait of Jacob wrestling, in his painting (see g. 1), and with an angel, turns out to be the Lord. And I don't know why they always had to put wings on these creatures. There's no wings on this person in the Bible. It just is a man. But it comes out of Genesis 32. It's a passage that's always

been kind of important to me, because I have always been one of those folks - and I'm not alone here - that have wrestled with God quite a bit. Faith has never come easy for me. It's like, I'm just wired such that my brain has to give my heart permission for almost every single thing it believes. I've never been able to just to accept things. And there are people who can do that. I am not one of them. And so I've always kind of identified with Jacob, this person who wrestles with God. It's an important passage, a rather strange passage in some ways. Genesis

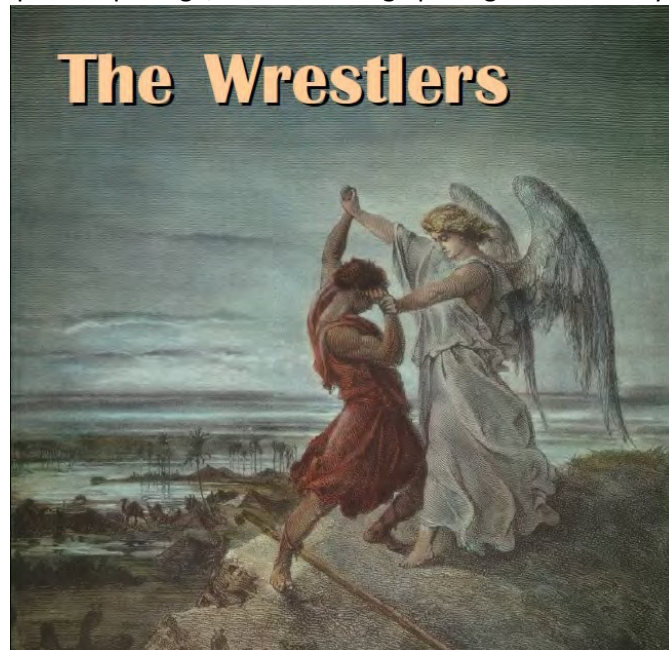


Figure 1: Gustav Dorø: Jacob

32, starting with verse 24:

Genesis 32:24-30

So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak.

That's all. It says that's what you do. This guy shows up and they start wrestling. It doesn't say why, how it got started. Did someone insult somebody or step on a toe or...? It doesn't say. They just start wrestling.

When the men saw that he could not over power him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak."

It's kinda crying uncle here.

But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with (or wrestled with) God and with human beings and have overcome." Jacob said, "Please tell me your name." But he (the man) replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed them there. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared." Pray with me here for a moment. Father, I thank you for every person in this auditorium and every person listening through podcast or television or any other means. And I pray Lord, God, that you would be working in our hearts and use this word. Give it your authority and use it, God, to build your kingdom in our life. And God, to make us a people who give ourselves and others space to question, and doubt, and to wrestle with you. Land on this, Lord, and infuse it with your spirit. In Jesus name we pray. And all of God's people said: Amen! Amen!

The story is odd in a lot of ways. A guy just shows up and they start wrestling and we're not told why. It's odd, because it's clear that this man turns out to be the Lord. "Jacob saw God face to face," it says. This was the Lord taking on a human form and yet the passage says that the man couldn't overtake Jacob. In fact, the man cries "Uncle, let me go! It's daybreak! We've been doing this all night!". So Jacob gets God to cry uncle. That's odd! It's odd because God, you know, touched Jacob's hip and got it out of socket. Just with one touch. And I'm thinking if you are able to dislocate his hip just by touching it, you probably could've pinned him earlier. And yet it says, that the man couldn't overtake Jacob. I have to conclude that the story is being told from Jacob's perspective. He really took on this guy.

The impression I get is something like this: The other night we had a get-together on New Year's Eve and my five year old grandson was there, and in his friend Zac was there. He's - I think - seven. And at one point, I started wrestling with them. And they tackled me to the ground and I would say things like "Ouch, you're so strong! You are so powerful! I cannot overpower you! I cannot defeat you! But I boss!" and then I'd role on top of them and then they'd role on top of me and we're just clowning around and wrestling and fighting. And my grandson got in boxing gloves and he would hit me and I go "Ouch, you are so strong!"

Now, the reality is, that even though I'm getting old, I could have pitted these guys very quickly. But you know it's fun to do this. They need to get some energy out, I certainly needed the exercise and it's kind of a bonding thing. You know, you can't sit around with a five-year-old and hug him for a half-hour. But you can wrestle for a half-hour. It's the same thing, really. You know, it's a bonding experience and so it's a good thing to do. And I kinda get the impression, that's what God's doing with Jacob. "Come on, Jacob. Let's wrestle a little bit. - Ouch, you are so strong, Jacob! Oh! Wow! You really can tackle good!"

It's an odd story, but the main point of it is really is really profound and important. The story's holding up Jacob as this hero. He is one of the forefathers of Israel, right? And one of the reasons why he's regarded as a hero, is that he had the audacity to take on God. To go to the mat with God. To wrestle God. And he had the tenacity not to let go until he got the blessing that he was wrestling him for. He's held up as a hero here and the reason his name is changed

from Jacob to Israel, it's because he wrestled with God. That Israel has the connotation of one who wrestles or strives with God. Or can just mean "God strives". This is why his descendants were called Israelites.

Now think about this! That means that's the distinctive trademark of these people! The name reflects their character. And they are people who wrestle with God. And if you read the Old Testament, that's pretty much what you find. Israel's always wrestling with God. And more often than that, because of their own stubbornness and their own sin and things like that. But what this passage is telling us is that there's a good side, a positive side, of that wrestling with God. It's okay to wrestle with God. You're supposed to wrestle with God. God wants you to wrestle with him. My people are the Israelites, those who wrestle with God.

And there's a purpose to that. The process is part of the point. Because in wrestling with God to receive the blessing, we grow, our character develops. Which is always God's main point. To develop our character. To refine our character. To make it fit for the kingdom of God that is coming. And our wrestling with God is part of the process. The passage that's always been important for me. Never more so than the last year or so.

I've been out loud here about something that I've been struggling with in a powerful way. And actually it's been kind of a struggle for a better part of a decade, the last year or two intensely. I've been wrestling with the whole thing of the violence in the Old Testament. Some of the portraits you find of God in the Old Testament, now most of it is beautiful. But you find a strand of the Old Testament where God is depicted in extremely violent terms and I've really been wrestling with that. The question is, how do you reconcile depictions of God where he tells his people to not show any mercy as they slaughter a whole population of Canaanites, how do you reconcile that with the revelation of God in Jesus, where he tells never to use violence and to love our enemies? How do you put those two things together?

What makes it particularly hard, is that Jesus himself endorses the Old Testament. So I've got to take it seriously. When I read about, you know, God doing violence in some other book, in Homer or some other ancient text, it doesn't bother me at all because I expect that. But here's the Old Testament and I have to believe that's divinely inspired. And yet I find portraits of God there, that don't look anything like Jesus. How do you put those things together? I've been wrestling with this and big-time. And I will not let go until I see daybreak. Now there're plenty of people who would say things like this: "Why do you always have to figure everything out? Can't you just accept a mystery? It's a mystery! It's a mystery! God reveals himself in Jesus to be a God who would rather die at the hands of his enemies, than slay them and then he goes and slays a whole population of people. It's a mystery! God tells never to use violence and to love our enemies but, oh, then we find that he's telling his people not to show any mercy when they use violence. It's just a mystery, we have to accept it!"

I don't buy it. Now here's the thing: There is room for mystery, absolutely! Mysteries are all around us. When you're talking about God, you have to accept mystery. Our very existence is a mystery. So mystery permeates everything. Got that! There's a place for mystery. But I sometimes wonder, if we don't go there too quickly. If we don't just sort of give up when God is saying, "Come on, let's wrestle a little bit." Sometimes, I suspect that, when people say "It's a mystery", it can be just a pious way of saying "I don't care enough to think about it" or "I'm

too lazy to wrestle with that question. I'm just gonna accept it as a mystery." I'm convinced that sometimes, in theological circles anyways, you say "it's a mystery" when you're aware that your position doesn't make any sense whatsoever. But you don't want to get criticized. "Oh, God's ways are higher than our ways. - Don't ask any more questions!"

There is a place where we have to accept mystery, absolutely. But see, sometimes, I think God wants us to wrestle with him and to say "Come on, get into the game!" Here's something that really impresses me about the Bible: the heroes of faith were never afraid to question God. At least not when it came to his character. When it came to the terms of the covenant, you find throughout the Bible heroes of the faith went to the mat with God, they wrestled God. So God let's Abraham in on his little secret: "Hey I'm gonna pour out my wrath on Sodom and Gomorrah." And Abraham, read it in Genesis 18, he pushes back: "God! What?! You can't do that! You're the Lord of all the earth! You're supposed to do what's right! There's innocent people there!" And they have to have a conversation about it. And God doesn't get mad at that. He brings Abraham in on this. He says to Moses at one point: "You know Moses, I'm really frustrated with these people. I'm gonna annihilate Israel and I'll start over with you." And Moses doesn't just go "oh, mysteries!" because "God, you got a covenant with them! You can't do that! It's gonna ruin your reputation everywhere! And when you take them, you gonna take me with them!" And he pushes back on God. And you find that throughout the Bible. David, all throughout the psalms, the psalmist is raising questions "Where are you God? Why? We know that you are this way and it seems like you're acting this way!" Habakkuk, Jeremiah, they weren't afraid. They had the audacity and the tenacity to wrestle with God. And God doesn't get offended by that, he actually commands that. God's not like the head in the Wizard of Oz who says, "Who are you to question me?" or like some insecure pastors, you know, if you question everything. They say, it's like, "I'm the man of God. Who are you?! You are supposed to just listen to what I say!" God's not insecure, he's not dysfunctional. He is very secure and he invites his people to wrestle with him. It's okay to wrestle! You're supposed to wrestle! He wants you to wrestle! That's why the people of God are given the name "Israelites". That's not just an Old Testament thing. Paul calls the Church "the Israel of God" in Galatians chapter 6. It's okay to wrestle with God.

So here I am wrestling with God. I just have the privilege of doing it in public and everyone can see, you know. But it is like this: I refuse to let go of the revelation that God looks like Jesus Christ. Jesus is the one and only definitive expression of God. He's the perfect expression of the father's essence. Hebrews 1:3, I will never compromise that. Everything hangs on that. At the same time Jesus himself endorses the Old Testament, says it's divinely inspired. So I have to take this as the revelation of God. This is it, has the authority of God. And now I'm going to the mat saying "Okay, God, how is this possible? I need some light here. I need some insight here." And I'm still in process on it, but I am beginning to see the break of day. I'm getting too little light. Morning, I think, is being to arrives. I'm starting to feel like I'm getting some of that blessing that I've been wrestling for. But I can't go into it all right now. I - we had a Q&A on it this last spring. I'll just share this much and we'll talk about later, things are sure. But here's kind of what I feel like God's leading me to:

It's this: If Jesus is the definitive, the final, ultimate revelation of God, he reveals what God is always like. God didn't just start being Christ-like when God became incarnate. Jesus reveals God's essence. What he's always been like. So the fact that God became a human being, reveals something about the way God always is. God was only incarnate once but he's always incarnational. Which means, if Jesus reveals who God is, then that means God's always been taking on our humanity. And the fact that in Jesus, God took on the sin of the world and appeared guilty on the cross, means that God always is doing that. He enters into our fallenness he takes it upon himself, he bears our sin. Enters into our humanity, bears our sin. And so, now, as I look at the Old Testament, I'm beginning to think that, when you see God in violent terms, what's going on there is, God's entering into a violent humanity and he's taking on the sin of our violence and bearing that in himself. And it's been healing like it's been blessing to me. It's bringing a congruity inside of me, that I didn't have before. Now will everyone agree that's a blessing? Probably not. But it hardly ever happens. But there are some who will see that it helps. And that's a blessing.

The point is, there are some blessings, in fact I think it's that the greatest blessings in the kingdom, come only as we struggle with God. And he invites us to do that, he wants us to do that. There's a purpose to that. And I'm not saying that the stuff that comes our way in this life is ordained by God to make us wrestle with him. I'm just saying he uses this war-zone, that we're in, to invite us in on the wrestling match. And there's a blessing in store for us, if we persist with that.

Jesus taught in parables. Unlike a lot of teachers today, he didn't try to reduce everything down to a cliché. He talked in parables. And one of the reasons was, because you have to chew on parables to get it. People have to always say "what do you mean by that?" Now there's a lot of other people who will just go "Oh, mystery! I don't get it. So forget about it!" But Jesus wants us to struggle with it, to chew on it. Because there's a growth process that happens. It forms our character, as we chew on some of the harder teachings that we find in the New Testament. Jesus says "Seek and you'll find." That means you're supposed to be just this hungry aspect of being a follower of Jesus.

Always to be seeking, never be coasting. There's a quest that we're on, a wrestle with God. "Seek first the kingdom of God." That's something we're always supposed to be doing. God wants us to be pulling on him for more of his insight, more revelation, more of his love, more of the kingdom showing up in our lives. He could just pour it all out. But see that that wouldn't develop our character at all and developing our character is what God's chief agenda is all about.

The point of the passage is that it's okay to wrestle with God. You're supposed to wrestle with God. God wants you to wrestle with him. We are called "Israelites". We're descendants of the Israelites. Our distinctive trademark is, that we're okay with wrestling with God.

The sad thing, I think, is that for a lot of folks today, faith, far from entailing wrestling with God, faith is the opposite of that. Faith is supposed to alleviate all struggles, solve all problems. Faith is supposed to answer all questions. Faith is the absence of struggling. In fact, it seems to me that, at least in some Christian circles, that is sort of their selling point. You know. The way you sell the church. And they sell Jesus by saying "We are the people with all the answers and

none of the questions. We're the people who are free from doubt and we are free from struggles. We have those who don't wrestle with God. You sinners wrestle with God, but there's no wrestling on our part. We are the people who are free from struggles. So if you just believe in Jesus, he will x your doubts, he'll x your worries, he'll x your concerns, he'll x your marriage, he fixes everything. We are the people of answers. We are the answer club." That's supposed to sell Christianity. And the real sad thing is, that they think that's a selling point. Like that's what people are looking for. The thing is this: people who are all thoughtful, who are aware of the ambiguities of life, when they hear that, they run the other way. Anyone who comes to you and says that they have all the answers, they're either lying to you or they're just not very bright. It doesn't sell. And people on some level know that life's full of ambiguities.

And the other thing is that: When we buy this model of faith, faith is having all the answers, faith is psychological certainty, freedom from all doubts. When you buy that model, then when you go through struggles or when you have doubts - and if you're thinking person, you're gonna have doubts - when you go through that, you feel all alone. Because your model of faith makes you believe that this is the answer club, the people who have all the answers. I call it "fluff and stuff faith". This is "fluff and stuff faith". When you have this fluffy model of faith, then when you go through the struggles, you feel all alone. In fact, if you really believe it, in the fluff and stuff faith, well then you feel like there's something wrong with you. You must lack faith because you have doubts. You must not be in a right relation with God, because you have some kind of the struggles. And you go through it all by yourself.

A lady came up to me several weeks ago at the end of one of the services. And you know, people come from all different kind of backgrounds, different kind of churches and whatever and they have their model of faith that they inherited from their previous background. So her question is one, that probably a lot of folks here at Woodland Hills Church are have gotten over, but maybe some are still struggling with this. You know we're all at different places. But she was kind of fearful, as she brought this up to me. She's going back to college to finish the degree which she started 20 years earlier. And one of her first classes was a class in science and she said: "You know I am worried because actually it is starting to look to me like there's some pretty good evidence for evolution." And I think she was worried that I was gonna like: "You heretic!" or something. I don't know. But she was worried. And I just, you know, assured her, I think, that was an issue several decades ago. That I had to wrestle with that a whole lot and gone through that and I still come back to it once in a while and there's a lot of folks who have wondered about that. It's a perfectly legitimate question. How do you reconcile Genesis 1 with evolution or with what you think science is saying to thee. Is it necessary to take Genesis 1 or Genesis 2 as all literal?

And that applies to a lot of stories in the Bible. How much hangs on whether or not you take as literal the story of Samson getting stronger as his hair grew longer. You're not the only one that's wondered about that. You're not the only one that's wrestled with the question of the traditional view of hell as eternal torture. Would God actually do that? Those are legitimate things to wonder about, and to wrestle with God over, and search the Scripture over, and to talk to folks about. We shouldn't get indicted for doing that.

For other folks the questions maybe are so much theological as they are personal. Why did God let my husband die? Or why did God allow my child to die? For some, this last Christmas was hard because it's the first one they've gone through without their loved one. And so you wonder: How come God doesn't heal me of my disability? Why isn't God answering the prayer for me to find a wife or to find a husband? How come I feel so alone? Or why did God allow the abuse to happen to me when I was a child? Why was I born with a gay orientation? How come that God doesn't empower me to overcome this addiction that I have? Or maybe it's something like this: How come people talk about experiencing the presence of God, God is in this place, you feel his presence, and I never do? What's wrong with me? We sing about joy but how come I don't experience that joy? We talk about love but how come I don't ever really experience that love? I believe it's true because it's in the Bible, but I don't experience it. Why not? Why do I feel all alone? How come for some folks, they talk as though God just guides their every step and they know what they're called to do, it's just so clear to them. But here I am looking at the options of my life and I don't have clue what to do and God's not giving me a greenlight on anything. Where is God? The Bible asked that question a lot. And it's a legitimate question. And we've got to be a people who are okay asking that question.

But see if you have a fluff and stuff model of faith, that what invariably happens is, when you have the questions and you're feeling alone, you run to the little shack of cliches that resign just outside the church building. And there you get all the little pat answers, that Christians have come up with. And if something doesn't make sense, they just tell you "it's a mystery". And you may buy that, but there's a part of your brain and maybe a part of your spirit that you have to assassinate in order to do it. And God never asks us to do that.

Folks, we are the descendants of the Israelites. And it's said, we are the descendants of Jacob who was renamed Israel. We are people who wrestle with God. That's the distinctive trademark. That is our name. And when we wrestle with God, it's not a sign that we lack faith. Not at all. In fact, when you wrestle with God, it's a sign that you have faith. Faith is not psychological certainty. I'm going to talk about that next week. It's not being right about everything. And belonging to Jesus doesn't mean you're part of the "we-got-the-answers"-club. "Salvation-by-self-certainty"-club. No. When you wrestle with God, it's a sign that you have faith. Because faith is at its core a covenantal term. And what it means is you trust your covenant partner and you pledge to walk trustworthy before your covenant partner. That's what faith means.

To have faith means you trust your covenant partner. You trust this relationship. And you pledge to walk trustworthy before God in that relationship. So when you wrestle with God, it's a way of saying this relationship, this covenant, I have faith that it is strong enough to take this. And it's worth fighting for. You ask questions because you believe, not as a sign that you lack faith. Even in our everyday relations with the people, we only confront or at least should confront those that we're in a relationship with. Those that we have some kind of an understanding, a covenant with, where it's appropriate to do that. When we don't confront others, it's simply evident that we don't have a relationship with them.

So it's a little bit like this: This last summer, I was in the mall and there's a young lady that was walking through this mall. And she was dressed provocatively. And caring herself in



provocative ways. And it's not just 'cause I'm a 53 year old guy that's saying that. Everyone was nosing her and that I think was the point. I don't know what her heart was, what her intentions were, but I do know what the effect was. Guys were gawking at her. As she was strutting her stuff, the young ladies were frowning at her. The wives were squeezing their husband's hands, saying "Don't you dare!" She was just working in. Now, see, if this is my daughter, I would've taken off my shirt and put it on her and said "go home!" But she's not my daughter, she's not my wife and I don't have any relationship with her. And so as a kingdom person, I've got one responsibility. Right? And that is to agree with God that she was worth dying for. And I am to take every other little judgmental thought that got activated by that stimuli - it always happens - and as soon as I notice, to set all judgment aside and simply say "God, I thank you for creating her. Lord, I bless her, I pray for her, I agree that she has unsurpassable worth." And so on, and so on, and so on. But that's because I don't have a relationship with her. I'm not in a covenant relationship with her.

But see, if my dear wife showed up in the mall dressed like that. - Ehm... Tread carefully, tread carefully... - You know, I would still agree that she's got unsurpassable worth. That she was worth Jesus dying for. But I might also have a couple of other thoughts. That I would share. I would say: "Honey, if you dress like this, I'm... - Nice out t. You look great. - But your timing is really bad. Honey, what are you doing? What are you thinking? This isn't you! I know you. I've been married to you for 32 wonderful years. And I know, this isn't the way you dress, the message you send. Now well - not in public. - What's going on here?" The other things are not your business, so knock it o ! But see, I would question her. We'd wrestle over this thing, we'd struggle over this thing. I'll be out loud about this. But this doesn't show that I lack faith in her, it shows that I have faith in her. I believe in our relationship. And I have faith that this relationship is strong enough to handle this confrontation. And I believe in her good character, which is why I'm demanding an explanation for what I'm seeing here. You see, the questioning is not a sign that you lack faith. It's a sign that you have faith. What kind of relationship would it be if I was upset by the way Shelley was dressing in the mall and I was too afraid to confront it. I don't wanna rock the boat because I might just end our marriage. That's a pretty sucky marriage if you can't address issues like that. Or even worse if I actually thought that that revealed her character. So you would reduce your marriage. You think you know a person. You think that they're modest and whatever, and now they come out dressing like this. And throw everything up because of this one incident. That would show a lack of faith as well.

You know, you wrestle with people and we wrestle with God because there's a relationship. And this is what you find throughout the Bible. Abraham and Moses and Job and Jeremiah and Habakkuk, when they called God on the carpet, it's not because they don't have a relationship with him, it's because they do. They're saying: "God, we know you. You're just, you're faithful, you're kind, you're benevolent. Why do you look like this? You say you're gonna be here but now you're not here." And they ask the real questions that are on their heart. And God doesn't get o ended at that, he doesn't get mad at that, he doesn't strike 'em down. He actually commends it. "My people are Israel, those who wrestle with me. They care enough to wrestle, they believe enough to wrestle, they trust my character enough to wrestle with me." He commands it.

I think one of the most beautiful examples of this is found in the book of Job. Job gets by a purely random thing he gets slimed. A cosmic wrath wheel going on in the heavenly realm and it dumps on him and that's part of the point of Job: Things happen that don't make any sense. Random sliming. Boom! And at first Job is kinda pious. He tries to keep pious language: "Oh, blessed is the Lord. You know, he gives and takes away and it's how it works." But as his book goes on, if you read it carefully, as the pain increases, he falls more and more into despair and he says so. And he starts saying some rather nasty things about God.

Now Job's friends are all the fluff and stuff people. They had that fluff and stuff faith. So they're always you know just piously pontificating about things. And in the process they're indicting Job. But what they're really doing is protecting themselves. They wanna make sure that what happened to him won't happen to them. So they have a faith around that, that if you're just righteous enough, nothing bad will ever happen to you. And that's why they start "you know God's always gracious and kind. So if you're getting slimed, it must be because you did something wrong or lack faith or something like that."

Job, he gets more and more raw as this book goes on. He starts saying things like this: "God you brought me into this world just to torture me. You play with me the way a lion has fun with its prey before he devours it. When are you gonna finally devour me?" He says things like: "You're not just. They say you're just, but you're not just. You blind the eyes of the judges, so they don't judge rightly. And you're the one who causes the innocent to be judged and cast out on the street. And you don't hear the prayers of the righteous. You don't hear the prayers of anybody. You turn a deaf ear towards them." And he goes on and on. He actually calls God the adversary at one point. That's getting pretty nasty.

Now when God shows up, he corrects what Job said. Job's theology was inaccurate, in fact, in Job 42, Job himself repents of what he said. He was talking nonsense. He admits that. He repents of it. But at the same time, when God shows up, he has a word for Job's friends. He talks to Eliphaz, one of Job's "friends". And he says:

Job 42:7

After the Lord had said these things to Job, he said to Eliphaz the Temanite, "I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken of me what is right (kun), as my servant Job has."

"My servant Job." Now God wasn't saying that Job's theology was right, 'cause he just spent two chapters, telling him that he was wrong. And Job himself repents of that. But he uses this word "kun", which has the connotation of aligning with a plumb line. It means straight. And God is saying here, that for all of his bad, despair driven theology, Job spoke straight. You guys, you fluff and stuff people, you didn't speak straight. You were speaking out of your own security. You had a self-serving theology and you indicted Job because of that. But Job, my servant, despite all that he said, despite his rantings and ravings, my servant, he spoke straight. And God commands that.

What God wants more than anything is honesty. I'm convinced that God is far more interested in the process by which we come at our answers than the answers themselves.

Not that answers aren't important. But it's the process, the honesty, the rawness of our life before him. Do we have a kind of relationship where we just do a lot of fluff and stuff pretending, sugar-coating everything, suppressing all the stuff that maybe is imperfect, suppressing the questions, put on a nice little sunny appearance. Or do we have a kind of relationship, where we're really there. Where we really are faithful. To be faithful means the real you shows up. Will you say what is real? Do we have a kind of trust in God, where we'll have the audacity and the tenacity of Jacob. And to wrestle with him all night long. Stay hungry for what has God to offer. To keep pulling at him for the blessing. Or to work through the issues that are there before us. And if we're honest, we've all got those kind of issues. Do we have a relationship that is honest. Like Abraham and Moses and Job. They asked God questions because they're in a relationship with him.

You never find the Assyrians or the Babylonians or the Egyptians wrestling with God. 'Cause they don't have a covenant relationship with him. They expect God to be mean and nasty. They don't know the true God. We find all the wrestling going on is with the people who know God. It's not a sign that you lack faith, it's a sign that you have it.

So I wanna start off this year with two challenges, all related to wrestling. Number one: Can we be a people who are just, who never coast, who always are pulling on God for more. He invites us to do that. In fact we're commanded to do that. To seek, to stay hungry to seek, rather than resting on past laurels and just kind of coasting. To stay hungry. And to be a people who are honestly saying "God, we want more of you in 2012 than we had in 2011, and more in 2011 than we had in 2010. And God, we want to see more of your kingdom, we want to see more of your power, we want to see more people being transformed, we want to see more marriages fixed and healed, we want to see people coming on their knees and being conformed to the Image of Jesus Christ. We want to see your healing power being poured out in every service. God, we want more of you. Can we stay hungry and ask the Holy Spirit to always be stirring us up. There is supposed to be a sort of restlessness inside of us. That there's a peace with that restlessness. If you normalize it, if you say it's okay, then there's a peace that is in the midst of this striving. But there is supposed to be striving. And growing as we pursue him.

And then secondly: Can we be a people who give ourselves and each other a grace that God gives us to be real. And to be a people who commit to being honest and to free from pretense. And to be a people who embrace one another as we wrestle. To be okay with people having questions. We've got a foundation, he's name is Jesus Christ. That's the center of the center. And God gives us every reason in the world to believe that he is the son of God. So it's not like that this is just a questioning-club, the opposite of answer-club.

You know, I used to, before I was a Christian, to go to this Unitarian Church. They used to say "To question is to answer." Which doesn't make any sense whatsoever. And then they say "Well, it's a mystery." No, there's supposed to be some answers. But we have a core, something we rally around. But never should we buy this model of faith, where we have to accept the party line on everything. We've got to be okay, having questions and having doubts. And allowing people space to have that. As people raise questions, if you feel like you have answers, by all means share them! And maybe a blessing, maybe you are the answer to prayer. Share them. And maybe it will land, but though maybe it won't. But can we be okay with people being in

process, because, folks, we are all in process. And to question and to doubt and to wrestle with God is part of being human. And it's part of being a child of God. Being an Israelite. To be people who give each other space. And in fact if you're in a relationship with a person, as they're wrestling with God, whatever the question may be. Even if they don't accept your answer to it. Can we be a person who enters into that? And wrestles with them? So when their arms are too weary from wrestling, you are there to hold them up and say keep on going, keep on going. When they're too weak, you can be their strength. And when they're too at to pray, you can be their prayer.

God, give us the grace to that you extend towards us, help us to extend it to ourselves and to one another.

I'm gonna call the prayer teams to come forward and if you're here this morning, struggling with something, whatever that may be, I encourage you to come forward and receive prayer for. The body is supposed to be holding the body up. Right?! And so don't leave here with that. Come up and pray with these folks. But if you just want to pray on your own, you can do that as well. Don't forget, we have the CDs in the back, if you want to pick some of those up. Lord help us to be honest.

Father, thank you for being the kind of God, who doesn't ask us to put on a song and dance in a pretense in a fabrication, but a God who calls us to honesty, rawness. Thank you God, for being a God who enters into a covenant with us, that's strong enough to handle conflict. And I pray, Lord, God, that by the power of your Spirit, as we rely moment by moment on your grace, to give us the boldest, the audacity and the tenacity of Jacob. To be one of your Israelites. People who love you enough to care enough about the covenant to wrestle for it. In Jesus name! And all of God's wrestlers said: Amen! God bless you guys, be honest!