

Changed by struggle (Genesis 32:22-31)

The challenges we face might not be ordained by God, but they can teach us things.

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What are we learning in the midst of our struggles, our wrestling, our suffering? The question might sound insensitive—and it certainly can be that, depending on how, when, and why it's asked. I do not believe that our struggles are always foreordained by God, designed specifically to serve some sanctifying purpose in our lives. This view dishonors those who suffer, and it fails to acknowledge that suffering is far from fairly distributed in our world.

And yet. In the times when we struggle, I wonder how we—like Jacob, who receives a new name, a blessing, and the awe-inspiring realization that he has seen God face to face and lived—might be changed by it. I see Jacob learning from his long night of wrestling with the Divine in three particular ways.

1: Jacob encounters God as mystery. The divine being first appears to Jacob at nighttime as a man. It is not until daybreak, when Jacob grabs onto the stranger and will not let him go, that the stranger says to Jacob, “you have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed.” In this moment, Jacob comes to understand his wrestling opponent as more than mortal. “I have seen God face to face,” he declares.

As in the moments when Jesus looks an awful lot like an ordinary gardener (John 20:11–18) or an unremarkable fellow traveler (Luke 24:13–5), people in biblical stories are not always who they seem. God is mystery; there is so much we do not understand.

In our own times of wrestling, we too might find ourselves face to face with a God beyond our comprehension, not contained in our boxes. We might feel disoriented by this. But we might also find comfort in it. Our views of God might expand—and while this can be painful, it can also be good and beautiful.

2: Jacob grows into interdependence. In *My Body Is Not a Prayer Request*, disabled scholar Amy Kenny reflects on Jacob's wrestling, and particularly on the limp he walks away with: “We often think of healing as running marathons in super-fit bodies, but in Israel's story, limping becomes a mark of relational interdependence. ... Limping becomes a way of moving beyond the self-sufficient hustle to define self-worth through independent prosperity and into the reality where we all help facilitate one another's thriving if we accept our human limits.”

Perhaps we too, when our wrestling scars us, find that our view of ourself in relation to others is actually changing in healthy ways. We lean into community. We learn to accept our limits. We become more aware of

our interconnectedness with one another and with our broader world.

3: Jacob rethinks power dynamics. The power dynamic between Jacob and the stranger proves complicated. The stranger initiates the wrestling match but is unable to prevail. He is, however, able to put Jacob's hip out of joint. Jacob holds onto the stranger and physically prevents him from leaving. When the stranger asks Jacob's name, Jacob answers; but when Jacob returns the question, the stranger refuses to respond. The divine being and the human one go back and forth, with no clear winner.

Many of us were taught that God is Almighty, infinitely bigger and stronger than we are. But Jacob encounters a God who gets on his level, initiating a wrestling match with an unclear power dynamic.

Maybe we too emerge from our struggles with a sense of shifted or shifting power—perhaps a stronger sense of our own agency, our ability to wrestle and to change things. Maybe we find ourselves no longer content to sit back and wait for God to fix problems in our lives or our communities. And maybe we come together and use our collective human powers to move and shape our world.

Not everything happens for a reason. Not all suffering is redemptive or redeemed. But maybe our struggles are not wasted, either. Maybe we, like Jacob, encounter God as mystery; we lean into interdependence, into community; we learn to walk in our own power. Maybe these transformations are sacred.