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Genesis 32:22-31  
2 Timothy 3:14-4:5  
Luke 18: 1-8

When was the last time that you struggled with God? When have you most questioned or wrestled with God's word or God's will?

I think that for most of us, our struggles with God flow out of problems in our relationships. They could be relationships with big things, like those with the world in general, or our senses of vocation. They could be closer relationships, like with a family member, a coworker, or a friend. We get frustrated and wonder where God is or what God is doing (if anything). We have trouble figuring out God's will and hopes for our world and our lives.

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Jacob's wrestling with God is inspired by the same sort of situation. Jacob had a long and twisting relationship with his twin brother Esau. You'll remember that He and his mother schemed and cheated his brother Esau out of his birthright blessing. Brokenness marked their relationship for years. They had not seen one another or spoken for a long time. Just before today's tale of wrestling, Jacob had sent a message to Esau with gifts, in order to seek reconciliation. Messengers responded that his brother Esau was coming to him with "four hundred men." (*Gen*

32:6) The news of Esau’s approach made Jacob “greatly afraid and distressed.” (32:7)  
Esau must have been coming to pick a fight or take revenge. That night, Jacob  
prayed. “Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother... for I am afraid of him.”  
(32:11) He sent three messengers ahead, to meet Esau, with more gifts.

We hear in our passage that Jacob spent that same night alone, wrestling with  
an unknown man. By the end, Jacob was marked by the evening – his hip was not  
the same as before. And he was given a new name, to denote the importance of the  
moment. “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with  
God and with humans, and have prevailed.” (32:28)



The scripture writer says that “Israel” basically means “one who has struggled  
with God.” Yet linguists would define the word “Israel” in a slightly different way.  
They would say that “Israel” means “God struggles.” That’s one of the amazing  
things about this story, isn’t it? It’s not that humans struggle, for we already know  
that to be true. But our God is one who struggles with us. God is not an impersonal,  
uninvolved monarch. Our prayers are not requests, logged by a great accountant in  
the sky. They aren’t mere thoughts or empty ideas that go into nothingness.

Instead God is fully engaged in relationship with us. It is a real and dynamic  
relationship, with one who responds to us as individuals – whether we’re in pain or

in joy or somewhere in between. In this relationship, our prayers are one part of a conversation, with God who will respond.

We bring to God what is broken, what worries us, and what our hearts wish and long for. As with Jacob, we won't necessarily like the response. Our hopes won't always happen when we want them to – that's usually my problem, since I get impatient. We may find ourselves wishing that our hopes were realized quickly, and instead we're wrestling with God.

As a congregation, right now we are wrestling to discern the Spirit's guidance as we follow Christ at this time in our history. It takes time and dedication. We push and pull, to see what God does when we explore new possibilities. We press on and hold tightly like Jacob, knowing that we will be marked by the struggle.

At times, it is tempting for me to give up – to say the wrestling is not worth it. My heart becomes cynical and hardens to the sin and brokenness. My brain questions what kind of God does this or that. Some times I suspect we all want to walk away, and to save our energy for other things in life.

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Yet our struggles with God are not ends in themselves. The Spirit leads us and prepares us for what will come. In the next verse after our text ends, Jacob encountered Esau. He remained very worried about what would happen. “But Esau

ran to meet him, and embrace him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.” (33:4) Jacob’s last prayer had been for deliverance from Esau’s wrath. He was scared for his life and things looked bad. Instead God answered by giving Jacob his true hope: real reconciliation. The brothers’ once-broken relationship was healed. New life sprung from what appeared to be ruins. As Christians, we hear it as an echo of Christ’s death that gave way to resurrected life. It is a small glimpse of the hope we all share – that the Spirit will bring light to and redeem the darkness and sin and death that is in us and surrounds us.

This wrestling prayer – it’s not easy. But frankly, none of my human relationships are easy. Most of them don’t seem like they’re worth the struggle though. With God, the process may be painful, and throw us off-kilter. With God, any pain gives way to astounding, new life. When the journey seems long, we hold fast to God, seeking the strength and the vision we need. As individuals and as a congregation, we pray for a blessing, of real healing and abundant life in Christ. We pray to be guided and enlivened and inspired by the Holy Spirit, in ways so wonderful that we can barely imagine them now. We pray for resurrection life, here and now, and in the eternal days to come. Amen.