

## Unexpected Wrestling Matches

### **Genesis 32:22-31**

The famous African-American baseball pitcher, Satchel Paige, once said, “Don’t look back. Something may be gaining on you.” In our passage from Genesis 32, Jacob knew that his past was gaining on him. Twenty years earlier he had cheated his brother Esau out of his birthright, and then his father’s blessing. Then Jacob had fled to Haran, the land of his uncle. Now he was headed home with both of his wives and their children, and also the two hand-maidens of his wives by whom he also had children. He had survived a nasty confrontation with his father-in-law, who had resented his leaving and taking his daughters and grand-children with him.

During the return journey to his homeland of Canaan, Jacob heard the news that Esau was preparing to meet him with an army of 400 men. Jacob needed time to think, so he separated himself from the others while encamped at the Jabbok River. There, alone in the night, he unexpectedly found himself wrestling with a man. They wrestled all night and in the end Jacob discovered that he had been wrestling with God himself. The result of this unexpected wrestling match was that God changed Jacob’s name to Israel. And if we look ahead in the story we will find that when Jacob a.k.a. Israel finally met his brother, Esau warmly welcomed him home.

By now you know that I am an avid sports fan. The Broncos, Rockies, Avalanche, and Nuggets garner a lot of my attention. I am a competitive person and so I enjoy competitive sports. I also just enjoy the athleticism of the players. Watching Troy Tulowitzki play shortstop for the Rockies is like watching poetry in motion. Now that the National Football League owners and players have settled their issues, we can get on with football. Oorah! Go Broncos!

When it comes to the sport of wrestling, I enjoy high school, college, and Olympic wrestling. I don’t like pro wrestling because it is scripted and faked. Why it draws so much attention is beyond me. In recent years a new sport has evolved called cage fighting, a mixture of boxing, kicking, and wrestling. Even though the matches seem genuine, I won’t watch it either. People beating up on each other is not, for me, a sport.

There is one similarity, however, between the unexpected wrestling match Jacob had with God and cage fighting. Both were prolonged, knock-down, all out, no holds barred matches. The Jacob vs. God match lasted all night with God inflicting an injury on Jacob, disjuncting his hip and undoubtedly giving him a permanent limp.

While Jacob prevailed against God in the wrestling match, God prevailed in the rest of Jacob’s life. He gave him the new name of Israel and from that day forward, Jacob truly became the father of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Following the wrestling match, Jacob asked the “man” what his name was. For the Jews, to know someone’s name was to be able to have influence with them, perhaps even to exert control over them. Moses tried this same gambit and out of the burning bush God told him, “I am who I am.” We also want to know God’s name because we want to have a personal relationship with him. For us, among other names, we have that of Jesus. In our minds we think we know what he looks like, but we don’t. Our prayers are personalized when we can address them to the Lord. God understands and embraces our need to know him as fully as possible. But in truth, God has many names and in the final analysis he is collectively the Great I Am.

Like Jacob, we can also suddenly find ourselves in an unexpected wrestling match with God. Why does that happen? Because God in Christ wants to be the predominant influence in our lives, and sometimes God has to wrestle with us to achieve that goal. To wrestle with God is not always a pleasant experience. It can cause us pain, but in the annealing that comes from that experience, we are molded into being that which God wills for us, and in that we are blessed.

I am going to tell you my story of wrestling with God. But the story isn't about me – it's about God. In June of 1980 I took command of a destroyer. For a naval officer this is the epitome of your career. Command at sea is the goal and once you achieve it you feel like you have finally arrived. Anything else that comes after is icing on the cake. God had been watching over me for several years and our family was deeply involved in a United Methodist Church in northern Virginia. God watched this new step in my life and then made his move. In early 1981, while sitting in the captain's chair on the starboard side of the bridge, I suddenly had a thought about entering the ministry. I thought, "What? Where did that come from?" Then I laughed and dismissed the thought and forced myself to focus on something else. Over the next few weeks, the thought persisted. Then I got ticked off. Here I was, on top of my world, having achieved my dream of commanding a destroyer, and I'm thinking about ministry. I told God to leave me alone. I had a great career going, I loved the navy, and I wasn't going anywhere else. "You've got the wrong person," I told him. "Go mess with somebody else." Lucky for me God has both a sense of humor and is patient.

I didn't realize it at the time, but God had just grabbed me, threw me down on the ground, or in my case the deck plates, and began a no holds barred wrestling match with me. Jacob's wrestling match with God lasted one night; mine lasted five years. There were times when it was intense. And there were times when I was able to prevail over God and put his call to me out of my mind for several weeks at a time.

Having completed my two-year command tour, I returned to Susan and the kids in Virginia. One day God stirred me up so much I went down to Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C. just to sniff around and pick up the usual brochures and catalogues. I read the descriptions of every course they offered. God had his hooks in me, but still I resisted, forcing the idea of ministry out of me by sheer will power. Don't ever underestimate, however, the will power God. If God wants you for anything, God will get you.

Approaching the summer of 1984, it was time for a new duty assignment. I had another shore tour to take on before returning to sea duty. Being tired of the Pentagon and military bureaucracy scene, I asked for command of a university Naval ROTC Unit. We wanted to come back west. That summer only two units in the west were open for new commanding officers, the University of Washington and the University of Colorado. We didn't know anything about Colorado but had some experience with the Puget Sound area and loved the Pacific Northwest. The decision seemed easy. We'd go to Washington, but something wouldn't let me do it. I'd come home and tell Susan, "I don't know why, but I think we need to go to Colorado." She'd say, "OK." But then I'd come home and say, "No, let's go to Washington." And she'd say, "OK." This back and forth indecisiveness went on for over a month. I wanted to go to Washington, but couldn't bring myself to lock it in.

Finally, my detailer, who was a good friend, said, "Rich, I need a decision. We have to fill both these slots and I'm giving you first choice, but you've got to make the decision now." I told him to cut the orders for Colorado. That evening I went home and told Susan and she said, "OK. Let's start packing."

We arrived in Colorado in June 1984, bought a home in Longmont and I took command of the NROTC Unit at CU. We also got immediately involved with the First United Methodist Church in Longmont. We were excited to be in a new church and I was settling into my new role with the midshipmen in Boulder. Here came God again. "Ahhhhh," I silently screamed, "leave me alone. Can't you see what's going on here? I'm happy and doing well. Go away."

Over a year later I accidentally stumbled (God is smiling here) on the information that there was a United Methodist seminary in Denver. Oh, oh. I went down to the Iliff School of Theology, sniffed around, picked up the brochures and catalogues, took them home and devoured them. This was taking on a sense of the bizarre for me. Colorado or Washington. With some trepidation, I went on-line researching seminaries in the Pacific Northwest – there weren't any affiliated with The United Methodist Church! Colorado or Washington. I felt like I had been struck by lightning. God had deterred

me from taking all of us to Washington, because he wanted us in Colorado so I would be confronted by a seminary of my denomination.

And yet, still I struggled, but I was definitely weakening. In the summer of 1986 I took a four-week course at Iliff entitled "The Philosophy of Religion." That's was it. My appetite had been thoroughly whetted and I surrendered. God's five-year unexpected wrestling match with me ended up with me yielding. I told God I needed to finish my three-year tour in Boulder. In the interim I took occasional courses at Iliff as I could. I retired from the navy in June 1987 and entered Iliff full-time, crunching through in two years. Graduating in 1989, I began my ministry calling, which is now in its 22<sup>nd</sup> year.

We wrestle with God in our thoughts and consciences, perhaps in our dreams, and in our prayers. God may be lofty in our minds, but he is down-to-earth in actuality. We will find him in the busiest, nosiest, and dirtiest of places. We will also find him here, in a place of serenity, and at his holy table of forgiveness. We will find him wherever we are. We can seek him in the midst of calamity. He may seek us out and confront us. The end result is usually a wrestling match of some kind. God may want us to do something and we resist; we may want to do something and God resists. The wrestling continues. It can last for a moment, or until dawn, or for several years. In the end, when the wrestling is over and we relent, God redeems us and blesses us. It was so for Jacob. It is so for us. Amen? Amen!

- Pastor Richmond B. Stoakes, Carbondale Community United Methodist Church, 31 July 2011