

Sunday, August 8, 2010

Sermon: "Wrestling With God" by Beth Snyder, Fuller Seminary Guest Speaker

Scripture References: Psalm 20 and Genesis 32:22-32

When it became clear that God was moving me out of performing and out of theatre into full time ministry I started the Seminary search. I was really excited to be cocooned in this theological utopia, just falling more in love with God and chatting about the apostle Paul and GK Chesterton at the campus coffee shop. How many can see the writing on the wall? I was warned before I left to be prepared for the battle of my life. Of course, at the time, I did not really understand what that person was talking about.

Throughout the last two years it seemed as though one rug after another was pulled out from under me. When I left for California, there was one plan for the future, within two months, that plan disintegrated. Although I'm generally a cheerful person and know how to not allow my emotions to rule my day- helplessness, confusion, and loneliness have been my constant companions over the past two years. I quickly began to understand what the person who gave me the warning was talking about. This is a time that I am being prepared for a battle, I am being raised up to be a warrior for the kingdom of God, and you better believe that there is One that will fight that progress. I don't want anyone to think that I have been miserable, God was always with me, He provided an incredible community, a place to use my gifts, and people in my life that care about me deeply. I've been able to explore a completely different part of the country and completely different culture...mountains and palm trees to look at every day. Even the way my classes fell seemed to be ordained by Him because whatever I was going through at the time the class was speaking directly to. In my OT Writings class one assignment was to write our own Psalm of Lament...and I was going through a breakup so it just poured out of me. Easiest assignment of my life. And in one of my worship classes we were talking about exactly what we were talking about at my church at the time!...But even when you know in your head God is there, that He has a plan, it is very difficult to sense that in your heart when circumstances have left you floundering and heartbroken. So I'm in my last class at Fuller, last class of seminary and I'm going to be honest, even though I've loved most of my classes, I'm going into this one with not the most charitable attitude. I've already walked across the stage. I've already worn my cap and gown. Finding a job right now seems to be so much more important than finishing two classes this summer. PLUS- it's a Genesis book study. I did not want the Genesis book study. I wanted Isaiah. Who doesn't know Genesis??...I was IN 'Joseph' when I was 14...But, this class blew my mind. I feel like God just gave me a gift... And I just got so excited that I wanted to share some of this class with you. (I know my degree is in worship and not biblical studies, if you want to talk about worship theology, I'm really sorry, I'll get you a copy of my thesis and we can talk about it.)

So we're talking about Jacob. I know you might not be used to this but if I ask a question here or there, just blurt out an answer. At the time Jacob was attacked, he was already in a stressful state due to events that had just occurred and events that were soon imminent. The relationship between Jacob and his father-in-law Laban was a tenuous one. Many years earlier, as Jacob was on the run from the wrath of his brother, he happened upon a girl named Rachel at a well and

immediately fell in love with her. Rachel brought Jacob back to her father, Laban, and Jacob began to work the land for Laban. He bargained seven years of work for Rachel's hand in marriage. On the wedding night, Laban disguised his other daughter, Leah, as Rachel and Jacob consummated the marriage with the wrong girl. ("Surprise!") In order to marry Rachel, Laban demanded seven more years of work from Jacob. Clearly, Laban and Jacob's relationship would not have been favorable as a result of Laban's deceit and extortion.

After 14 years of being taken advantage of, and with God's prompting to head back to the Promised Land, Jacob decided it was time to leave Laban, but it was stressful. Laban chased after him, it was a fight, yada yada. THEN- Laban finally leaves, it's nighttime and the next day Jacob is about to meet up with estranged brother.

Growing up the two boys didn't get along. Jacob was a mama's boy, Esau was the man's man- he hunted and was hairy. Jacob stayed at home. So the last time Jacob saw his brother, Esau, he had stolen Esau's birthright and paternal blessing- which was a huge deal. Of course, Esau was enraged and vowed to kill Jacob. It was at this point Jacob fled the land and eventually found Laban. Jacob wanted reconciliation with his brother Esau after so many years of exile and sent a messenger to Esau. Esau's reply was disconcerting; he would come, but he would come with 400 men. It was at this point, alone, in distress and fear, awaiting an army of his brother's men the next day that Jacob was attacked by a nameless divine being.

There is a song entitled "I Can Only Imagine" in which the writer speculates about his reaction upon finally meeting Jesus in heaven; upon seeing God face to face. What are some emotions, some reactions we expect? Speechlessness, awe, prostration, and dancing are all possibilities according to the song. These reactions are what many Christians envision when finally faced with the glory of our Savior in person. Interestingly, not many people mention the prospect of immediately fighting God, attempting to wrestle Him to the ground, and demanding answers. This picture brings an entirely new meaning to the phrase "I Can Only Imagine."

I want to talk about three things, three implications of this story for our lives:

#1- Confession is the turning point

- Jacob means conniver, ambitious deceiver- Jacob confessed who he was, all the negative aspects of himself.
- In OT times especially, (also Saul to Paul) God changed names as a symbol of how He had changed their lives.
- Israel means struggles with God and overcomes. God said, you have a new destiny, a blessed destiny
- Blessing is now to Jacob's name and not a stolen blessing
- Confession and struggle lead to blessing

#2- God wants relationship with us so badly that He will allow pretty extreme behavior from us, as long as we're communicating with Him! He will get down and dirty with us just to be with us.

And He wants us to be persistent.

- Wrestling is intimate, it's close, it affects us
- Persistence
- God is willing to strive with us
- Sometimes causes injury
- Blessing comes

#3- **God is with us in the struggle.** He will not leave us. Even though there is struggle, He will bless us.

- Jacob able to walk into the meeting with his brother with peace, knowing God would be with him, knowing he was blessed.

And guess what? Our lives are going to include struggle. Jesus told us, Love your enemies. Pray for those that persecute you." In another place he says "do not repay evil for evil and bless those that persecute you." Really Jesus? I never would have come up with that on my own. I may or may not have just gotten in a fight with a woman in line with me at LAX on my way here! I may have been standing in the security line, with my little carryon, minding my own business when she just walked right into my bag. And then she said, Instead of just saying sorry and turning the other cheek I may or may not have said.... To which she replied it's a good thing for you I can't hit you in an airport...to which I may or may not have said, in the most condescending voice possible, oh sweetie, I think you'll be ok." Failed. **Not only are we going to struggle with God- we are going to struggle to do what God tells us to do.** Of course, I got to my seat and the big guy next to me pulls out a Bible and starts highlighting verses for the next hour. OK, God. I know. I feel really bad about this one.

Of course- we are not just an OT people; as Christ followers, we are also a NT people. We also read the OT through the lens of our redemption in Jesus Christ. So who, for us, embodies this principle- this struggle and blessing principle- more than God's own Son? We don't know if Jesus knew the full extent of who He was His entire life or if He was able to grow up as an average child- so we don't know if it was always a struggle- but we know about the struggle in His adult life. "Father, take this cup from me." Jesus pleaded in Luke 22. He was in such anguish and such a struggle with God that it was like He was sweating drops of blood. Have you ever felt that? Such anxiety? Such anguish- like your heart is going to come out of your chest, no matter what you try to do to calm yourself down, you just can't? Multiply that by infinite amounts. But what came...what came was the ultimate blessing. Raised from the dead, restored to life, and ruler of the Kingdom, sitting on the throne, the most high and lifted up.

In Hebrew writing, when words are repeated it means what? (They are important.) These two words that are repeated in this text are struggle and bless. Isn't that interesting- the juxtaposition of these words...they are both repeated, both significant, opposite in meaning- but both part of Jacob's relationship with God...and both part of our relationship with God. He wants us to know there will be struggle, but there will be blessing.

I would like to leave you with this blessing from Psalm 20- the Message translation.

MAY GOD answer you on the day you crash, May the God-of-Jacob put you out of harm's reach, Send reinforcements from Holy Hill, Dispatch from Zion fresh supplies,

May He Exclaim over your offerings, Celebrate your sacrifices,

May He Give you what your heart desires and Accomplish your plans.

That clinches it—help's coming, an answer's on the way, everything's going to work out.

See those people polishing their chariots, and those others grooming their horses?

But we're making garlands for THE LORD our God.

The chariots will rust, those horses pull up lame—

and we'll be on our feet, standing tall.

Oh Lord, Answer us when we call!