

**Sermon** “Struggling *With* God” Minister David Jones

Listen to the Sermon Here: [Aug 2 2020 - Sermon, Struggling with God.mp3](#)

I grew up in a small town not unlike Ashfield, a town that has changed an awful lot, evolving from a rural community with countless family farms dotting its landscape, into now something else: part retirement community, part commuter town, with still the odd, large farm that somehow both contains and conceals the past before our eyes. The place I grew up in is a little less sure of itself than it was in the past, a little less rooted in the soil, a little less connected to the flow of the river, than it once was. What is essential about the town is certainly still there but it's more amorphous now, as if it's floating in the sky over the people's heads, searching for new purchase on the people's hearts. I have shared before Rev. Mick Comstock's sense that something similar has been playing out in the hill towns. Our Sunday worship *in* church has always been the strong vine that we all could hold onto. Communion Sundays in particular bound us with bread. I wish my hometown had a church like ours.

It is a tremendous privilege for myself, and Vicki Ix at St. John's, to serve as ministers in a place like this, where churches remain at the very center of so many people's lives. And we have such a beautiful sanctuary in Ashfield. Of course we have the very best choir. There is a glorious morning light that, as Gerard has shown me in photos, graces anyone at our lectern with a sunny halo at a very precise moment every Sunday. There is a really palpable energy as choir members rush to find their seat after rehearsing with Margery and Amy, and as people visit with their neighbors in the pews, trying to bring a bright conversation to a tidy conclusion, or at least to the right pause before picking the thread back up over coffee after the service. Then when finally the clock hands arrive at 10 o'clock, a Deacon brings the Christ candle to light, and I do my best to invite the bell, to quiet and center us. We might still hear Daisy's paws clicking on the sanctuary floor as she huddles under the piano; our increasing silence seems to calm her. It is all these things that work together in a little dance of sound and light that guarantees a deep observance of the sacred, the clear presence of God attending to our worshipping souls.

It has now been over four months since we could worship in our sanctuary. For people like us, people with church at the center of their lives, that means it's been four months of missing the most important parts of the most important thing; it's been four months of missing our deepest witness to God's presence here and now among us. Worst of all, we have not been able to mourn and to celebrate the

lives of those we have lost the way we deserve to. I hope we still will when we can.

In our tradition we are all ministers of God, we are all God's love manifest in Creation. So when we are together in one space, we can hear God's voice so much more clearly. For four months now we have had to settle for a lower quality sound. I know and trust that we are still hearing God's voice, but we have to strain a little harder to hear it. After four months of working harder, I think we're all understandably getting tired. A colleague of mine in the Franklin Association described still being energized by conversations and ideas with congregants about how to do church in different ways during this time. That resonated with me. She then described how quickly that energy disappears when she wakes up in her home and realizes all over again how limited we all are right now because of this pandemic. She realizes her fears for her children going back to school all over again, her fears for her community with the possibility of another wave of this thing coming before there is a vaccine. She realizes she's running on fumes, and the exciting ideas fall away. Well, that resonated with me too. I imagine that resonates with many of us who have been diligent about keeping up with church business, only to feel like we're spinning our wheels. Unless we can conjure that sunny halo and the voices of our choir in harmony, church must remain a struggle for now.

Today we'll share communion, and the message of Matthew's Gospel will be apparent. We will be reminded that all will be fed when we are truly committed to feeding each other. But it is not this 'good news' that has been comforting me this week. Instead, it is our reading from Genesis, that familiar story of Jacob wrestling with a stranger, who he recognizes as God or as an angel of God, that has given me a fresh store of patience. It is the story of Jacob and his wrestling with God that most connected me to our ancestors in faith.

I realized this week just how often I use this story, reduced to a metaphor, to describe my work or my prayers, how often I report that I am "wrestling" with this or that thing in my life. I think it's an apt metaphor for what our church communities are doing right now. We are all having to wrestle with God, cut off as we are from our sanctuary. In the place of our sanctuary's peacefulness, we have new fussing with technology and internet connections, with muting and unmuting; fussing with masks, fussing with trying to understand each other when we can't see each other smile widely in joy or gently in sympathy. And everything else that goes on in our lives between Sundays--an illness or passing in our family, a success or a failure in our classes or workplaces, trouble in our relationships,

painful experiences of being subjected to discrimination or prejudice, fear and worry over the course of events, tragedies, celebrations, vacations, reunions-- everything is now not only cut off from that sustaining, nourishing peace of our sanctuary, but also from the reassurance and comfort of a hug, or a big meal together, of taking in a concert or sporting event.

So we are really caught in a cruel twist, where just when we need to be together most in our sanctuary, we *can't* be together in our sanctuary. Every day we suffer in the frustration, the anxieties, the isolation and discomfort of this situation. And if that wasn't enough, there is always that little voice in our head that protests, that reminds us, well, things could be worse, things *are* much worse for so many people. So it is even hard to complain, it is even hard to let go of judging ourselves, and to just grant ourselves the permission to vent or to cry.

In Genesis, the story of Jacob depicts a clear change in the relationship between God and us. When Jacob wrestles with God, he bears the marks of it; he walks away from the contest with a limp, laboring through an injured hip. Now, Jacob didn't know at first who his spirit and his body were contending against, he did not know at first that his will was vying with the Lord's. It is only when God, following this contest, grants him the name Israel, which means one who struggles with God, that the truth is revealed to him. From that day forward, God's relationship with God's human creature is expanded, it is widened, to include now a nation of marked people who have dared to wrestle, to contend, to struggle *with* God and prevail. God tells Jacob it is *because* Jacob has "striven" or struggled with people and with God, that he should have the name Israel that all his people will bear. To have faith, to be a people of God, to come to live according to God's love, is to be willing to wrestle and come face to face with God, to cling to God like we would a worthy and undaunted opponent; it means to carry within us a back and forth of asserting our own free will as creatures, and yet still striving to serve God's purpose for Creation.

Jacob's story is a reminder that what distinguishes us as people of faith and good will is our inheritance of a tradition of wrestling or contending with God. We are inheritors of a tradition that understands God to meet us in our wandering, in our uncertainty, in our questioning, that understands God's willingness to supply resistance to our exercises in faith so that we can build new, strong muscles.

I think we have a long way to go in this pandemic. Today I am grateful to be reminded of the ancient roots of our tradition, because this is not the first time we have had to wander, or that we have had to strive to meet God on our road rather

than in our sanctuary. It is not the first time that our main way of being *with* God is in the clash of our will with God's. The name Israel means wrestling or contending with God. The wrestling part is easy, we're steeped in that every day. But let us also remember the 'with' part of our name. All the people of Israel, all those who are descendents--by their faith--of Jacob, all people of good will--though we are without our sanctuary--we are always *with* our God.

Alleluia and amen.