Genesis 32:22-31

I remember a phys. Ed. class in college, a unit on wrestling. We were paired off by size, I was paired with George Zeno. The instructor taught us some moves, George and I wrestled. I remembered how tired I was, almost immediately. In high school I played basketball, I got winded running up and down the court, but never exhausted like I was after thirty seconds of struggling against George. Arms legs, muscles I didn’t know I even had all were turning to mush. With all my strength I twisted George, Something cracked. He cried out - I released him - frantically called the instructor.

In that moment I felt a deep sadness - I had harmed another.

Within seconds the instructor pronounced George fit as a fiddle, just some cartilage making noise. I wasn’t dangerously strong after all.

But that wrestler who wrestled with Jacob was. He wrestled with Jacob through the night until daybreak. When he saw that he did not prevail against Jacob he touched him on the hip socket - put Jacob’s hip out of joint. “Let me go for day is breaking,” he asked Jacob.

“I will not let you go unless you bless me.”

“You shall no longer be called Jacob but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed.”

“Please, tell me your name.” Jacob asked.

“Why is it that you ask my name?” the wrestler responded. And there he blessed him.

And Jacob knew it was God he had encountered - God who wrestled with him, God who named him, God who blessed him. So Jacob named the place Peniel for he said, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.” And Jacob limped because of his hip.

Have you wrestled with God lately?
I think more of you have wrestled with God than have wrestled with God here.

More often you wrestle with God through the long hours of the night as Jacob did, than on a warm sunny Sunday morning singing hymns of praise here.

A marriage in trouble, a job lost, a parent dying, and suddenly your whole being is struggling for a blessing.

That night was not just any night for Jacob.

Years before he had cheated his brother out of their father’s blessing. He had wrapped his arms with the skin of a young goat, fooling his father into believing the blessing was being given to his hairy brother Esau. And once his father’s blessing had been spoken he fled before his brother would find out.

Now years later he was returning. Word was his brother was coming to meet him with an army of four hundred men. Would he come to kill, to give the liar and cheat Jacob just what he deserved?

God had directed Jacob to return to the land of his father. Jacob had prayed that God would deliver him from the hand of his brother Esau. And the during the night came the wrestling.

And then with a limp, and a new name, and the blessing given in the night Jacob met his brother.

And they were reconciled. Esau did not strike his brother but embraced his brother. His army was never ordered into battle. The brothers met and parted in peace.

You don’t have words to tell of your wrestling with God?

For days or weeks or months you pray as you have never prayed before.

It is like the whole world is living in the same world they have always lived in but for a time you are living in a different world altogether. You ask for a blessing - you are changed - you hang on - you are wounded. Jacob asked for a name for this one who wrestled with him. To have a name means to know.
Like Jacob's name was "cheat" at the first and "God rules" at the last for "cheat" is the meaning of Jacob. and "God rules" the meaning of Israel. But the wrestler would give to Jacob no name. And to you the one with whom you wrestle has given you only the name Jesus. Jesus, the one who entered the very hell you pray God will spare you from. Jesus who suffered and died. Jesus is the name of God for you.

But there is also a promise in Jesus' name. When the struggle of praying in the garden was over, and the struggle of pain and rejection on the cross had mortally wounded Jesus, when the darkness of the grave had closed off all light - the one who led Jacob back to his brother raised Jesus from the dead. Just when humanly speaking there was no hope at all, God raised Jesus from the dead. What a name God gives you to call - Jesus.

When you have wrestled through the night and have come to the morning - Jesus is the sun that rises over the horizon driving out the darkness. And though you may limp - or carry a great burden of sorrow upon you - in Jesus there is a new day.

How do I know? One by one you tell me of your wrestling - and of the new morning Jesus gives. We gather together to tell of our wrestling and of Jesus. Our story is no neater, no more precise than this story of Jacob wrestling this stranger. But when it is over, just as Jacob spoke of seeing God face to face, you are convinced that you have encountered a love in Jesus that is greater than sin, greater than pain, greater than loss, greater than death, greater than hell itself. In Jesus you have encountered a love that drives out every darkness.

Tell one another your stories. Tell how Jesus was God's light for you when the night of wrestling had ended.