

APRIL 23, 2023: 3RD SUNDAY OF EASTER



My two cats, Emerson and Berkley, can be rather funny with each other. One of them will be lying in bed with me and then the other one will come over and start washing him. Clearly the one washing is doing it just to irritate the other one. After a short time, the one getting washed will inevitably start fighting. Then, they'll start wrestling with each other the way cats do when they're not *really* fighting.

The wrestling of my cats reminds me of the story of Jacob. "Jacob was left there alone. Then a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. When the man saw that he could not prevail over him, he struck Jacob's hip at its socket so that Jacob's socket was dislocated as he wrestled with him. The man then said, "Let me go, for it

is daybreak." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go until you bless me." "What is your name?" the man asked. He answered, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be named Jacob, but Israel, because you have contended with divine and human beings and have prevailed." Jacob then asked him, "Please tell me your name." He answered, "Why do you ask for my name?" With that, he blessed him. Jacob named the place Peniel, "because I have seen God face to face," he said, "yet my life has been spared."

Jacob was facing a difficult decision and as part of the transition, he came to wrestle with God. His new name is a sign of this struggle. Israel: the first part of the Hebrew name *Yisrael* is given a popular explanation in the word *saritha*, "you contended"; the second part is the first syllable of *'elohim*, "divine beings." The present incident, with a similar allusion to the name Israel, is referred to in Hos 12:5, where the mysterious wrestler is explicitly called an angel. (explanation taken from footnotes of USCCB)

In our lives we face many difficult moments and at times can feel irritated with God. When that happens, we can almost feel like God is poking us, and poking us until we start to push back. Then, like my cats and Jacob, we get into a wrestling match with God. This is not a bad thing when that happens. When my cats wrestle it is actually a sign of affection. In the story of Jacob there is a clear sense of intimacy in this wrestling. The contention that happens between Jacob and God is *not* a sign of disrespect, but one of trying to establish a deeper relationship.

How often I hear from people about their doubts of faith and how badly they feel about it. My response is almost always the same. Doubt is *not* a lack of faith. It is a faith seeking to understand more deeply. Apathy is a lack of faith: we are unsure and simply walk away. When we struggle with doubt, we are really, in a sense, wrestling with God. It is a sign of hope because we are not giving into the doubt, but are trying to understand whatever it is we are struggling with. We are being called to delve deeper into our faith. We are called to wrestle with our perceptions of truth, and those presented by the Scriptures and the Church. It is a sign of maturity and a desire to have a more meaningful faith.

Peter, when he denied Jesus, could have followed Judas. Instead, he grieved over his sin and, then, when he heard the good news that Jesus lived, he pursued the truth. He did not hide from what he had done: he faced his sin and brokenness and confronted Jesus with hope and wonder. He failed Jesus in a real way, but his moment of doubt did not determine his relationship with Christ. I have no doubt that he struggled with how Jesus would receive him. He wrestled with how to approach the Lord. But ultimately his faith showed him the hope that initially brought him to Christ.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." He then said to him a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him a third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was distressed that Jesus had asked him a third time, "Do you love me?" and he said to Him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." [Jesus] said to him, "Feed my sheep. Amen, amen, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to dress yourself and go where you wanted; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go."

He said this to signify by what kind of death Peter would glorify God. And when He had said this, He said to him, "Follow me."

Peter was dumbfounded by all that Jesus said. Do you love me? Must have been a tough question for him to hear. He had to wrestle with what Christ was calling him to do. Peter would eventually lay down his life for Christ. But that did not just happen in a moment. Rather, it was a journey, and Peter wrestled mightily with who God was calling him to be. But through that struggle he truly became Peter, the rock of faith upon which the Church was built.

May our journey lead us to that struggle. May we be open to wrestling with God, particularly when He annoys us—when our doubts seem to be at their greatest. We are *not* lost. Rather, it is then that God is wrestling with us to help us change our lives.

If you have any questions about anything, please do not hesitate to ask me directly, or send your questions to me at fr.brian@theholyrood.org , or if easier please call or text me at (978) 254-0560.

Please keep me in your prayers.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in purple ink, appearing to read "Fr. Brian". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Fr. Brian