

“Soul Wrestling”
First in a Lent Series
Mark 1:9-15
February 21, 2021
Pastor Jenothy Irvine

Prayer - We reach for you God in this season of Lent. We grasp into the dark places of reflection and sacrifice. We wrestle with questions, decisions, assumptions, and expectations. We seek answers, healing, and wholeness. Find us in the wrestling God, raise us from the ashes that we might kneel before the cross.

Message

I was so relieved when my youngest son decided not to play football even though he had the build for it. I had no desire to watch him on the line, getting smashed into, or running full on into another player and careening to the ground. I didn't want to sit in the stands and watch him slamming into other players or being at the bottom of a pile up. I cringe just thinking about it still.

Instead, he decided to wrestle! Wrestling.

A sport defined as two opponents grappling in a hand to hand battle with the intent of throwing the other to the floor with force, and pressing their shoulders to the mat. A sport that taxes and contorts the body in ways you can't imagine and requires mental and emotional fortitude as well. So much for being relieved.

Wrestling is an intense sport with intense physical, emotional, and mental reactions at every meet. It is a team sport that rides on the shoulders of the individual athlete. When you are on the mat, it's just you, the other guy, and the ref. It can be the shortest 6 minutes of the day, or the longest 6 minutes of the

season. There hasn't been a match yet that I haven't sat in the stands squirming, wincing, jumping, moaning, or groaning at the sight of my son pushing himself to the max in a battle of physical strength, mental toughness, and emotional determination.

I share this with you because wrestling, I have come to realize, makes a great metaphor to illustrate the season in the church we call Lent. The forty days we commit ourselves to intentional self reflection and spiritual examination. It is indeed a wrestling match of the soul and requires us to look again at our commitment to following Jesus - our commitment to living a life reflective of Jesus' teaching. It is a time to remember what is important, to recognize the places we have grown cold or callous in our faith or understanding of sacrifice, and to take ownership of how we might be a part of the problem we so eagerly criticize rather than the solution.

To help wrap our head around the purpose and meaning of Lent, I turn to one of my favorite authors, Frederik Beuchner, who puts it this way:

In many cultures there is an ancient custom of giving a tenth of each year's income to some holy use. For Christians, to observe the forty days of Lent is to do the same thing with roughly a tenth of each year's days. After being baptized by John in the river Jordan, Jesus went off alone into the wilderness where he spent forty days asking himself the question what it meant to be Jesus. During Lent, Christians are supposed to ask one way or another, what it means to be themselves.

If you had to bet everything you have on whether there is a God or whether there isn't, which side would get your money and why? When you look at your face in the mirror, what do you see in it that you most like and what do you see in it that you most deplore? If you

had only one last message to leave to the handful of people who are most important to you, what would it be in twenty-five words or less? Of all the things you have done in your life, which is the one you would most like to undo? Which is the one that makes you happiest to remember? Is there any person in the world, or any cause, that, if circumstances called for it, you would be willing to die for? If this were the last day of your life, what would you do with it?

To hear yourself answer questions like these is to begin to hear something of not only who you are but of both what you are becoming and what you are failing to become. It can be a pretty depressing business all in all, but if sackcloth and ashes are at the start of it, something like Easter may be at the end.

This is Lent - a wrestling match with the soul. Throughout the bible we read of individuals and groups of people who find themselves in a wrestling match with God, angels, demons, and themselves. Wrestling with who they are, who they are to become, where to go, how to move forward, how to be faithful to God in the midst of pain, anger, injustice, uncertainty, and tragedy. How to be patient and courageous.

Jesus knew such wrestling and gave us a model of how to find the way

Read Text - Mark 1:9-15

Jesus knew what it was to have a wrestling match with the soul. Although Mark's gospel shrinks the story of Jesus' wilderness time to a few sentences, if we listen, there between the lines, is a world of experience. There is a whole life. An entire ministry. A complete history. As there is with ours too. "It's a long story" we might say, without telling it. That's where Jesus is in his wilderness experience- part of his story - coming to terms with the hunger of body, mind, and

spirit and, as he wrestles he is trusting the promise of God's Word, and listening deeply to what God is revealing to him.

I believe the account of Jesus' baptism and wilderness experience is told in the gospel to show us that Jesus, in his humanity, endured the hard stuff too. So that anyone asking soul deep questions about identity, purpose, or meaning of life, can come to understand that Jesus faced those questions as well.

The wilderness of the soul can be a frightful and dangerous place but it can also be a place where our senses are heightened like never before. Over the next several weeks we will explore the wilderness together. Whether you face a wilderness of the heart - a soul searching time, a wilderness of the mind - a time of questioning, reason, and doubt, or a physical wilderness - a time of pain, brokenness, and discomfort, there is much to be learned in the listening. There is much to be given and received, lost and found.

It is listening that we challenge you to focus on these next forty days. Listen to the struggle; to the frustrations, disappointments, hungers. Listen to the journey - the process; the ups and downs, the insecurities, the desire to want more and the feeling of never enough. Lean in to the learning, what you know - what you don't know; lean into the unlearning, and learning again. Lean in to the listening. Listen for understanding, not simply for a chance to respond. Listen for spiritual growth and wisdom, not just so you can look good, or check off another I'm a good Christian box. It is in the listening we grow. It is in listening we find our way through to truth.

The beauty of Lent - is that it can show us how God moves among us even in the midst of pain and anger, injustice, uncertainty and tragedy. Wrestling is a back and forth, give and take, kind of struggle where we continually search for our footing and hand hold, balance, and position. It's not necessarily meant to be easy. It's not meant to be all fun and games. But rather, it is meant for us, like Jesus, to stand us on the edge of a personal wilderness, remembering our baptism - our commitment to God. We remember the words of God telling us, "you are my beloved, you matter, you are capable, you are where you need to be, your life has meaning, and you are enough...now walk in faith - find your way with me (God) step by step, come what may.

As we, together yet alone, take our first steps into this season, let us do so with the following blessing, written by author, artist, and poet, Jan Richardson.

Beloved is Where We Begin

If you would enter
Into the wilderness,
Do not begin
Without a blessing.

Do not leave without hearing
Who you are:
Beloved,
Named by the One
Who has traveled this path
Before you.
Do not go
Without letting it echo
In your ears,
And if you find
It is hard

To let it into your heart,
Do not despair.
That is what this journey is for.
I cannot promise
This blessing will free you
From danger,
From fear,
From hunger
Or thirst,
From the scorching
Of sun
Or the fall
Of the night.

But I can tell you
That on this path
There will be help.

I can tell you
That on this way
There will be rest.

I can tell you
That you will know
The strange graces
That come to our aid
Only on a road
Such as this,
That fly to meet us
Bearing comfort
And strength,
That come alongside us
For no other cause
That to lean themselves
Toward our ear.

And with their
Curious insistence
Whisper our name: beloved, beloved, beloved.

People of God, may the wrestling begin... amen.