

**Sunday, October 20, 2013**  
**Rev. Diane Monti-Catania**

**Sermon – “Wrestling With God”**

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Jacob can't sleep. He is afraid that his brother Esau, whom he tricked many years ago, is coming to kill him and destroy his family and flocks. He tosses and turns. He wrestles with a man, an angel, a spirit – with God.

Perhaps you have had an experience like this at some point...a sleepless night where you toss and turn and try to figure out the challenges of your life.

Perhaps you have wrestled through the night...seeking clarity, or guidance.

I find it interesting that the term used in this passage is wrestle, for in wrestling, there is no compromise.

The goal of a wrestler is complete dominance of their opponent – victory comes in the form of a “pin” a move that eliminates all options for the defeated.

I wonder how much of our wrestling comes from our attempts to control God – to bend God's will to our own.

How often do we have sleepless nights because we are asking God to support our plans, rather than seeking what God's plan might be for us?

How much of our wrestling is rooted in our lack of trust in God – our doubts?

In the psalm we read earlier the writer is rock solid in his trust that God will take care of him.

*I lift up my eyes to the hills-from where will my help come?*

*My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth...*

*The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.*

Forevermore is a long time to trust someone.

I think most of us long to have this kind of unwavering faith, but it is not always the case.

This week we read Martin Copenhaver's book, *Living Faith While Holding Doubts*.

The author makes a strong case for the benefit of addressing the doubts we encounter on our spiritual journey.

He recognizes that most of us harbor some doubts about God and God's presence in our lives.

He says:

“It takes courage to doubt. It takes courage to reexamine those beliefs we had assumed were beyond the reach of doubt.”

It takes courage in this life not only to say what you believe, but also to say what you don't believe.

Blindly going along with what seems like the majority rule can cause poorly formed ideas to rise to the forefront of a movement.

Lacking courage to doubt or disagree people will protect their hardened beliefs against new understandings with great vehemence, even violence.

This precludes dialogue, investigation and transformation.

Copenhaver contends, “Beliefs held unexamined can stunt our spiritual growth, preventing us from claiming a deep and mature faith.”

Evelyn Underhill, in *The Spiritual Life* writes:

*For a spiritual life is simply a life in which all that we do comes from the center, where we are anchored in God: a life soaked through and through by a sense of God’s reality and claim, and self-given to the general movement of God’s will. Most of our conflicts and difficulties come from trying to deal with the spiritual and practical aspects of our life separately instead of realizing them as parts of one whole.*

When Jacob wrestles with God, he is left with a blessing and a compromised hip.

He is changed forever, having seen God face-to-face.

I’m not sure that we allow ourselves the opportunity to see God face-to-face.

Copenhaver makes the distinction that belief is an act of intellect, while faith is an act of the whole person.

“To believe in God,” he says “all we need to say is ‘True’ but to have faith in God we must go on to say “Yes.”

Saying yes to faith is a commitment to try and embody the teachings of that faith.

Next week we will welcome a group of young people, as well as some adults, into our faith community.

These folks come with the same amount of doubts that you likely harbor, but they, just like you, are making a commitment to be part of something greater than themselves.

When we say ‘yes’ to God we are affording ourselves the opportunity to be loved by the one who created us.

We are opening ourselves to the peace that Christ brings.

We are tapping into the power of the Holy Spirit to guide us.

In a recent Stillspeaking Daily Devotion, Copenhaver opined:

Have you noticed that most people, when they come to worship, don't sit up front?

The back of the church tends to fill up first almost as predictably as the bottom of a glass will be the first to be filled with water.

Why is that?

If we are attending a concert or a lecture, we would charge down front where the "good seats" are.

I think we don't immediately go to the front because that would feel like a definitive declaration of faith.

To stride down the aisle and sit in the front feels like skipping right to the "your whole self in" part of the hokey pokey, and we may not be ready for that.

Our own experience of faith often is more qualified, more tentative than that.”

If doubt or uncertainty disqualifies us from worship, we will have many empty churches.

We need to be able to bring our questions, just as we bring our hopes and fears, to our faith community.

Belief, faith, is not something that comes upon us in a flash – although some people do claim to have such an experience.

No, our faith is gradual, building, growing over time.

In our youth retreat yesterday we talked about our childhood images of God – as a wise old man, sitting up in the clouds, and how that image has changed over time.

Jesus said it can start as small as a mustard seed – and grow to great proportions.

Belief is most likely to come when we act in a faithful manner.

It is by entrusting ourselves to God that we can come to see that there is a God and that God is worthy of our trust.

It is by living in a faithful manner obeying God’s commandments, learning of God, praising God, serving God’s children, seeking God’s help, committing ourselves to God’s care, that we can come to believe in the God with whom we have been in relationship through all of these faithful activities.

Paul assures his congregation “For I am convinced that Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

I would add that even our doubts will not separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

I invite you to put your whole self in and see what happens.