

“When I am weak, then I am strong.”

“Don’t you care that we are dying?” That’s what the disciples said. The wind was too strong. The waves were too high. Some of them were probably trying to use anything they could find to bail out the boat. They were fighting for their lives. What was Jesus doing? Sleeping. Didn’t he care?

Our Old Testament reading is from the book of Job. Job had been a very good man. He loved his family. He prayed for his kids every day. Then his life became miserable. His property was destroyed. His children were killed. He lost his health. Most of the book of Job is made up of conversations between Job and his friends. They discussed how God could do this to poor Job. Didn’t God care?

In both of these situations you can tell that there were some pretty raw emotions. When the disciples said, “Don’t you care that we are dying?” they were yelling so as to be heard above the wind and the waves. Job, also, in his discussions, said stuff like, “Why did you do this to me God?” and “I wish I had never been born.” They were fighting with God.

Fighting with God doesn’t seem like it should be a good idea, but this is one of many instances having to do with our relationship with God when we should not be led by our reason. We should let our reason take the lead with many things in life, but not with our relationship with God. Our reason has a surprising amount to say about the topic of God. We naturally have ideas about how things should be, how God should be, what he should do. Our reason says that God should act in such a way where we don’t ever have to fight with him. If we are fighting with him, then things must be really bad, our reason says.

The Scriptures speak differently. The greatest figures in the Bible struggle mightily with God. Think of Abraham. God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son, his only son, Isaac, whom he loved. What a fight Abraham must have had!

Think of Abraham’s grandson, Jacob. One night Jacob was at the lowest point in his life. He was pretty sure that at least half of his family was going to be annihilated the next day by his brother Esau and his men. Then, in the middle of the night, a strange man shows up out of nowhere so that Jacob had to fight for his life. This was God. And God played kind of dirty—he popped Jacob’s hip out of joint so that he walked with a limp the rest of his life. Jacob, though—that wonderful man—wouldn’t let God go until God blessed him. And God did bless him. God gave him his new name of “Israel,” which means “wrestler with God.” The people of God in the Old Testament came to be called by this name, Israel, which means “wrestler with God.”

There are almost countless other examples I could give you. Wrestling—fighting—with God is not forbidden. In fact, it seem to be how we grow. But it’s hard. It’s deeply unpleasant. We don’t want God to act in such a way where we have to wrestle with him. We want what those disciples undoubtedly wanted. We want smooth sailing forever. Each day should be better than the one before. But then suddenly, out of nowhere, a great windstorm arises and you are in a fight for your life.

What are you going to say about that when that happens? Is it just bad luck? Has the wheel of fortune landed on bankrupt? Does God exist? Would a good and omnipotent God do such awful things? These are the kinds of thoughts that our reason comes up with in order to avoid fighting with God. We want a nice life, and if God isn't going to help us have a nice life, then be done with him.

But this is the worst thing that we can do. Even with human relationships, the lowest point is not when there is fighting and wrestling. The lowest point is when the person despises the other, won't have anything to do with them. There's no fighting. There's no heart-to-heart. The best to be hoped for is polite chit-chat.

There is a way to have a kind of spiritual chit-chat with God, too. The politeness reveals something terrible—a huge distance between the person and God. God never commands us to be polite with him, nor do the examples from the Scriptures bear that out. The disciples were not polite with Jesus. They screamed at him: **“Don't you care that we are dying!”** And Job too: **“I wish that I had never been born. I wish I had died while I was still in my mother's womb.”** Those are ugly thoughts. They are accusatory too. **“It's your fault, God!”** **“Why did you do this?”**

The many examples of the greatest figures in the Bible give us permission to open our hearts to God and let him have it. This is called lamentation. We have a book of the Bible that's called Lamentations. We have psalms of lament. King David, the greatest of the psalmists, composed the saddest songs. He said stuff like, **“God, why won't you answer me?”** and **“Why have you forsaken me?”** and **“Turn away from your fierce anger and be merciful to me!”**

One of the benefits of using the Psalms is that they teach us a much larger vocabulary for our prayers and praises. Our vocabulary is very often limited because our reason tells us we need to be polite. I could imagine that God might get sick of all this politeness, just like we get sick of the cold politeness we receive. God wants our heart. The greatest commandment is that we should love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind, and that we should love our neighbor as ourselves. We need to open ourselves up to him. Tell him what you really think. And that might mean that you will wrestle with him and fight with him.

And what can we expect to happen when we wrestle with God? Our reason is very interested in this question. We want what's best for us, and so will this wrestling and fighting business make us better off? The answer is that we will be better off, but not the way we would expect. We expect that we will become stronger, but what the examples from the Scriptures reveal is that we will become weaker.

Jacob, for the rest of his days, walked with a limp. Job finished up his conversation with God by saying, **“Therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.”** Consider the words that Jesus spoke in our Gospel reading. He said to his disciples, **“Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?”** Maybe before this ordeal they thought that they were doing pretty well, that they had a strong faith. After wrestling with God they discover that they had no faith at all.

Why should a person enter into a contest with God if it is only going to reveal one's own weakness, helplessness, faithlessness, and so on? A person should do that because of this wonderful saying from

St. Paul with which we began. He said, “**When I am weak, then I am strong.**” Paul knew that when he was weak then he was strong because God had said to him, “**Don’t worry about your failings. My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.**”

It’s God’s power that we want and need, not our own power. When I *feel* good or strong or righteous or whatever, that doesn’t mean that I really *am* those things. A windstorm could show up out of nowhere, and prove that to me. When I am weak, however, when I’m not relying upon myself, when I’m placing all my trust and hope in Jesus, then I am strong—even infinitely so, because Jesus is infinitely strong.

We see this play out in a wonderful way in our Gospel reading today. The disciples’ wrestling match with God—the disciple’s wrestling match with God’s wind and God’s waves—revealed that they were not as strong as they thought they were. Their terror during the ordeal revealed that their faith wasn’t as resilient as they thought it was.

But what does any of that matter? We don’t save ourselves by our own strength, nor do we save ourselves by our estimation of our own faith. Jesus saves! And through this experience the disciples were turned away from themselves and became completely captivated with Jesus. They tinkle with fear and say, “**Who is this that even the wind and the sea obey him?**” That is the spot to be in.

I know that for some of you terrible windstorms have come upon you. Out of nowhere the smooth sailing is over. Learn from the Scriptures what to do. The Bible teaches us a different way, as we have talked about today. Open your heart to the God who has wounded you. That takes a lot of courage! Don’t let him go until he gives you a blessing, and you will be blessed. As David says in Psalm 51, “**The bones that God has broken will rejoice.**”

“**Cast all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.**” Amen.