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The patriarchs of Genesis, the giants of the faith,
 are traditionally considered to be Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
 Today's selection is about Jacob,
 Isaac's second son, Abraham's grandson.

Abraham is characterized by obedience.
 Abraham often, though not always, unquestioningly acquiesces
 to God's demands and requests, to the point of ridiculousness,
 see: near sacrifice of Isaac.
 Isaac himself gets a little less airtime
 but seems to be a faithful, quiet man.

Interestingly, Isaac has the distinction of being the only **man** in the Bible
 to appeal to God for a child;
 normally it's the women who come to God with this plea.

Jacob, on whom our Scripture today focuses, is portrayed very differently
 than his dad and granddad.
 We drop in when Jacob is returning home after a twenty year exile.
 Jacob left b/c his older twin brother Esau did not take kindly
 Jacob stealing both his birthright & familial blessing.
 He then flees for his life.
 Jacob is incredibly sly,
 often very manipulative.

Jacob is gone for so long because his uncle Laban is equally manipulative and sly.
 Laban entraps into Jacob working for him
 through a series of complicated capers.
 Jacob finally realizes he is never going to be allowed to leave,
 So he and his two wives and two their maids,
 & his eleven children
 by these four different women,
 And some livestock to boot.

Steal away in the middle of the night.

Just before we start in today's passage, Jacob has found out that his brother Esau has heard that Jacob is coming home.

Esau is on his way to meet Jacob with four hundred other men.

This could be a "Hey, welcome back!"

It could also be an army.

So, finally, we have the ingenious yet manipulative Jacob alone at night by the river, having sent everything and everyone dear to him in front of him towards his possibly still bitter twin brother.

And Jacob spends the night wrestling,
literally and metaphorically.

Through the course of the men's conversation and scuffle,
it becomes evident that Jacob's sparring partner is no ordinary person
but is, in fact, somehow God.

Jacob realizes this, and,
in his wonderfully stubborn Jacob sort of way,
refuses to let go, no matter what,
until the so-called man blesses him.

The man does so, bypassing Jacob's question about his name and identity.
God gives Jacob a new name, Israel,
which is a play on the Hebrew word for "struggle."

The fact of the matter is, a relationship with God, well, it ain't always easy.
Sometimes a relationship with God will feel— and actually be—
more of a struggle than anything else.

Struggle is a legitimate, undervalued part of the lives of many faithful people.
Sometimes faith will make our lives harder,
inviting or perhaps even seemingly demanding
that we do things that are inconvenient or maybe even scary.
In any case, the metaphorical wrestling with God
is not a sign that something is wrong with you—
it is certainly not a sign of disbelief

or a sign of bad faith.

Please hear me. I'm not in the every struggle comes from God
to teach us something camp.

I **am** saying divine encounters, even blessings
as the junior and adult choirs will sing about at the offertory
can come in all shapes, sizes, and colors.

So why bother? Why bother being here if faith doesn't convey ease?

Why not go for a nice hike or brunch instead?

God's promise is not and has never been charmed life
free of pain or suffering.

The protection the junior choir sang about in Psalm 121
Is about love, about presence, about connection,
Even when we can't always feel it
or believe it.

God's promise about presence, about love, about connection, and about purpose.

Not that everything goes well all the time.

Not that we get to live in a world

where everything becomes progressively better and better.

Presence, love, connection, purpose,

Sometimes from unlikely people, unlikely places.

May we have the grace to consider that the blessing may be
in the struggle sometimes. Amen.