**Epic Cage Match**

**FBC Albemarle**

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 I remember my grandparents on my dad’s side came to visit us for a couple of months a few years after I had come to the United States. I had become firmly entrenched in the American culture by then but my grandfather (who I don’t think had any idea what he was teaching me) showed me one more thing I needed to know to live in the southern American culture: WRESTLING.

 Looking back, I’m not sure how he stumbled onto watching wrestling on TV. I am sure he was bored to death and knew nothing else to watch due to the language barrier. Back in the mid-80’s, I don’t think NWA wrestling televised in South Korea. I’m not sure that he even knew that the wrestling matches were pre-determined for entertainment purposes. The only thing I remember is that he and I would watch stars like Arn Anderson, The Iron Sheik, The Rock & Roll Express, The American Dream Dusty Rhodes and of course The Nature Boy Ric Flair. Of course, the best matches would be held as a cage match so that they would have nowhere to run and no outside interference. Usually, those matches would be more “bloody” than others to add to the excitement and drama!

 In Genesis, we find a story of an epic wrestling match between Jacob and a heavenly being. Some might say that the heavenly being was an angel of the Lord or the God himself. Either way, there was a mighty struggle that night between the two and in the end; I would call it a draw. Jacob ended up with a displaced hip but also a blessing from the Lord.

 Let’s go back to remember who Jacob is. Remember, Jacob is the younger twin of Esau and his parents were Isaac and Rebekah. With the help of his mother, Jacob stole the birthright from Esau, a special blessing as the firstborn son. In order to escape the wrath of his older brother, Jacob fled from Canaan to Haran, where he lived with his maternal uncle, Laban. There he accumulated great wealth. He also married both of Laban’s daughters; Leah and Rachel but he loved Rachel more. Repeating his character of deception, he swindled uncle Laban of the choice goats and lambs with an elaborate scheme. (Gen. 30:25-43) Being forced to flee again, he returns to Canaan. And while he is en route to his homeland via Edom, the territory of his brother Esau, he learns that his brother is advancing toward him with a large force of men. Fearing the worst, Jacob divides his entourage, hoping that if Esau and his men destroy part of his large family, maybe the other part of his family could survive. Jacob also strategically sent gifts of peace offerings to Esau in hopes that would appease him for what he had stolen from his brother many years before. This is where we pick up the story in todays text.

 After making the elaborate preparations, Jacob sent his immediate family across the Jabbok River for the night but he remained behind alone. That evening, Jacob wrestled with a transcendent figure until daybreak. The two wrestled all night but neither gained the upper hand. Finally, the divine-being struck a blow to Jacob’s hip, causing the hip to be dislocated. Yet, Jacob held on for dear life and would not let go until the divine-being blessed him. ‘So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, ”It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.”

 Jacob was called by God to possess the land that had been given to his grandfather, Abraham. (Gen. 31:3) He was compelled to respond to the call, but the call awakened his memories and unleashed his fears. He felt not only fearful of his brother but also guilty before God. He felt inadequate for the task and fearful of the outcome. This struggle drove him to prayer, which is symbolized in his night of wrestling with God who eventually blessed him. Ultimately Jacob prevailed – not by overturning God’s plan but by getting himself aligned with it. The blessing Jacob received was the *shalom* (peace) of God for the days to come.

 How do we respond to God’s call? Do we wrestle with God? Wrestling with God often can be a positive experience. When we wrestle with him, we are more in tune with his call for our lives and often receive confirmation in some form. Yet, we often let fear stand in the way of receiving God’s blessing of peace by not aligning ourselves with his call. When we let fear stand in the way, we are the one who misses out.

 Here are a few excuses we often use to avoid answering God’s call to kingdom work. First, we often answer, “Lord, I am too busy.” We often tell God that we have so much to do that there’s no time or space left to answer God’s call. I wonder what God thinks about our answer?

 There is no doubt that most of us are really busy – overscheduled, overcommitted and overworked. Our calendars are full of meetings, engagements, doctor’s appointments, school, extra-curricular activities and the like. We have very little time and space in our lives for ourselves, much less God. But maybe God isn’t calling us to add one more thing on our plate. What if God is asking us to let go of that good thing you do because you couldn’t say that one word ‘NO,’ in order for you to experience a greater joy and peace in saying ‘YES’ to his call? What if God is calling you and me to reconsider what we do with our time so that we can align ourselves with him? When we are aligned with him and his call in our lives, the blessings are far greater than we can imagine.

 A second fearful response we often give is “Lord, I am unworthy of this call.” Certainly this is a true statement. None of us are worthy of being used by God. Yet, if God waited for someone who was worthy of his kingdom work, he would be waiting forever. Time and time again, we see in the Bible God using unworthy people like Jacob who stole the birthright of his twin brother and who gained wealth by swindling his uncle. Jesus called a tax collector and lowly fishermen to be his disciples. He called a man like Saul who killed Christians for their faith and turned him into a great missionary. None of us are worthy but God is. And in his infinite wisdom, he calls you and me to his kingdom work.

 Lastly, we often give God the lame excuse of feeling inadequate and unprepared. NEWSFLASH: Whatever God is calling us to do, it is always a larger task than we can accomplish with our own strength. The call generally requires change; and with change comes risk; and with risk our fears. We feel overwhelmed and we come face to face with our inadequacies. So when this happens, what do we do? Do we run away or do we run toward God?

 We have to learn to depend on God and not on our own strength and talents. We have to learn to trust him. We have to trust that God desires the very best for us. We have to trust that God will always walk with us and his Spirit will guide us along the way. Time and time again, Paul reminds us that it is Christ crucified that allowed him to do what he did.

 I resonate with the words of Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians: “And so it was with me, brothers and sisters. When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God.For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God’s power.” You took in a rookie pastor and allowed me to receive on-the-job training when I felt inadequate and unprepared. In a few moments, you will have a chance to affirm the call of a rookie minister who also feels inadequate and unprepared. Yet, Scripture reminds us that when we are weak, God is strong.

 When God calls, wrestle with him in prayer. Make it an epic cage match with the Lord! And just like Jacob, don’t let go until you know that God has called you and blessed you. Don’t let fear stand in the way. Clear your calendars, know that none of us are worthy and recognize that the feelings of inadequacy and unpreparedness can be a source of strength. When answering God’s call, we can do all things through Christ who gives us strength! (Phil. 4:13)