

[1 **Movie Poster**] Hey Catalyst! For those of you who don't know me, I'm Shelley Bloomer. My family moved from Rowlett nearly a year ago but I still call these people my family. I also still get to work with JR and the preaching team and speak every so often.

So I pretty much had the movie "Forrest Gump" memorized in high school. All those great lines, right? ("Life is like a box of chocolates." "Seat's taken," "Jennay" etc.) They won the hearts of people all over. And what an incredible journey to follow him through the decades!

[2 **Forrest and Lt. Dan**] I really want to talk through just one scene in particular today-Lt. Dan's showdown with God. If you're not familiar with the movie or the scene, let me give you a little background. Forrest joins the army and meets Lt. Dan, who eventually loses his legs (but not his life, thanks to Forrest) while serving in Vietnam. Forrest takes us through his story a bit. Lt. Dan is pretty angry that he has missed his destiny to die a hero with his men. He later asks Forrest if he's found Jesus...Forrest responds with a great line-"I didn't know I was supposed to be looking for him"... and they go into discussing Lt. Dan's struggle with the idea that he will get to WALK beside God in heaven someday, which is what the priest at the VA told him. There is some deep-seated anger in this broken man as he looks down at his stubs for legs. When the war is finally over, they end up working a shrimp boat together. And here is where our scene for today comes in. Forrest and Lt. Dan are out on their boat after a day of unsuccessful shrimping and a storm blows in. Lt. Dan faces the storm and uses it as an opportunity to scream at God. To ask God if that's all he's got. Or if God was going to hit him with more. Crying out obscenities. He calls it a "showdown." The next morning, their nets are full of shrimp, and Forrest narrates about Lt. Dan that, "He never actually said so, but I think he made his peace with God."

That scene always hit funny with me. I can remember my friends at school saying how bad it was or how their parents fast-forwarded through it on their VCR. The fact that he was yelling at God was clearly not ok. This "bad scene" might possibly give us the idea that being angry and wrestling with God is ok. And it was SO not.

I was intrigued because I really had never seen anyone that angry with God. It just wasn't something you did. You could get mad. You could question why things were going the way they were. But you can't get angry with God. You can't yell at God for your problems. It's just not allowed.

But I was young then. As I got older I found some good reasons to be mad at and question God. Brad's Mom unexpectedly passed away. A former student was murdered. When the doctor told me my retinas are disintegrating. Now, to be honest, that one I am still working on. I, along with my brother, were officially diagnosed with Retinitis Pigmentosa my senior year of high school. Just what I wanted to hear! Basically, over the course of my life, pieces of my retina will break off and eventually things will grow so dark, I won't be able to see much at all. There's no cure. No surgery. Lots of research. So the anger over slowly losing my eyesight over the course of my life didn't come all at once. Which is why it's been so difficult to wrestle with. And it has manifested itself in other emotions-shock, denial, and fear. I finally got to the point where I found an ounce or two of acceptance which turned out to be

enough to take all my anger and fear and denial and shock and put it all away in a box. Buried it deep in the back of one of those closets where you keep all those old towels and sheets you never use. Sounds safe. It's not. Because every time I run into something or someone tries to hand me something and I just stare at them or tries shake my hand during Pass the Peace or someone waves and I miss seeing them or I need help getting around in the dark...I get angry. And THEN I get angrier thinking, "What right do I even have to be angry? There are people who were born blind. There are people who are in way worse situations than I could ever imagine! And what right do I have to be angry? My issue is small compared to many." So...it all goes right back into that box. All my anger, hidden away.

This has been my on-going journey. Because even now, it still feels wrong. I mean, I just can't help being angry with God even though I feel like it's not ok.

So back to Forrest Gump and the reason I love this scene. I find hope for my own anger in the honesty of Lt. Dan. There is a true relationship with God represented here. I mean Lt. Dan is exerting every last bit of energy in this scene to show his anger at God for losing his legs. This is the power of movies-to give voice to what we find difficult to put into words. The beauty of this scene is that it mirrors the good news we find in the Scriptures: God actually invites us to wrestle, question, and doubt. And even beyond this, God calls it a "blessing!"

[3 **Anger emoji one side.... God on the other**] This is where we get nervous. We think, "That's not Faith! That's not allowed!" Anger...wrestling...doubt...these are the opposite of faith, aren't they? We can't doubt and have faith. We can't be angry at God and love God at the same time. When people of Faith encounter doubts, we respond one of two ways. A.) There are no questions asked. If you ask questions, you're risking a good smiting and hellfire. Or B.) Some of the more generous religious folks might allow questions, but those questions are a sign of immaturity in their eyes. "Questions are ok...we guess...but hopefully you'll eventually grow out of them and find a mature certain faith."

So y'all, is Lt. Dan right? Is wrestling with God a way to find peace? Or is he risking the fires of hell by daring to shake his fist at God? The scriptures give us a view into a mature faith as one that knows how to live in uncertainty and embraces wrestling with God as a life-giving practice. [Scripture Slide] If you'll turn in the scriptures to Genesis 32:22-32, we are going to look at a story about a man-Jacob-who, like Lt. Dan, was wrestling with God. If you need a Bible, we have some at the back you can use and keep. This scripture is found on page ## in that Bible. So the back-story to Jacob is that he is a "trickster." He tricked his brother out of a blessing from their father and basically stole his brother's inheritance and birthright so his brother wanted to kill him. He ran away and was living with a man named Laban. Jacob married 2 of Laban's daughters-2!- and now he wants to kill Jacob, too. Jacob is basically on a run for his life and has burned every bridge he has. Here he's on his way to throw himself on his brother's mercy and hope the years have softened him. So in this scene we see him at the end of his rope, facing the very real possibility that tomorrow, when he faces his brother, his choices will catch up to him. And just like the screaming match between the Lt. and God, Jacob wrestles with God. Let's look and see how God responds to this anger that Jacob feels.

During the night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two servant wives, and his eleven sons and crossed the Jabbok River with them. After taking them to the other side, he sent over all his possessions.

This left Jacob all alone in the camp, and a man came and wrestled with him until the dawn began to break. When the man saw that he would not win the match, he touched Jacob's hip and wrenched it out of its socket. Then the man said, "Let me go, for the dawn is breaking!" But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

"What is your name?" the man asked.

He replied, "Jacob."

"Your name will no longer be Jacob," the man told him. "From now on you will be called Israel, because you have fought with God and with men and have won."

"Please tell me your name," Jacob said.

"Why do you want to know my name?" the man replied. Then he blessed Jacob there.

Jacob named the place Peniel (which means "face of God"), for he said, "I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been spared." The sun was rising as Jacob left Peniel, and he was limping because of the injury to his hip. (Even today the people of Israel don't eat the tendon near the hip socket because of what happened that night when the man strained the tendon of Jacob's hip.) -- Genesis 32:22-32

So Jacob sent his family into hiding and was alone. Then this man, who is God, showed up and they got into a wrestling match. When the man realized that Jacob won't give up, he pulled Jacob's leg out of socket! Ouch! But Jacob still didn't let him go. He demanded a blessing. I imagine there are some pretty epic WWE moves going on. So God renames him Israel, which literally means "Wrestles with God" and he will walk with a limp for the rest of his life. In fact, this story was such a huge event in Jewish history, that Jews to this day still remember this in their eating practices!

When Jacob asks for a blessing, God confers it by affirming Jacob's wrestling. His blessing is a new name "God-wrestler." The wrestling IS the blessing. [4 Wrestler on one side, God on the other] Now, as someone who does wrestle with God, wrestling doesn't FEEL like a blessing. I mean, it's a fight, right? Jacob is in the midst of such fear, anger and frustration and he is releasing this in the way of fighting with God. I mean when I have hit rock bottom, when I am in the middle of a storm-angry over not having my complete eyesight, having to fight or wrestle (Which, has not happened just once. There hasn't been just one wrestling match or one epic shouting in the pouring rain for me. It's a choice to be angry each time I'm reminded of my disease.)-it feels more like a curse than a blessing. I don't want to fight God. I just want him to fix it. I just want it to be all ok...maybe even without me putting up much effort.

So. How CAN wrestling be a blessing?

From my experiences teaching in the classroom, true transformation will not happen unless you're uncomfortable. If I want my students to grow and learn, I must cultivate experiences for them to wrestle with ideas and concepts, argue and demand change. Only then is there an authentic transformation in learning. Only then can they take ownership over the experience. In that moment, it becomes THEIR transformation and not forced by the teacher. You can tell a kid they need to learn something as much as you want and they won't care until they choose to wrestle with the concepts themselves.

So that makes sense now, we must be uncomfortable to be transformed, but why does it have to be painful? Why do we have Lt. Dans who have lost their legs and Jacobs who walk with a limp the rest of their lives or Shelleys that struggle to come to grips with what the future holds? It's a great question. But that kind of leads to the question that we REALLY want to ask, "Why do bad things happen AT ALL?" I mean, that was Lt. Dan's question. And I imagine if Jacob would have had the chance, he would have asked the same thing. We get to this point where we just have to ask, "How did it come to this?" Sometimes bad things happen TO us...like Lt. Dan. But other times they are a result of our own choices...like Jacob. Either way, why do bad things happen?

Well, God's answer to pain and suffering is not to give us answers. We see that in the passage when Jacob demands to know the man's name and he refuses to tell him. [\[5 Wrestler and God together\]](#) Instead, God's answer to the pain and suffering is to meet us IN the storm, to meet us at rock bottom and to wrestle WITH us. He wants to fight with us and for us until we are transformed. Just like Lt. Dan, he met God on that boat. God showed up as a storm and they had a "showdown." He was there with Lt. Dan to fight with him and for him. Just like Jacob, or now Israel, who was angry and alone, God showed up to wrestle with him.

Wrestling is actually good news because it is God WITH us, which is the ultimate blessing. He is there in that transformative moment, to fight with us and for us. And nowhere is this clearer than on the cross, when Jesus takes on OUR suffering. He wrestles the powers of darkness with us and for us, even to death!

Wow. So incredible. But still in the back of my mind, I understand that Lt. Dan still lost his legs. Israel still walked with a limp the rest of his life. Shelley still can't see. Jesus was crucified. So if God wrestles with us, what do we actually gain? How does this help? Does it change our loss and pain?

So maybe the situation doesn't change. We still lose our legs, still walk with a limp, but we are TRANSFORMED. It's the peace of Christ that transforms us. We flourish when we find transformation through the same power of the Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead. Jacob became Israel. A new person. His circumstances didn't change. HE CHANGED.

C.S. Lewis, an intelligent man best known as the author of "The Chronicles of Narnia," understood this transformation fairly well, and shared his journey with others. But he wasn't always a hero to the faith.

His journey to faith included wrestling. He was even at one point a self-proclaimed atheist-calling God a “cosmic sadist” and a “spiteful imbecile.” I think he shares it best so I am going to read a portion of an interview included in “The Question of God,” about how his journey was one of wrestling. C.S. Lewis says-

The new Psychology was at that time sweeping through us all. We were all influenced. We were all concerned about fantasy, or wishful thinking. I formed the resolution of always judging and acting with the greatest good sense. I was at that time living like many atheists; in a whirl of contradictions. I maintained that God did not exist. I was also very angry with God for not existing. I was equally angry with him for creating a world. Why should creatures have the burden of existence forced on them without their consent? I was attacked by a series of gloomy thoughts about professional and literary failure. Such a rage against poverty and fear and all the infernal net I seemed to be in that I went out and mowed the lawn and cursed all the gods for half an hour. All the books were beginning to turn against me. The most religious were clearly those on whom I could really feed. I can only describe it as the Great War between Barfield (A friend and devout Christian who had the knack of asking Lewis the right questions.) and me. When I set out to correct his heresies, I find that he had decided to correct mine! And then we went at it, hammer and tongs, far into the night, night after night. ... I was off once more into the land of longing, my heart at once broken and exalted as it had never been since the old days. I was overwhelmed. I called it Joy. (But) The fox had now been dislodged from the wood and was running in the open, bedraggled and weary, the hounds barely a field behind.

I felt myself being given a free choice. I could open the door or keep it shut. I chose to open. I felt as if I were a man of snow at long last beginning to melt. Drip-drip. And presently trickle-trickle. I had always wanted, above all things, not to be interfered with. I had wanted — mad wish — to call my soul my own. I had been far more anxious to avoid suffering than to achieve delight.

You must picture me alone in that room at Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet.

Total surrender, the absolute leap in the dark, were demanded. I gave in, and admitted that God was God ... perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.

C.S. Lewis, a man known for his intelligence, wrestled and argued with our God. He finally understood it as part of the transforming love, part of the choice that we have to live a life with Him. To have a mature faith, it must be a wrestling faith. Whether we identify with Lt. Dan or Jacob or C.S. Lewis, we know one thing- a religion where it's not safe to question or wrestle leaves us untransformed, wallowing in our doubts and anger and we end up hitting rock bottom. When we are not allowed to question and wrestle-we are stagnant. We risk a life unchanged.

[6 Wrestler ???] What would it look like to share your questions and doubts and anger with someone this week? Maybe in your C-group, an LTG, or just someone that you feel comfortable with? Think

about a time you have shared anger with a friend. When I have shared my anger over the circumstances of my eyes with someone I know cares-I can feel that, while they may not know exactly what I am going through, they still share my questions and doubts and they listen. It helps me feel that I am not alone in what and how I feel.

We see together that our journeys and the circumstances within those journeys don't change. But We do.

And when I see that I have been transformed, I become an agent of transformation. Just like Jacob. Like C.S. Lewis. Like Lt. Dan. When I can feel safe to open my darkest worries, I begin to allow others to see they are not alone, either. It's a safe community of sharing and not judging. Of growing together. Let's do this with each other. Let's allow each other to question and be angry with God. Let's be a church where it's super safe to wrestle because wrestling is a blessing. It's actually what marks us as God's people.

Communion Setup

[Communion Slide

We are going to approach the Communion table today. As we come, we remember Christ's sacrifice for us so that we can live in community, in relationship with God. It is here that we are reminded of the last meal Jesus shared with his disciples on the night before he was killed. He took bread and broke it saying, "This is my body, broken for you." With these words, Jesus takes on the anger we feel as we wrestle with God. Jesus also said, "This is my blood poured out for the sins of the world." We remember His sacrifice through partaking in this meal together in the same way Israel remembered Jacob's wrestling and blessing from God and didn't eat the hip muscle. You don't have to be a member at Catalyst to come forward today and participate. If you are searching for a relationship with a God that welcomes your fear and doubts and brokenness, you are welcome to come. If you are ready to be transformed by questioning and airing your anger at God, you are welcome. Come to the table where God embraces your pain, where God says, "Me too." This table is for you.

God, you have gathered us today and called us your people. Since that day you wrestled Jacob, you have called us "Israel", the people who wrestles with you. Thank you for welcoming our anger, our doubts and our questions. Thank you for hearing us, responding to us with a sacred "Me too". Thank you for not sending empty answers down from heaven. Thank you for entering into our pain, shouldering our doubt, embracing our questions. As we approach your table this morning, may we find your divine "Me too". May these wafers and juice become a spiritual food that nourishes a mature faith in us, a faith that transforms us into a people of hope and life, a people who walks marked by your presence in our lives. We offer these prayers and approach your table in the name of your son, Jesus.