

January 05, *Equipping*



Struggling as a good thing

When my wife Laura, asked one of her grade two scholars how the first two weeks of school had gone, he said:

"It's tough, it struggles you a lot, but you've got to do it!"

Much of contemporary spirituality is not ready for struggle nor does it prepare us for it. There is a prevailing notion that spirituality should issue naturally into peacefulness, calm, and stillness. We tend to forget that our favourite call-to-stillness verse — *"Be still and know that I am God," (Psalm 46:11)*— is set in the context of *"trouble," (v. 1), "the earth giving way," (v. 2)* and *"mountains falling into the heart of the sea."*

The reality of our lives is struggle. Leadership responsibility is full of it. We struggle with dauntedness: the challenges we face cause us to tremble. We struggle with disappointment and loss. We struggle with doubt: it feels as if God has not answered our prayers, or if God has, the answer has come in ways that leaves us confused.

A new book by Joan Chittister has given me fresh perspective on struggle and hope: *"Scarred by struggle, Transformed by Hope," Eerdmans, Novalis, 2004*. Chittister proposes that the story of Jacob wrestling with God, (Genesis 32), is a model of the Christian spirituality of struggle.

This mysterious wrestling match takes place at a crucial transition time in Jacob's life: between his leaving behind the troublesome years of living with his in-laws and the imminent meeting with his alienated brother Esau. It is a hinge-place where Jacob's past is threatening to catch up with his future.

During the night, when he is alone by the Brook of Jabok, Jacob is plunged into a struggle for his life. In the darkness he wrestles with a stranger. The struggle is terrible and goes on for the whole night. Jacob is wounded, but perseveres. As light begins to dawn, the stranger attempts to end the fight but Jacob will not let go. Jacob's tenacity seems to be the point of the story: he will not "say uncle" until his mysterious combatant blesses him.

At the conclusion of the story we see Jacob limping into the sunrise. The struggle has changed him. He is now scarred. He has been renamed. He goes into a new day with a memory of a kind of intimacy with God that he could not have imagined or predicted. He names the place of his struggle and declares: *"I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."*

The wisdom of the seven year old student is an apt commentary for the life of a Jesus follower: "... it struggles you a lot, but you've got to do it!"

"It is not struggle that defeats us, it is our failure to struggle that depletes the human spirit." (Joan Chittister)

As we embrace the newness of this year and the challenges and struggles that lurk in wait for us, let us like Jacob, Jesus, and our forbears in the faith, find courage to engage our struggle with hope.

—Sven Eriksson, Denominational Minister