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# The Hip-Hop Life

Genesis 32:22-31

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel for the Baccalaureate services on May 11-12, 2018,  
by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

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As you might have heard, the 2018 Pulitzer Prize for Music was given to Hip-Hop artist Kendrick Lamar for his album entitled “DAMN.” That word may have never been uttered from this pulpit before, but it’s the name of his album and as some of you look around in amazement and perhaps shock at some of those who are actually graduating, you might be thinking those very same words and saying to yourself, “They actually finished?!” I know you’ve said this word or thought it at some point on your Duke journey; we’re all human. You don’t have to let your parents know, but I know you ‘Lamared’ it from time to time. That exam for which you studied all night long and still failed—you could only articulate a Lamarism. That girl or boy who had a stinky attitude with you, even though you initially saw them as your future love, I know you Kendrick-Lamared it. Here at graduation today, but not sure of next steps for your tomorrow—you Lamared it. Those four letters could be the lexicon of life sometimes at Duke or in Durham or Denver or Des Moines or Delhi or Dubai. It has cross-cultural appeal because it speaks to a universal human experience.

Kendrick Lamar, the first non-classical, non-jazz musician to win the Pulitzer, was not trying to present an ode to joy but an ode to struggle and wrestling in life. Although Brown University professor Tricia Rose in her book, *Black Noise*, names the four pillars of Hip-Hop to be graffiti, breakdancing, DJing, and rapping, what’s also key is Hip-Hop’s existential nitty gritty texture with its social commentary on poverty and the deindustrialized urban landscape; in other words, the Hip-Hop life reveals the truth about human struggle.

This same existential, honest beat of the rhythm of life is also found in the Bible. “The sun rose upon [Jacob] as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.” Jacob was living with a limp, not from an intramural basketball injury, but because he had wrestled with a mysterious man until daybreak and during that wrestling match the man struck Jacob on his hip socket, putting his hip out of joint and giving new meaning to the term “hip hop.” Jacob knew the hip-hop life and limped along in the sun.

There are so many people throughout history who knew about the hip-hop life. Not all of them had a physical limp but they had an issue, an ailment, a struggle, a so-called limitation, yet the sun still rose upon them. Abraham Lincoln was known to suffer from depression yet is deemed one of the greatest Presidents ever in this country. Franklin Delano Roosevelt suffered from polio and couldn’t stand or walk without crutches yet was elected four times as President of the United States. Wilma Rudolph was afflicted with polio as a child but went on to become an accomplished sprinter and the first American woman, and African-American woman, to win three gold medals in one Olympic Games.

Actor James Earl Jones, the voice of Darth Vader and CNN, overcame a stutter for which he was so embarrassed that he refused to speak in school but is now praised for his distinctive voice—“This is CNN.” Mystery novelist Agatha Christie had a learning disability, which prevented her writing from being legible or easily understood; but she dictated all of her novels, stories and plays, and became a best-selling book writer.

There are so many living with a limp. Don’t let Duke fool you. Life’s not neat or clean or polished or pristine or painless or struggle-free. There are wrestling matches that will leave you wounded and limping along in life and this has nothing to do with not making it through fraternity or sorority Rush week. People are misguided if they only claim a six-pack, muscular, triumphant, dominant, prosperous, rich existence where there’s no struggle, no questioning, no wrestling, no suffering, no brokenness, no shortcomings, no imperfections, no Jacob-style “hip hop.” Jacob wouldn’t buy this and neither would God.

And neither does Lecrae in his song, “Welcome to America.”

*...Yea made in America  
Momma told me that I belong here  
Had to earn our stripes had to learn all rights had to fight for a home here  
But I wouldn't know a thing about that  
All I know is drugs and rap  
I probably could have been some kinda doctor  
Instead of holding guns and crack  
I was born in the mainland  
Great-grandpa from a strange land  
He was stripped away and given bricks to lay  
I guess you could say he a slave hand  
But I was made in America...*

*Man I'd die for America  
I serve my time for America  
Got shot back with the war  
Got back and ain't nobody give a jack in America  
I could lost my life, boy I lost my wife  
I can't even get right in my home land...*

*Though America ain't feeling me  
I went to war for this country  
Turn around came home and you rid of me  
When y'all free here saying you don't wanna be here...*

*We bled for America  
To keep y'all fed in America  
But what's the point of talking, a lot of y'all don't really even care America...*

The struggle is real. National or personal dysfunction is real. Jacob comes from a dysfunctional family (of course, no one here knows anything about that!). His family makes the Kardashians and Kanye West look normal! Jacob runs away from his brother who wants to kill him and then meets his match at night when he's all alone, showing us that God will catch you when you're all alone because you have to encounter your real self when you are by yourself. The door to God is sometimes only opened in solitude when we are left to wrestle in the dark.

Jacob's own name reveals how his whole life was one long struggle. Jacob means “deceiver” or “trickster” or “supplanter” and when his name is changed to ‘Israel’ through the wrestling match, that name means “struggler with God” or “God struggles.” His UFC fight at night reveals how struggle *is* a part of life. Jacob wrestled with God and God wrestled with Jacob. Therefore, God even struggles and God knows hip-hop. But it's only Jacob who's wounded when he's struck in the hip, creating a limp in his life that all can see in the sunlight.

But there's no shame in struggling throughout life's journey. We all live with limps. Your limp, your hip-hop, is not a sign that you don't know God; it could be the very sign that you have wrestled and struggled with God deeply and faithfully. The struggle itself can be the sign of divine presence, not absence, and be the space where you discover who you really are and who God is. In the limping, in the hip-hop, is where you will find God.

This limping in the sun openly is an act of faith and courage and vulnerability because by doing so, we show that we aren't Marvel superheroes, no matter how much we loved the movie “Black Panther” (Wakanda Forever!). Life gets

out of joint sometimes when we're wrestling, but the limp keeps us honest with ourselves, others, and God; it may be the gift that prevents us from taking life for granted or those suffering for granted as we discover our common humanity in mutual suffering. The hip-hop life is not a liability but shows that we've been with God and God is in the struggle whatever it might be because this is part of the spiritual life. And this will be a part of your future. If there is no struggle, no wrestling, there may be no blessing either.

In the Christian tradition, the wounds of the crucifixion on the body of Jesus are not erased by the resurrection. In the same way, our limps don't disappear when blessings come. Actually, the blessing of God has its genesis in the struggle and the truth is that although Jacob has his name changed to 'Israel,' he emerges from his encounter with God, limping because of his hip. This means that the hip-hop life is linked to a holy God. This life will hurt sometimes because it's not always easy and smooth; we might come away from God wounded. As Hebrew Bible scholar, Walter Brueggemann says of Jacob's situation: his meeting God "did not lead, as we are wont to imagine, to reconciliation, forgiveness, healing. It resulted in a crippling." Our limps may be the mark of God on our lives. As 13<sup>th</sup> century mystical poet Rumi says, "the wound is the place where the Light enters you." It might be where you find your calling.

As former US poet laureate Natalie Tretheway says of her mother,

*And how could I not, bathed in the light  
of her wound, find my calling there?*

The limp, the wound, the hip-hop life, is the window for the sunlight. Limps are normal, not the other way around. After Jacob is struck in the hip, he doesn't let the man go until he's blessed. The blessing from God comes in the struggle, in the wrestling. Jacob is eventually blessed *and* he still limps or hip-hops. The limping is not the negation of the blessing; in this story, it's the indication of the blessing. To be in the presence of God doesn't mean all of your pain and struggle disappears. And perhaps, there won't be the blessing without the wounding.

So know as you graduate, that life is about wrestling, not about resting; life is about grappling with your dreams and your demons; life is about struggling with your future until you find a blessing; life is about meeting God when your life is out of joint like your hip. But just as the sun rose upon Jacob even while he was limping, the sun will rise upon you and your hip-hop life as it has with Nick Vujicic.

Nick's an Australian-born man who was born without limbs, without arms or legs. He has an extremely rare congenital disorder known as tetra-amelia syndrome. When he was born, the doctors said that he would be a vegetable. He was the first disabled person integrated into the Australian school system. He wrestled with depression, was bullied at school, and when he was 10 years old, he attempted suicide but finally got to place to say like Logic, "I don't wanna die anymore." His Dad always told him that he was "a gift, just differently packaged." This 30-something year old man has a small foot on his left hip, which he refers to as his little chicken drumstick; it helps him keep balance. Nick can type, pick things up between his toes and even kick a ball. He swims regularly and has gone skydiving. He's a husband and a father, without limbs. He leads two organizations, *Life Without Limbs* and *Attitude is Altitude*. He speaks to thousands to encourage people to not give up. He often says, "We sometimes wait for a miracle to happen in life — but the miracle never comes. I wish many things were different in my life. But knowing I can be a miracle for someone else makes my life worth living." With or without limbs, with limps, like Jacob, like Lamar, even if you hip-hop, you can be a miracle for someone else and give hip hope to others. That's my prayer for you, class of 2018—may you be prisoners of hip hope. My name is Luke Powery and I approve this message.