

Sermon Reminiscere 2016
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Genesis 32:22-32
Wrestling with God

Wrestling is one of the most intense sports there is. Although a high school wrestling match lasts only six minutes, a well-conditioned athlete can be more exhausted after such a short struggle than after a forty-eight minute basketball game. When a wrestling match must go into overtime, it is the wrestler who conditioned more, who didn't let himself slow down at the end of practice, who wins. Wrestling is exhausting. So you can imagine the struggle Jacob endured in his body and soul as he wrestled with God throughout the night.

Let me give you a little background to this episode. Jacob was chosen by God, when he was still in the womb (Genesis 25:23). Moreover, God promised Jacob that he would give him the land of Canaan, that he would make his offspring as numerous as the dust on the ground, that all families of the world would be blessed in his offspring (referring to Christ), and that God would never leave him until he had done what he promised for him (Genesis 28:13-15). Jacob believed this promise. Yet, it seemed like God was breaking this promise. Jacob was journeying with his large family to the land God promised him. But his older brother Esau was coming toward him with 400 men. The last time Jacob saw Esau, his brother was planning to kill him. Jacob is afraid that God's promise will come to nothing. The younger will after all serve the older brother, the land would never be his, his offspring would be cut off from the nations, and he would be remembered only as a curse. Yes, Jacob feared that the God who promised that he would stay with him had abandoned him.

Jacob prayed to God, “Please deliver me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him, that he may come and attack me, and the mothers with the children.” (Genesis 32:11) Jacob separated his family, so that if one group were attacked the other would be spared. Then he sent gifts toward Esau, attempts to appease his anger. Then to make matters worse, a man appears.

Jacob cried to God for help. And not only does it seem that God is silent, not only does Jacob wait in fear for the destruction of his family, but a man comes to challenge him. Jacob spends the night stirring up the dirt with a strange man, who tries to prevent him from advancing. The man wrestles with him through the night, exhausting Jacob’s body even as his soul is already spent. It was as if the stranger said, “God has abandoned you. Esau will take the spoils. You will by no means inherit this land nor will your children be anything but slaves. God will not keep his promise.”

But Jacob doesn’t give up. He wrestles, not only with skill, but with determination. And even as his body fights through drained muscles, his faith too endures. Even as the man scrapes and kicks, even punches his hip out of joint, Jacob refuses to let go, and his faith too refuses to let go of God’s promise to him. When the man says, “Let me go!” Jacob responds, “Not unless you bless me!” Jacob is clinging to the promise God gave him, that he would not be overcome by Esau, that he would inherit the land, that his children would be a great nation, that the Christ would come from his seed and bless the world, that God would never leave him, even when he seemed so far away.

Then the man revealed himself to Jacob. Jacob struggled with the Lord himself! And because of his persistent *faith* in God’s promise, Jacob prevailed. Jacob receives the name Israel, which means, “He strives with God.” After God left him Esau arrived. He no

longer hated his brother but embraced him and kissed him. Jacob's prayer was answered and his fear subsided. The clouds of doubt had lifted and Jacob could see the sun of God's promise shine.

Thus Jacob teaches us how to wrestle with God. What does it mean to wrestle with God? Wrestling with God is when God permits struggles to your faith, so that your faith is strengthened and you trust in him all the more. God is powerful enough to destroy us at anytime, but that is not his goal when he wrestles with those he loves. As Saint Paul writes, "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also prove the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it." (1 Corinthians 10:13) God never seeks to destroy your faith. However, God does at times challenge your faith, so that you rely even heavier on his promises, his *Word* than on your own experiences or reason.

The only reason Jacob endured his trial was because he trusted in God's Word. He prayed before hand, reminding God of his promise, "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O Lord who said to me, Return to your country and to your kindred, that I may do you good," (Gen. 32:9) After admitting to God that he feared Esau he reminds God again, "But *you said*, 'I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.'" It was by this prayer that Jacob clung to God even as his hip was popped out of joint. So we must cling to God's promise and pray to God according to his promise.

Your Savior Jesus said, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved." He said, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand." (John 10:27-28)

He told his ministers, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them” (John 20:23). And he tells you “Take eat. This is my body given for you. Take drink. This is my blood, shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.” These are God’s promises. Come hell or high water, cling to these promises.

Hardship might come to your life. God may permit you to suffer. You may see people deny the faith all around you. You may be tempted to doubt that God is there. Your conscience might feel guilty, even after you’ve repented and been absolved and received Holy Communion. Dark clouds may gather. Some have endured physical hardship that tried their faith. Some endure emotional struggles when even their loved ones betrayed them. And many endure a spiritual wrestling match that questions God’s grace, his forgiveness, his presence, and his love. Yet, through all this cling to God’s promises in faith. Do not doubt that God is there, setting the limit to your struggle. Even if you lose everything and everyone you have, confess the words from that great Lutheran hymn, “A Mighty Fortress,” “And take they our life, Goods, fame, child, and wife, Though these all be gone, Our vict’ry has been won; The Kingdom ours remaineth.” (LSB 656).

Can God revoke his promise? Certainly not. Can sickness or death undo the fact that Christ Jesus died for your sins? Can any sin you’ve committed withstand the drowning waters of your baptism? Can God say to you, “You are not my child. I will not give you my grace.” Even if God were to say such a thing, your grappling faith should answer back, “No, I am your child. I am baptized into your Son! Your Apostle Paul teaches, ‘For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ... And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.’ (Gal. 3:26-27, 29) I am your child, God. I hold you to your

promise. God, I hold you to your word. Do not take my inheritance from me! I will not let go until you bless me!” This is how you wrestle with God. You hold on to his promise, clasping with both hands and don’t let go even if all your bones get thrown out of joint.

This is also how the Canaanite woman learned to wrestle. When Jesus seemed to reject her, she clung even more to the promise. Come rejection or even insult, she said, “Give me what you owe me according to your promise.” And this is how we should pray. “Yes, God. I know I do not deserve anything. I know that according to my works and sins I deserve to go to hell for all eternity. Yet, You have given me a promise. You have made me your child in Baptism. You have fed me Christ’s body and blood. You have forgiven my sins. I will not let doubt or even your apparent silence take away what you have promised. Although I was born with nothing, you have made me entitled to the kingdom of heaven.”

Such boldness can only be gained through the Gospel. We boldly pray the Lord’s Prayer, calling God our Father, because we believe the Gospel. So even if God discipline us. Even if he seem cruel to us, we will not hate him or curse him, or give up hope in him. We will keep our eyes on his promise. As Job said in his turmoil, “Though God slay me, I will hope in him.” (Job 13:15) Though it seems he denies my petition a thousand times; although everyone give up faith around me; although my body wither in sickness and my soul feel no relief, I will look at my suffering as temporary. As the Psalmist says, “For his anger is but for a moment and his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning.” (Ps. 30:5)

So did Jacob’s joy come in the morning. God’s testing, his wrestling, hurts. Every athlete knows the least enjoyable part of training is conditioning. If you don’t condition,

then your lungs and your muscles will give out before your match or game or race is done. There is nothing more frustrating for a wrestler than to wrestle a good match, but run out of gas and lose at the last second. This is why God wrestles with us. This is why he tests us. He's not cruel any more than a wrestling coach is cruel who makes his wrestlers do sprints, up-downs, and carry heavy weights after a long hard practice. Jacob's faith was stronger after his match with God. So was the faith of the Canaanite woman.

There is no promise that your faith won't be challenged. You will suffer in this life. Yet, with faith clinging to Christ's death and resurrection, his Baptism, forgiveness, and Supper, you cannot fail. You don't need faith in yourself. You don't need faith in your country or family or job or friends. You need faith in Jesus; in *his* Gospel. And you should cling to this Gospel even if an angel from heaven were to come and preach a different one. As Saint Paul asserts, "For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom. 8:37-39)

Brothers and sisters in Christ, Christ Jesus died for you. He is risen for you. He gives you his body and blood to eat and drink. He forgives you. Trust in him and you will win your match. Amen.