

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost (c)
Genesis 32:22-31 2 Timothy 3:14--4:5 Luke 18:1-8
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
October 16, 2022 [Traditional]

In the Bible, Jacob for me stands out as a rascal. He takes advantage of his father Isaac's bad eyesight. He steals his brother Esau's birthright. In today's first reading, you think "finally, this boy is going to get what he deserves." At this point in the story, Jacob has no choice but to come back out of exile and face his brother, whom he ripped off and humiliated. Esau, whom he ripped off, knows Jacob is returning, and he has vowed to kill him. Jacob gets word that Esau is now coming out to meet him with 400 men. So Jacob figures *this is it*. Judgment day has finally arrived.

True to his character, Jacob comes up with a plan. He organizes all his cattle and all his servants and his worldly possessions, into groups. And he sends these collections of treasure out, one after the other, to Esau as gifts. So picture that, Jacob sends his whole fortune out ahead of him, as an offering to what he thinks is his hostile brother. It's really quite remarkable: he's giving it all up. He times the delivery so that Esau, who's on his way with his army, will get one gift after another in succession. So Jacob is trying to butter up Esau with gifts. He knows one flock of sheep might not do it, but after the 4th herd of cows, maybe Esau won't be so angry at him anymore. Jacob knows how to persistently wear someone down.

And the whole time, he's praying to God with the same persistence. He tells God, "You know I'm a dead man here. I know I deserve whatever punishment my brother inflicts on me. God, I know I don't deserve any of the steadfast love and faithfulness you've shown to me all these years." But then in his prayer he says something amazing. He says, "Yet you, God, have said, 'I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted.'" In other words, "I've run out of excuses. I've been a scoundrel, a thief and a liar. I can't justify any of it. I deserve death. But...*you promised me*. You, God, promised me that my family and I would prosper. My descendants will fill the earth." So Jacob has the brass to stand up in front of God and say, "I'm not true, but you are, God! I know who you are. I know you're going to stick to those promises you've made to me!"

And then, the mysterious part of the story, which we get in the reading today: Jacob is alone in the night. He knows tomorrow is judgment day; his angry brother is coming. But suddenly right there, in the middle of the night, a stranger comes and wrestles with him. They wrestle all night, and Jacob keeps his hold on him like a pit bull. At one point, with one whack of his hand, the stranger knocks Jacob's hip out of its socket. So obviously, the stranger has this incredible, explosive strength. And we do learn that the stranger is God. He is embodied, flesh and blood, in this man. But it gets even more strange.

Although he is obviously powerful enough to destroy Jacob with one swipe of his hand, Jacob is able to wrestle the stranger into submission. God is wrestled into submission.

OK. Alright. Just a few pages back in the same book (Genesis), this same all knowing, all seeing, all powerful God was creating the universe through his Word. "Let there be light!" he said. And there was light. Now, he shows up as a flesh-and-blood man. Jacob pins him down. And when he gets up, he leaves Jacob with his blessing. How can a human being pin the all-powerful Creator of the universe down? But wait! The gospel of John reads: "Carrying the cross by himself, Jesus went to the place called Place of the Skull (in Hebrew, Golgotha). There they nailed him to the cross." So God, the Almighty power of the universe, who can wipe out our existence with the wave of his hand, is willing to allow sinners to pin him down.

Jacob held on like a pit bull to God and wrestled a blessing out of him. Was it because Jacob had superpowers? Did he get the blessing because he was a good man? No, Jacob was a cheat and a thief and I would say that up to that point in his life, he ran away from God more than he turned towards him. The only hold he had on God was the promise God had made to him. God had told him, *You are my chosen one. I will give you and your descendants a future that nothing on earth will ever be able to take away.* Jacob had only one thing working for him that night: **faith** that God would never go back on his promise. **Faith** that God would remain true to his character. **Faith** that God would work for him. He held onto that promise like a pit bull; and that's why God gives him a new name in the lesson: Israel...he who struggles with God and prevails. Israel held on to God not by his own strength, but on the basis of God's own character. And God allows him to pin him down not only for Jacob's sake, but ultimately in order to fulfill his promises to the whole world, to you and me right here, through Jacob's descendant, Jesus.

Whoever says faith in God is always about peace and joy doesn't know what faith is. Sometimes faith in God is a bruising battle in the dark that leaves us limping. I think of the woman in one of my former congregations whose young child died of cancer. She said her life became a complete, meaningless darkness of despair. One night, one of her friends said a prayer with her, and it suddenly made her realize how much she hated God, how angry she was at him. And praise God, that's when the fight began! A long, brutal no-holds barred match with God. And now she praises him for loving her enough to come and wrestle with her, for insisting that she face him directly, no matter how much she threw at him, for holding on to her, no matter how hard she fought him. In her own words, she said she came out of the fight broken but saved.

What kind of God am I going to fight, if I know Jesus? He is a God who allows himself to be pinned down by his own promises. Who has told me that I am his own child, that I have a place with him forever, that nothing will snatch me out of his hands. I'm going to wrestle with a God who was pinned down, crucified, nailed to the cross for me. That's a God I can hold onto like a pit bull. And I know that that's nothing, compared to the force with which he is holding on to me.

Maybe you remember how Jacob's story ended. Esau finally shows up with his four-hundred men. Jacob, of course, is expecting death. And instead, Esau runs to meet him and embraces him, and kisses him, and they both weep for joy at their reunion. Esau asks

him, "what were all those camels and sheep and cows you sent out to me?" Jacob answers, "they were gifts. I wanted to gain back your favor." And Esau answers, "I have enough, my brother. I have enough." In other words: "I have you." So after a long struggle with a faceless, nameless strange power in the dark, Jacob now, in the daytime, directly sees the true face of God, in the flesh, in his own brother.

Isn't it amazing. A bunch of broken sinners like us can stand up in front of the creator of the universe and call on him for help day and night and he'll listen. Who loves us enough to keep a firm hold on us while we fight him on those dark nights. Who has come to us in the flesh, who has turned his true face to us. And who, in the light of day here now, gives us his own body and blood. Who looks at our gifts of praise here and says "with YOU in my arms, I have enough."