

10th Sunday after Pentecost A 06 August 2023

Genesis 32:22-31

St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth

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Grace and peace to you in the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.
Amen.

Then [the man] said, 'Let me go, for the day is breaking.' But Jacob said, 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me.' Let's pray: ...

You've got to admire the pluck of our ancient ancestors. If Jacob, the son of Isaac, was alive today, he'd be gobbled up by a major corporation and given a top executive position. Energetic. Tonnes of initiative. Aggressive. And few scruples when it came to getting what he wanted. Jacob wasn't one to take "No" for an answer. If he had something in mind, he'd go for broke to get it. Even when the chips were down in his scuffle at the ford of the Jabbok, he was determined to profit from it. Jacob wasn't one to back down in the face of trouble and never gave up until he got what he wanted.

This story is complicated and I've got more questions than I have answers. But let's open it up by looking at the background of everything that has happened so far in Jacob's life.

Jacob was the second born of twins. He came into the world with his hand grasping his brother's heel; almost as though trying to overtake Esau from the very beginning. His parents named him Jacob, which means "grabber" or "supplanter". This was a prophetic foretaste of what kind of person Jacob would turn out to be. By hook or by crook Jacob wanted desperately to always be the winner by trickery, scheming, and grabbing what he could get.

He spent his life moving from one tight spot to another. He'd become his mum's favourite at home, swindled his brother Esau out of his birthright, and tricked his dying father into giving him, not Esau, the family inheritance. Jacob becomes a fugitive when his brother puts his name at the top of his hit list.

After 20 years Jacob wants to go back home. Back to the brother who'd threatened to kill him. Back to the father he had cheated and lied to. (Isaac lived until he was 180 years old and both sons buried him). Tomorrow he will stand face-to-face with the brother whom he's so grievously wronged. Will Esau receive him or kill him? Rightly so, Jacob is terrified.

Jacob's worried because his brother has come with a force of 400 men. In order to placate his brother, Jacob organises gifts from amongst his livestock to go ahead. Then he wakes up the whole camp and sends his wives and children across the river. If Esau had any thoughts of attacking as they crossed the river then Jacob would be one step ahead. While a river crossing is dangerous in the dark, it's not as dangerous as being ambushed there by Esau's army in the morning. Yet again, Jacob plots to outsmart his brother.

Jacob is the last to move and it's dark. Suddenly he's assaulted by a stranger. Who? The story only says "Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak" (32:24). The assailant could've been a thief or even his brother who'd sworn to kill him. However, by morning, Jacob will say that he has fought with God.

Imagine the contest! Blow for blow. Head-lock for head-lock. Blood nose for blood nose. Then the man touches Jacob's hip and dislocates it. At dawn, exhausted and gasping for breath, they speak. The man says, 'Let me go, for the day is breaking'. Jacob replies, 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me' (32:26). Even in the worst of situations, Jacob still fishes for gain. It's then, when the stranger asks him his name, that Jacob realises he's come face to face with God [*Peniel* – literally the face of God from, *paNim* face, and El/Elohim God] - 'You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed' (32:28).

However, Jacob doesn't learn his assailant's name. What he gets is a new name and a new identity as a result of wrestling with God. We've known Jacob by the names "Trickster," "Grabber," and worst of all, "Heel". Now he's called, "Israel", which means "God perseveres", "God persists", or "God strives". With the new name, there comes a new person, a new man, and a new people has been called forth. Jacob, now known as Israel, is the one who has faced God, struggled with God, been gripped by God, given a blessing, and renamed. Jacob is forever changed.

When daylight comes, God is gone. So is Jacob. Now, only Israel remains, walking with a permanent limp. That night, Jacob, the man who was always so sure of himself, ready to cheat his own family, the schemer, the liar, the deceiver, became a changed man and his new name, "Israel", is proof.

With great relief and gratitude Jacob acknowledges that he's been spared through God's gracious goodness, when all he deserves is to have been destroyed. He'd always thought of himself as an entrepreneur, a self-made man, a person in control of his life, but now he realises that in God's eyes he's little more than a gnat - a pesky, little nuisance, an arrogant sinner.

And yet, amazingly, God came down in human form, came down to Jacob's level and engaged him in a wrestling match. He did so because he loved that pesky, arrogant, nuisance, Jacob.

God loved him! God blessed him! No one gets to see the face of God, so there's little wonder that Jacob says in amazement, "I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved" (32:30).

Jacob is weakened by his encounter with God's power. But paradoxically, he's also now much stronger – stronger because he leans on God's power.

Saints, God has come down to interact with and for us, too. This time it's Jesus, God the Son, who comes down. He became human. He wrestled with those who wouldn't heed his call to "repent", to turn away from their sin. He wrestled with Satan, with sin and with death. And he won! He won, and as the victor, gives a blessing for each and every one of us. He declares that we are his children, that he loves us, forgives us and will always walk with us. He came down and wrestled us away from Satan and brought us into his kingdom.

What Jacob's encounter with God illustrates, is that whatever our past, whatever our previous priorities, Jesus never gives up on us. It's his strength that comes to us and makes us strong for the struggles we face in this life.

Like Jacob, we're assured that:

- God's forgiveness is greater than our greatest sin,
- his renewal is greater than our deepest failing,
- the life he gives is more secure than death,
- and he will be there when we have to wrestle with life's struggles.

There are times when we have to wrestle with our own failings – the times we're disappointed in the way we've responded and acted. There are times when we have to wrestle with the calamities, dangers, tragedies and sorrow that this life throws at us. We wrestle with questions like:

- “Where is God when I need him?”
- “Why is God allowing this to happen to me?”
- “Why don’t you just fix everything, God?”

We wrestle looking for answers, for help, for strength and in his grace, God allows us to wrestle with him as we try to come to terms with what has happened or is happening in our lives.

Sometimes God uses tragedy, danger, or sorrow in our life to remind us to trust him that everything is in his loving hands and nothing can cause him to love us any less.

Sometimes God uses unemployment, or poverty, problems with our children, health issues and struggles in our life so that we’ll look only to him and depend on him. Right now, we’re all wrestling with the uncertain future of this congregation, where fear and anxiety are our dislocated hip joint. But we must remember to strive with God, and trust in his plan, rather than our own schemes and resourcefulness.

Suffering isn’t part of God’s plan for us and he’s saddened by the trail of lies, fear, broken relationships, disfunction, and disconnection that sin causes. But at the same time, he will use all of this to redirect our attention to the cross and Jesus, in order to draw us closer to himself.

And as we wrestle with God, like Jacob, we’ll undoubtedly come away from it with some lasting injury. But like Jacob, in our wrestling we’ll encounter God’s power and learn to lean on him and again experience his grace and mercy. And like Jacob, we’re made new by faith in God, refreshed in our relationship with God, and assured of God’s blessing.

May God’s Spirit use the struggles that we have in this life to draw us closer to our Lord. May God’s Spirit use the problems we wrestle with to reassure us of God’s love and grace. May God’s Spirit never let us forget what was so painfully won for us by Jesus on the cross for the sake of his love for us. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.