

Grace and Peace from God our Father and our Lord, Jesus Christ.

A wrestling match in the middle of the night in the desert with God or God's angel ranks among the oddest narratives in Scripture. And yet, though it seems a very unusual encounter, what goes on between Jacob and God at Peniel is not unfamiliar to our lives as people of God. Because truth be told, all of us struggle with God and God's will in our lives, and we are all painfully familiar with the experience of being trapped in difficult situations of our own making. Jacob is no different.

Jacob, for lack of a better phrase, wrestles with God about his identity, who he is and who he is supposed to be. You see, Jacob's mistakes have come back to roost. Jacob has no place left to flee, and can no longer hide from the person he is – a cheater who takes advantage of others – and what he has done to others, stealing his brother's place of honor in the family and just about everything his wives' father possesses.

Decade earlier he cheated his elder brother Esau out of both his family birthright and his blessing, and fearing for his life from an enraged Esau flees to his uncle for protection. And now, he has also cheated his Uncle Laban out of most of his property, and has been driven out forever from his territory. Jacob is caught in the jaws of a vice – driven out by his Uncle with nowhere to go but back to the territory of the brother he cheated. He has nowhere left to go because of who he is and what he has done.

Make no mistake. Jacob is caught in a deadly serious predicament of his own making. His older brother Esau rides with 400 armed men to meet

him – which sounds pretty threatening, considering their past and Esau's promise to kill Jacob.

What will Esau do? What will happen to him? He doesn't know if he'll even survive the next day. What will happen to his children? His wives? What is going to happen to all that he has gained in his life?

Jacob does not know. In the darkness of that night in which Jacob is confronted with his past and uncertainty about tomorrow, he calls upon the God who had promised to deliver him, and that's when the battle begins.

Jacob calls upon God remembering the promises that God had made to him many years before in the desert as he ran away from his angry brother Esau. He recalled how in his dream at Bethel God told him, *"Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land, for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised."*

All night long God holds Jacob in combat. God struggles with Jacob, and will not let Jacob win. No matter what Jacob tries, alone he is not strong enough, smart enough, crafty enough, or quick enough to prevail.

The actions of Jacob's life have brought him to the brink of his own extinction, and alone he is powerless to prevail against what may happen tomorrow. This God struggles with Jacob and forces him to see that he cannot prevail alone, and that his strength lies in the God and God's promises.

Jacob is made by force to realize that he cannot do this himself, and must give over control. Jacob must contend with who he has been – must be subdued before God can help him.

All night long they wrestled, but the one who wrestles with Jacob does not prevail either. Jacob cannot win, but he refuses to let go. Jacob

refuses to release his grip on this God who has made promises to him. Facing the uncertainty of what lay ahead of him Jacob clings to this God, and will not let him go. The only option left to him – accept and admit his own powerlessness and failure, and cling to God to fulfill his promises.

The struggle ends when the stranger simply touches Jacob's hip, throwing it out of joint. It seems, the God who wrestles with Jacob could have easily won at any time, but continues to hold onto Jacob in his struggling.

Still, Jacob's persistence, his unwillingness to release this God of promise forces a conversation between them. In their exhaustion a deal is negotiated. The one who wrestles with Jacob demands to be released, but Jacob demands a blessing first. So, God gives Jacob a new name; *no longer will he be called **Jacob**, "the supplanter, the cheat," but **Israel**, "One who struggles with God."*

When Jacob asks for the midnight wrestler's name, receives only the answer, "*Why do you ask my name?*" As if to say, you know it already.

Suddenly, Jacob who has struggled his whole life for his brother Esau's birthright, through a new name now has his own. Suddenly, Jacob who has cheated Esau out of his blessing, now receives his own blessing. Despite who Jacob has turned out to be, this God of promise renames Jacob, Israel, and blesses him. Israel – one who struggles with God. We who have been grafted into Israel by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus try to avoid the wrestling places. This quite easily done.

All one has to do is (1) never come into the gathered worshipping community to be reminded of God's call to live selflessly as people of the Kingdom, or (2) go to a gathered community is preached, and tune out

when the Word is proclaimed, or (3) never study God's Word, refuse to attend Christian education classes, assuming we know it all, or (4) think of baptism as a sprinkling and not as a drowning, and the Holy Communion as a symbol or a reenactment of the Last Supper, and not meeting Christ broken and poured out because of our sinfulness, confronted by Jesus with ourselves and with a promise and better vision for our lives, just as God meets Jacob on the banks of that river.

Without Jesus Christ who out of love comes to struggle with us like the lifeguard, the world would have been lost – caught between what it had done and what it had done. *Were He not to wrestle with us and for us, we would be dead without our identity of the birthright of God's children which is the life that is truly life.*

God reminds us of our new identity given with God's promise at our baptism. Like Jacob God calls us to live as people trusting God's promise and blessing – free from the fear that causes us to live only for ourselves. Rather, God calls us to reckon with our own failings and the failings of the world because we are not left to struggle alone, but rather struggle with God.

Daily we have to remember our baptism, and feel the grip of the God who has struggles for and with us. As Luther's Small Catechism instructs us: *"we are to put the Old Adam, the old Eve to death daily by sorrow and repentance so that a new person should come forth and rise up, cleansed and righteous, to live forever in God's presence.*

If you think that's easy, just try it. To live as God's people in a broken world is indeed a struggle, but we are never alone, because the

Godus a new birthright, a new blessing and and a new name refuses to let go of us in the struggle. *“I am God’s and God is mine,”* and in the end that gives us our new identity as people who struggle with God.

AMEN !!!