

Wrestling with God
 October 19, 2025
 Genesis 32 22-32

"The same night he (Jacob) arose and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. And Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day."

Dear Friends in Christ Jesus,

I think that most of us gathered here recognize that something gained by hard work and earned through a struggle is an accomplishment that is character building and is appreciated more than something that is received without any effort. So for example, children are required to practice their penmanship even though it causes little hands to cramp. Musicians have to practice over and over again – long hours of effort before they can play with proficiency. Coaches often proclaim, "No pain; no gain." The road to anything worthwhile seems to be the tougher one. We would heartily agree with what the Apostle Paul wrote to the Romans 5:3-4, namely that "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character".

Soon we discover that life itself is a struggle where we are constantly wrestling with one thing or another – with your sinful heart or with your heart disease; with one person or another - with a beloved child or a fearful foe. And then, one night (for it seems that the fiercest contests occur during the darkness), you awaken only to realize that you are wrestling with God! Based on today's Old Testament reading, we want to consider and ponder three people who were ... Wrestling with God.

1. The first person is Jacob

Jacob is on an exodus journey. He is going out from his kin in his uncle Laban's home in Haran and journeying to the promised land and to his brother Esau. Jacob fears what is ahead because he had, by temptation and trickery, taken the inheritance that belonged to Esau and had received the blessing that rightly should have been spoken to his older brother. Then Jacob receives the news that his brother is coming to meet him. He assembles and organizes his great family and his herds with all proper precaution as his group continues in the direction of Esau.

Night comes and Jacob is restless because of what took place twenty years earlier. Jacob understands that time does not take away guilt. Esau is advancing in his direction. Has Esau been waiting for his day of vengeance? These events weigh on his mind and, no doubt, he runs through the various scenarios and mulls over what he might say to his brother. His conscience rises up and accuses Jacob the Supplanter, Jacob the Tricker, Jacob the Deceiver. Esau is coming and is it even possible that his brother might have forgotten about the inheritance and especially the blessing? **No way.** The promised land is ahead and Jacob's sin and his ever-increasing burden of guilt prevents him from entering it.

Jacob desires to be alone and to have the solitude that would give him a few hours of peace during a long night. He crosses the stream called Jabbok and this soul continues to seek the peaceful rest that is so illusive. He is now apart from his family and his earthly possessions. His sin has separated him not only from his brother, not only from his family, not only from the promised land, but, it seems to him,

also from God's gracious presence. It is night and except for the memories of his twenty-year-old sin, his burdensome guilt and his ever-increasing fear, he is alone.

Jacob is alone, but not for long. God arrives on the scene. God has come in the flesh and has come to contend with Jacob. They begin an epic wrestling match and Jacob doesn't realize who his opponent is. As Jacob the sinner contends with the great and holy God, the Lord God permits Jacob to wrestle with Him throughout the night. Sometime during the match Jacob realizes that he is not contending with mere flesh and blood. Suddenly God reaches out His finger and puts Jacob's thigh bone out of joint. There is instant pain and it continues. Jacob hops around and, in spite of the hurt and suffering, with strength and determination that can only be from above, he does not release his hold on God until He has God's intended blessing.

Though we don't know the particular wrestling moves and counters in this match, they might have gone something like this: "**Jacob, You have sinned.** Yes, but you don't desire the death of a sinner. I hold You to that truth. **I am the God of justice and you are guilty as charged.** Yes, but You are the God of mercy and I know that You will not give me what I deserve. You have promised and I cling to Your Word. **You deserve nothing but eternal separation from Me.** Yes, but You are a gracious God, providing a substitute for my father Isaac on Mount Moriah. I won't let go of You until I hear the Word of Your blessing."

Then the Word of the Lord came to the man whose name, Jacob, meant supplanter, "**Your name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.**"

Then Jacob asked Him, "Tell me, I pray, Your name." But He said, "**Why is it that you ask My name?**" And there He blessed him. So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his thigh.

Could God have won this match at any point? Certainly. No mortal man has an inkling of a chance if God wants to reach out in His Divine, Omni-potent justice. But why? Why did the Lord God engage in this wrestling match? Why did He allow Jacob to prevail? Why did God inflict a painful injury that dogged Jacob for the rest of his life on this earth?

At least four reasons: first, so that Jacob's sin could be forgiven; second, so that Jacob's guilt could be taken away; third, so that Jacob's servile fear could be replaced by godly fear; and fourth, so Jacob could hobble into the Promised Land.

2. The Second Man, Jesus

Jesus is on **His** exodus journey. He is going from His disciples in the Upper Room to face His opponents who are out to kill him. Jesus is restless and His soul trembles for what lies ahead for Him.

Jesus knows that a great troop is assembling and is advancing in His direction. It is night and Jesus knows that time does not take away the sin and the guilt of the world. The events weigh on his mind and He considers what is ahead for Him in the next twenty-four hours.

The Promised Land is ahead and the sins of the world and the ever-increasing burden of guilt prevents the world from entering Paradise. This weighs heavily on the heart and soul of Jesus, the Incarnate Son of God.

Jesus seeks the solitude that would give Him a few minutes of quiet communion. Like Jacob, He crosses a stream – one called Kidron -- as His soul continues to seek the peaceful rest that is so elusive this night in which our Lord was betrayed. He is now in the Garden of Gethsemane and with the disciples slumbering yonder, Jesus is now apart from His family and without any comfort. You see, your sin has separated Jesus not only from His disciples, not only from His family, not only from the Promised Land, but also from God's gracious presence. It is night and except for the trio of sin, death and the Devil, the Incarnate Son of God is alone.

Jesus is alone, but not for long as He calls upon God His Father and pleads with Him, "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will" (Matthew 26:39).

The Scriptures record no answer to Jesus' prayer. The struggle continues as the petition is repeated and the plea is uttered a third time. Throughout that dark, that doleful night and the mid-day darkness that followed on Good Friday, there is pain and suffering -- instant pain of body, soul and spirit. He is crucified and the Lord Jesus contends with the Lord God throughout the crucifixion.

Though challenged to come down from the cross and save Himself (which would have been so easy for Him), He remains bearing the burden of your sin and not yours only, but also the sins of the whole world. He allows Himself to be pinned in the Divine wrestling match. He will not release His hold on the cross until He has earned God's intended blessing for you. Dearly friends, this is Jesus, Who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross (Hebrews 12:2).

Then He cries out from the cross, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? That is, My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me (Matthew 27:46).

Why did the Lord God engage in this wrestling match? What joy was there that caused Jesus to endure when the Lord laid upon Him the iniquity of us all? At least four reasons: first, so that the sins of the world could be forgiven; second, so that everyone's guilt could be taken away; third, so that subservient fear could be replaced by godly fear; and fourth, so those who believe in Him would be able to hear Him invite them into the Promised Land - "Well done, good and faithful servant; ... Enter into the joy of your Master (Matthew 25:23).

3. The Third Person

Now we come to the third person in this sermon. The first was Jacob. The second was Jesus. Who is the third person? It could be Job. Having had his soul wrung with grief and his body fully covered with hideous sores, Job wrestled with Lord God Almighty. It could be the woman in today's Gospel lesson. She came to the judge demanding justice, over and over again. (Matt. 15:25).

But the third person is neither Job nor this pleading woman. It's you. You are in an exodus journey going out from this fallen world and to the Paradise that God has promised you. But for now you live in a land where there are temptations and in which you have fallen time and again. Perhaps it is pride that keeps you from acknowledging and repenting of sin committed so long ago and still keeps you awake in the

darkness before the coming dawn. Maybe it is servile fear that haunts you in the middle of the night. You are alone as you wrestle with your past, with your accused conscience and with that ever-increasing load of guilt.

You are alone, but not for long. God, Who is present everywhere, arrives on the scene. The Lord God permits you to wrestle with Him throughout the darkness of this world's night. During your sojourn and time of trial, God may reach out His finger and touch your heart or your home or a loved one. There is instant pain and it continues. You hobble around and, in spite of the hurt and suffering, with strength and determination that can only be from above, you will not release this hold on God until You have God's intended blessing.

It's amazing, isn't it? Wrestling with God ... and prevailing. "**The wages of sin is death** ... Yes Lord, but the Gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. ... **The soul that sins shall die** ... Yes my Lord, but Jesus was wounded for our transgressions. ... **There is none that does good; no, not one** ... Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him. Dear Lord God, You permit me to wrestle with You and give me the strength to do so. Therefore I will not let go of You until I hear the Word of Your blessing."

Why does the Lord God engage in such a wrestling match with you? Why does God inflict or permit a variety of painful injuries, horrid diseases, heart-rending tragedies and awful events that might dog your days for the rest of your life on this earth?

Once again, there are at least four reasons: first, so that your sin could be forgiven and in Christ it is; second, so that your guilt could be taken away and in Christ it is; third, so that your servile fear could be replaced by godly fear and in Christ it is; and fourth, so you are enabled to limp your way along and be ushered into the Promised Land and in Christ you are.

He provides you with His Word and Sacraments, not only to bring you into the Israel of God, but to sustain you in His Church. Recall your Baptism daily by drowning the Old Adam and declaring, "I am baptized. And if I am baptized then I belong to Christ." Know yourself ... both the sinner and the saint, and know God's Word ... both the Law that accuses and the Gospel that forgives. Listen as the absolution is announced at the beginning of every service and take it to heart. Receive the Body and Blood of the Incarnate Son of God which given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sin and the strengthening of faith.

Through Word and Sacrament, the Holy Spirit gives you the strength to endure whatever the Lord God may permit to come your way and to remain faithful unto death and be given the crown of Life (Revelation 2:10).

Now consider the Word of God written by the Apostle Paul: "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through Him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us" (Romans 5:1-5). In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.