

Genesis 32:22-30

Two days ago I met a young man, around thirty years of age, who was a wrestler. He was good. From the age of six he wrestled. In the years prior to High School he was undefeated, and as a freshman in High School he was placed on the varsity team. And then it happened...a car crash, in a coma for many days, and when he came out of it, the left side of his body was mostly paralyzed. Now he still wrestles, but with a different opponent. Every day he wrestles, he struggles with tasks such as walking, bathing, and dressing.

In our text for today we meet another such wrestler...Jacob. All of his life he lived up to his name: "supplanter, deceiver," but also in Hebrew the name Jacob can mean "wrestler." And he wrestled well. He defeated his father Isaac, his brother Esau, his relative Laban. Jacob was undefeated as a wrestler. And then it happened. At the brook Jabbok he faced a head-on collision with God. And after that night he was never the same. For one thing, from then on, because God touched his hip socket, Jacob, like the young man I met, would walk with a noticeable limp for the rest of his life. And also this...after that night at the Jabbok, Jacob would not wrestle with men any longer. His wrestling days were over because God changed his name from Jacob to Israel.

As far as we're concerned, I rather doubt if many of us have ever wrestled in our life. That is, I doubt that we have physically gotten down onto a wrestling mat and sweated and grunted trying to pin our opponent. Perhaps a few of us have, but not many. But in another way, each one of us here is a Jacob...a wrestler. We wrestle with many opponents...the weather, farming, molehills in the yard, weeds in the garden, brown recluse spiders in the house. We wrestle with tasks at our job. Sometimes we wrestle with our boss and with other coworkers. We wrestle with school work, with the class bully, at times with the teacher. We even wrestle with those near and dear to us in our home, here at church. And I doubt very much if any of us here are undefeated as a wrestler. Some matches we win, but many we lose.

Today you are at the brook Jabbok. You are, as Jacob was, in the presence of God. He is here to meet you. He is here to confront you. He is here to bless you. And when we leave here today I pray that we leave the same way Jacob left the Jabbok: with new understanding, a new attitude, and realizing that we are truly blessed by God.

Jacob entered that night at the Jabbok preparing to wrestle Esau again. He had stolen Esau's birthright many years earlier. He had won that wrestling match. But now Esau was coming to meet him with hundreds of armed men. Could Jacob beat him again? Or was he about to lose his first match? That night the strangest thing happened. A man wrestled with Jacob all night long in his tent. This was the Angel of the Lord. It was God Himself in human flesh wrestling with Jacob. What a struggle! Arms and legs flying around the room. Sweat dripping, muscles exhausted, lungs gasping for air. Why did God do this? Perhaps for this reason...to teach Jacob a lesson he would never forget--that all of his life, as Jacob had been wrestling with his father, his brother, his relative, he had really been wrestling with God. Jacob's struggles were really not with men; his opponent, all along, had been God.

Isn't that true also for us? We wrestle with this and that in life, but isn't it God whom we are really struggling with? He is desiring to lead us in the way of truth and the path of life, but we so often choose the path which is most appealing to our sinful flesh. And when we wrestle with obstacles in our path, day after day, has not God placed those obstacles there to turn us back to Him?

The young man who wrestles with a sexual disease is really wrestling with God because he chose to disobey God's 6th Commandment. The father who struggles with finding enough time to get everything done during the week may, in fact, be struggling with God because if he is not giving time to God first on Sunday morning and a little each day, then time will always be a struggle for him. The family who wrestles with paying their bills may really be wrestling with God; for if they are not giving to God first from their income, then making ends meet will always be a struggle for them. When children wrestle with their parents they are really wrestling with God. When spouses fight against, and wrestle with each other, is it not God who is the real opponent? When church members do not get along, they are fighting against God who commands us to love and forgive each other. Don't you think it's true in your life (I know it is in mine), that our wrestling matches all along have been with God and not really with others?

After that night at the Jabbok, Jacob was a different man. From now on he would worship God more often than he had before. From now on his attitude, his outlook was different. He came to meet Esau with a humble spirit. Now, as never before, it was God, not Jacob, choosing his path in life.

This does not mean for you, my Christian friends, that we should be passive, docile people. We're in the fight here on earth. We are the Church Militant. Our struggle is against the very powers of hell. We need to learn, however, which battles to fight and not give up on, and which battles to stop fighting. Jacob learned that night at the Jabbok that it was time to stop fighting with Esau. But he also learned that he should always fight for what God had promised him. He would not let go. Even with his hip out of joint, Jacob hung on to God for all he was worth. He had God pinned to the floor in their wrestling match. "Let me go," God said, but Jacob said, "Not unless you bless me." Now come on...how could a mere mortal pin God in a wrestling match? He is almighty; He has no weaknesses. Here's how: because God wanted Jacob to win. God came to the Jabbok that night to bless Jacob, and He would wrestle with him all night long so that Jacob would not give up.

Friend, the same is true for you. God does not want you to fight against His will, but He does want you to fight for, struggle for, wrestle Him for what He has already promised to give you in Christ Jesus. Does your conscience bother you over a sin you have done in your past? Then do not be content to live with that guilt. God promises forgiveness in Jesus. Do not rest until that forgiveness clears your guilty conscience. Hear His words of pardon. Come and take His Holy Supper. Speak to your pastor and demand that he give you what is already yours in Christ; that he release you from the burden of your sin with God's own absolution.

Do you have fears, perhaps secret ones, about the life hereafter? Do you have doubts regarding your eternal soul? Then go to God in prayer and pour out your request to Him, and then dig into His Word. Open the pages of your catechism. Sit with those in Bible Study and ask questions. The confidence St. Paul had about dying in Christ, God desires also for you. Wrestle with Him for it, and do not give up.

Friend, all of God's promises to you in Christ Jesus he desires for you to have in full measure...a stronger faith, a life led by His Holy Spirit, a love for the saints, a love for His Word, the assurance of eternal life, and the hope of heaven. Do not stop wrestling with God for anything He has already promised you in Jesus Christ.

That young man I met Friday could have easily given up. He could have stopped fighting after his crash. He could have stopped wrestling with every obstacle that came his way. But he did not throw in the towel. And now he is a blessing to others, one who can and does encourage.

Jacob is an encouragement for us. God changed his name that night at the Jabbok to Israel: "he who contends, strives, with God...and prevails." And God's beloved people; those led by Moses out of Egypt, led by Joshua into the Promised Land, judged by Gideon, ruled by David, from which the Messiah, your Savior, was born...these people were never called the Children of Jacob; God called them the Children of Israel.

And friends, that is you. You are God's people in Christ. You are beloved of Him. To you He has promised all good things. To you, even though you often strive against His will, He daily and richly forgives all your sins for Jesus' sake. You, too, are Israel's children...as you, also, here at the Jabbok, cling to Christ by faith and do not let go; as you boldly approach Him as dear children approach their dear father; as you wrestle with obstacles in life, yet always trusting in Christ who is your strength and your life. He, your Savior, contended with every enemy of yours--sin, death, and hell--and He prevailed at the cross for you. That is why, clinging to Him and never letting Him go, holding on to Him for dear life as Jacob did in his tent, you will prevail; you will be victorious. He will help you through every obstacle and He will, in the end, give you the final victory. Amen.