

Sermon: Genesis 32:22-30
(See also 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8)

The night was still. No birds sang, no insects chirped; the wind had died. Even the nearby stream barely seemed to make a sound. Jacob watched his family solemnly wade across it and disappear into the darkness on the other side. He was utterly alone.

Then suddenly, a man! A dull smack broke the silence as flesh slapped against flesh, and a weary and desperate Jacob struggled against an unknown assailant. For hours they strove in silence, with only a grunt when the fighting was fiercest and a soft thud when a body was thrown to the dirt.

The struggle we read about in Genesis is the climax of a whole series born out in Jacob's life. Even in the womb he wrestled with his twin brother Esau, grasping his heel as they were dragged into the world. That was how Jacob earned his name: in Hebrew, "Jacob" means "he grasps the heel." Someone who "grasps the heel" was also an expression used to describe a deceitful person, a liar. Jacob lived up to that name and bested his brother through deceit and extortion for all their lives, until he had taken everything his brother had, even his inheritance that he hadn't yet received. But Esau was still the stronger of the two. The last time Jacob saw his brother was when he fled his home to escape Esau's wrath.

And that was when Jacob first encountered Almighty God. As he slept on the side of the road, Jacob saw God face-to-face in a dream. In that dream, God personally promised to bless Jacob and his family and make them prosper. When Jacob awoke, he recognized what had happened and called that place Bethel, meaning "house of God." It was there, in that place, when Jacob first saw the face of God and received his blessing.

Still, Jacob pressed onward, seeking refuge from Esau in the home of his uncle Laban. There was no rest, however, for *Laban* was every bit as deceitful as Jacob himself. For 20 years Jacob struggled to make a living as Laban continually changed the terms of their agreement and cheated him out of his pay. By God's blessing Jacob bested Laban, however, until Laban became convinced that Jacob was cheating *him*. Finally Jacob took his family and fled once again, with an angry Laban in pursuit. Only by smooth talking and even more deceit did Jacob manage to appease Laban and send him away.

Now, however, Jacob had to face the demons of his past. He was headed back home to face his brother Esau, whom he had cheated and deceived so many times before. Word was brought to Jacob that Esau was also coming out to meet him...with an army of 400 men. Terrified of his brother's wrath, Jacob sent wave after wave of servants and gifts, hoping to appease the coming destruction.

Esau continued onward, however, until on the night before his arrival Jacob had no choice but to send away his family and the last of his possessions. A weary, heavy-burdened Jacob was left alone with no home, no family, no possessions. No hope.

And then a man charged. Jacob wrestled this man not for prize, not for glory, not even to stave off his inevitable downfall. Jacob wrestled because it was the only thing left. He couldn't run, for he faced hostility in every direction. He couldn't talk his way out, for his lies had been exposed. He had nothing to lose, nowhere to go; he could only fight.

The two wrestled until dawn broke, and Jacob's mysterious visitor decided to end the match. With a mere touch, the silence was broken once again by the tearing of muscle, the grinding of bones, and a sharp cry as Jacob crumpled over his dislocated hip. Now even his fight had been stripped from him. The victor rose and turned, but with a final burst of strength Jacob lunged toward him and grasped his heel. "Let me go," the man replied simply, "Dawn is here."

"I won't let you," Jacob cried, desperation in his blood-shot eyes. The man with the power to move bones stopped. Jacob had seen through his disguise; he knew whom he was dealing with. This was Almighty God! The same God who had promised to bless him. Only now...now God was against Jacob. The only real ally Jacob had ever known had just fought against him all night. What kind of sign was this? Was God turning against him, too? Was this same God who had blessed his father and grandfather now turning away from him? "I won't let you go!" Jacob cried, "Not until you bless me!"

"Please," Jacob's expression pleaded, "Please God, don't leave me with nothing." Jacob knew only manipulation and deceit, and those had brought him only hurt and despair. Why should he expect God to give him any different? He didn't know what God was up to, but he knew God was all he had left. And in Jacob's weakness, at the lowest point in his entire life, when he was reduced to a mere *beggar*, the power of God was made manifest.

"You are no longer Jacob," he said, "You are now Israel, the God-wrestler! For you have striven with men and with almighty God, and you have prevailed." At that, the Lord turned and vanished into the hills, leaving him with a promise of safety and a legacy that would be remembered unto eternity.

Just like that, in an instant, Jacob's whole life, his very *identity*, was changed by his encounter with God. For the first time, he received something not by deceit or manipulation, but simply by grace. That unconditional blessing from God changed *everything* for him! You don't have a face-to-face encounter with God like that and walk away unchanged. That's why Jacob named that place Peniel, which means "Face of God."

Jacob's family would become a great nation and be known to the world as the nation of Israel, the God-wrestler. And they were a nation that wrestled, all right. They wrestled against God and his will for them as a nation; they wrestled against the enemies that invaded and ultimately conquered them; they wrestled against the fear that God had abandoned them. But God had not abandoned them. His greatest work in Israel would be accomplished in their hour of greatest need.

Jesus Christ, the God-man, the hope of the entire nation of Israel, was that work. As an Israelite, he wrestled against sin, death, and the power of the devil his whole life. A perfect being alone in a world of darkness, Jesus' entire ministry was one of continual persecution and struggle. In the garden of Gethsemane he came to the end of his rope and begged God, "Please! Take this cup from me!"

Yet only silence answered his plea as Jesus, like Jacob's hip, was ripped apart, dislocated from the Godhead in his suffering on the cross. Jesus succumbed to death, and for a while, it seemed death had prevailed over him. But just as with Jacob, when dawn broke on the third day, God blessed Jesus with a promise and a legacy. In his resurrection from the dead, Jesus was exalted and given the Name Above All names, that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess that he is our God.

And that blessing was not just for Jesus, but for all of his children, as well. Just as Jacob became the father of the nation of Israel, so Jesus is the Lord of the Church, his holy nation. Jesus Christ, in his moment of greatest weakness, won for you forgiveness of sins. And in his moment of triumph over death, he won for you eternal life.

God's power is continually made perfect in weakness in Scripture. That's how he operates—it's completely counter to the wisdom of our world. God doesn't work through the strength and intelligence of men, but rather through our weakness and foolishness. He will often wait until a person is sufficiently weak before he chooses to act, even if that means he has to wrestle them himself to get 'em there.

So what about you? Have you been wrestling with God lately? Probably not in as direct a fashion as Jacob, but ask yourself for a moment: where do you feel weak? Maybe you're struggling to figure out how to pay the bills this month. Maybe you're worried about your health, and it feels like your body is failing bit-by-bit around you. Maybe you're wrestling with friends or family members in a strained relationship. We pray against these things in church and in our own lives, but that's probably why we always add that God's will, and not ours, be done: because maybe God is using these things in your life to wrestle you down to where he wants you. Yes, these things can be painful; yes, these things can be bad; but God promises to discipline those he loves, even though discipline sometimes hurts.

Did God love Jacob? Of course he did. Did it hurt and confuse Jacob when he realized that God had attacked him in the middle of the night? Of course it did. In fact, that dislocated hip that Jacob got never healed—he walked with a limp the rest of his days. Yet through that weakness, God did amazing things.

Does God love you? Of course he does. Does God know what he's doing when he allows your health or your finances or your relationships to fail? Of course he does. Yet God tells us that his power is made perfect in weakness.

Even the apostle Paul had to live with some sort of "thorn in the flesh." He doesn't tell us what it is, but he describes it as something that will never go away, even though he prays for it to. And what does Paul do in response? He praises God. He thanks God for making him weak, because God's power is made perfect in weakness. Isn't that something?

And look at the story of Job! What glorified God more: the praises of a rich man with a stable home and happy family? Or the praises of a broken man, who had lost it all, who recognized that everything he has is God's to give and take away? Job was both, yet God was clearly most glorified when Job remained faithful even when he'd lost everything.

What you have from God is better than any treasure, even than your own bodily health: you have the promise of eternal life. You have a share in Christ's legacy, that he who gave himself for you is still with you. And best of all, you have full assurance that no trial, no pain, no thorn in the flesh will last forever; that on the Last Day, God will usher us into eternal life free of all of that stuff. You may wrestle with God and with man, but take heart, for it's that struggle that defines the church, the new Israel, and it is from the pit of that struggle that God's greatest blessings emerge. In Jesus' name, amen.