


***“Wrestling with God”***  
**Sunday, August 6<sup>th</sup>, 2017**  
**9<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**

**#4 of 4: Jacob: God’s Unlikely Choice**

 **Genesis 32:22-31 (NRSV)**

**Jacob Wrestles at Penuel**

The same night he got up 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.

Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.

When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.

Then he said, *“Let me go, for the day is breaking.”*

But Jacob said, *“I will not let you go, unless you bless me.”*

So, he said to him, *“What is your name?”*

And he said, *“Jacob.”*

Then the man said, *“You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.”*

Then Jacob asked him, *“Please tell me your name.”*

But he said, *“Why is it that you ask my name?”*

And there he blessed him.

So, Jacob called 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 Penuel, limping because of his hip.

**This is the Word of God for the people of God.**

***Thanks, be to God.***

***[2<sup>ND</sup> Service: Affirmation of Faith]***

**[MESSAGE]**

Wow! Jacob is quite a character in the grand story of the origins of the Chosen People.

It's important that Jacob be portrayed as a hero, despite his flaws and failures.

In this turning-point story, Jacob wrestles with "*a man*."

Although the text describes Jacob's opponent as a man, this "*man*" also blesses him, represents the face of God, and identifies himself as supernatural.

The Bible frequently identifies the "*angel*" of God with God himself.

So, the fact that Jacob wrestles with God and prevails gives him unparalleled stature as the heroic patriarch.

We also need to remember that Jacob fled The Promised Land when he ran to escape from his brother Esau.

Esau, as a descendant of Abraham and Isaac, remained in and cared for the land that God promised to the people

This story begins Jacob's return home.

**Let us pray...** Lord, we come to your word today and find a story of unexpected redemption. Jacob is portrayed as a hero despite his repeated choices to defy your guidance. Help us to hear you in this text and notice that there is hope when we turn back to you. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

So, last week we saw Jacob as the victim of Laban's deceit and recognized the irony in this little bit of karma that is to blame for Jacob's circumstances:

The family conflict stirred up between Leah, Rachel, and their servants resulted in the birth of seventy children and grandchildren.

Jacob's wealth is based on an agreement he made with Laban that gave Jacob all the spotted and speckled livestock.

What Laban didn't know is that Jacob used magical means to multiply these while suppressing the fertility of the solid colored stock.

Now that Jacob is a success on his own and much time has passed, he decides to return home.

But, as he gets close to Esau, Jacob is justifiably terrified since Esau's last words were that he would kill Jacob for stealing his birthright.

He sends messengers to Esau saying that he has returned, that he is very wealthy now, and that he seeks peace with his brother.

They return to tell Jacob that Esau is on his way with an army of 400 men.

Jacob is really scared now and he prays for God's help, but he doesn't wait for God to answer.

Instead, he takes matters into his own hands and divides his flocks, his herds, and all he has so that when Esau comes to destroy one group, the other group can escape.

Then he sends his messengers back to Esau with half of the first group as a peace offering.

This is where we begin the story today.

Jacob has asked God for help, then taken it upon himself to solve his problem, and then he flees across the river anyway.

Not only does he lack faith in his own plan for survival, he has no faith in God.

Is it any surprise that he finds himself in a wrestling match with this man/angel/God?

For me, this is where the story gets interesting.

Think about it, Exodus 33:19 tells us that no one can see God and live.

Yet, in today's story we hear that Jacob wrestled with a man/angel/God who gives him a blessing **and** a permanent limp.

And Jacob claims to have seen God "face to face."

That is remarkable enough.

Then we add in the fact that Jacob *seems* to have won the wrestling match...**He "beat" God!**

**Well, that's just amazing!**

Then I got to thinking about what it might really mean to "*wrestle*" with God.

How many times have we come upon a difficult Scripture passage and wrestled with it?

God's Word challenges us or bewilders us or confuses us, so we wrestle with it until "*we prevail*" in our understanding of it.

Then there are those times when we hear God calling us to something we want to resist and we argue with God, we wrestle with the call.

In the end, "*we prevail*" as our decision is made after the wrestling match.

Jacob asked for God's help and then he went ahead and "handled" things himself instead of waiting for God to answer his prayer.

Gee, I wonder if any of us have ever done something like that...Surely not.

Then Jacob runs away to hide from his problem; none of us would ever do that.

Maybe this man/angel/God really represents the problems Jacob has failed to deal with; maybe the struggle he faces is of his own making.

Maybe Jacob only *thinks* he has prevailed in this cosmic wrestling match.

It seems unlikely that Jacob could really beat God at anything; yet, that's what the story says.

But, just suppose that Jacob was led through this process for a reason that he doesn't realize.

Just suppose that God let him **think** he won.

After all, Jacob's opponent is quick to offer a blessing; one that only God could offer.

This is where Jacob is re-named "Israel"; a name that means to have striven with God and with humans and prevailed.

That is an important distinction for the Chosen People to carry with them.

While Jacob focuses on having seen God and lived, he seems to forget that God managed to inflict a permanent reminder – the limp that will hobble him the rest of his life.

Jacob fails to get his opponent's name; consistent with the Hebrew belief that God must never be named.



And dawn arrives before Jacob can really see  
clearly who was calling the shots.

It seems to me that Jacob ended up right where God  
wanted him to be.

As this part of his story ends, Jacob limps away  
once again transformed.

He will never be the same again.

Each step he takes is marked by the divine touch he  
received from The Wrestler.

His limp will always remind him and his tribe that  
he prevailed.

But, we will notice that maybe it was God who  
prevailed after all.

I feel a little foolish now for those times when I  
wrestled with God or argued with God.

How many times did I think that I had won an  
argument with God?

When did I take matters into my own hands and  
not wait for God's help?

How easy it is to think that we made the right decisions all by ourselves.

Looking back, maybe we should realize that it was God who prevailed all along.

And much of the time, God accomplished the task in spite of our best efforts to mess things up.

Looking forward, though, I think we will continue to wrestle against God.

We will continue to press our luck, thinking that *“this time things will be different and I’ll get my own way.”*

Like Jacob, we may walk away with a “permanent limp.”

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**