

August 2, 2020: Genesis 32:22-31 (Proper 13)

The Bible has it all: drama, suspense, mystery, high adventure, clashing armies, even Big Time Wrestling. Jacob's story, in Genesis Chapters 25 through 36, is epic. If you have never read it, do so. Jacob is an unlikely hero: he cheated his brother and swindled his father; a devious, narcissistic, "momma's boy,". Until his wrestling match by the Jabbok river no one with any sense would trust Jacob.

After wrestling an unknown adversary all night, at daybreak a curious exchange occurred. As a young man Jacob stole a blessing not rightfully his; here he fought for one that cannot be won. The Wrestler wants to know Jacob's identity and asks his name. The Wrestler immediately changes his name, his identity, to Israel: "one who strives with God". Jacob asked for a blessing, and in his exhaustion and woundedness *receives* a blessing. His cunning and strength could not *take* what can only be *received*. Jacob, then, leaves the place he names Peniel—"the face of God"—to meet the brother who wants him dead.

Jacob in wrestling with God was changed and given new identity, presently the identity of an entire people: Israel, the chosen of God, who have never stopped striving with God and receiving God's blessing. We are the new Israel, the new Covenant people through faith in Jesus Christ. We, too, share the name and identity of Israel-who-wrestles. Wrestling is indispensable to faith—faith in Jesus Christ at-the-center that defines who we are, not the kind of vague, tepid thing society is sometimes willing to tolerate. This is active faith that Jesus Christ is Lord, died for the world's sins and is the resurrected Savior to whom every knee will bow and tongue confess; Jesus, the center of all that was, is and will be, especially one's own life. This kind of muscular, restless faith leads us to wrestle with just about everything; and it leads to our wounding because to truly open our fragile hearts and vulnerable spirits to the sufferings and complexities of the world, let alone the unknowable, unapproachable glory of God, is not for day trippers. Those looking for religion to shield them from sorrow and pain, perplexity and paradox—who object to wrestling with fallen creation and a transcendent God—will be profoundly disappointed in Christianity or will pervert a wrestling faith into an ideology of exclusion. As Christians we do not escape the world of confusion, absurdity and deceit, blissfully unaware of or blind to human suffering and injustice; we do not follow a Lord who wraps us in a protective bubble through which nothing but pleasant thoughts and rose petals can penetrate.

We are called to strive against the suffering, ignorance, malice, and violence in the world; spiritually, we are invited to wrestle with God. We will be wounded in both struggles, and we will be exhausted at times. The outcome is not defeat but blessing: blessing for oneself, for the people of God and for the world. God loves you and the world enough to humble Himself to contend with us; not counting us out but bringing us to maturity, giving us salvation in and through Jesus Christ.

Are you willing to enter the contest, to strive for what is honorable, true, and just? Are you willing to be taken hold of by God, and not let go—no matter your wounds—so that you may finally be vulnerable enough to receive God's Blessing and the identity He gives?

Perhaps with Jacob's story in mind St. Paul in I Corinthians 9 likens our living for Christ to an athletic contest. Paul writes: *Athletes exercise self-control in all things: they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. So, I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air.* As physical and mental training prepares an athlete, so exercising spiritual and moral discipline prepares a Christian to faithfully contend in this life.

Staying in spiritual training can be a challenge during the season of Covid-19. Coming to worship, receiving the nourishing Sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood is not advisable for some. However, we are always able to encounter God through the Scriptures; we may always exercise our prayer muscles many times every day; we can continue to practice acts of charity with those who need support. While the gymnasium of the heart, mind and will found in Christian Education is temporarily closed, we may still read and learn from holy writers. Of course, for many, the internet can be a source to strengthen prayer, worship, study, and perseverance. We offer them so that we will be strengthened, encouraged, and equipped for successful Christian living. We will be blessed for all eternity. Yet we will never receive it if we do not enter the arena of training towards Christian maturity. Through such training and contending we will receive Blessing, like our Father Jacob. Amen.