

Blessed Wrestlings

Given all that we've had to endure these past several months, the lessons we hear appointed for today's meditation probably strike a nerve, *for better or for worse*. We get that these texts are all about prayer and taking our cares, our worries, and our petitions to God. No one will dispute this. *However, there is a real danger of taking these texts and turning them into something they're not.* Why did God wrestle with Jacob? For many Christians, this text often winds up getting turned into a "how-to lesson" on perseverance; outwrestling and outlasting God, as if He's some kind of genie in a lamp that you can strong-arm into doing what you want. *"Wrestle with God; stick it out, fight hard, and stand your ground. Keep on fighting. Work God into submission so that rewards you and blesses you...just like He did with Jacob."* Well...not to burst your bubble, but that's **not** exactly the meaning here. What about those times when you wrestle and struggle with God, *and yet you still "lose"?* What about those times when your prayers go seemingly "unanswered"? I'm reminded of a cartoon I recently saw. Everyone is gathered at the cemetery around the casket. The pastor says to the assembly, *"We are gathered here today because your prayers weren't answered."* We know that this isn't true, *but it certainly feels like it sometimes, doesn't it?*

So... why did God wrestle with Jacob? What does this mean? What is God endeavoring to teach us with this account? A little background helps. For those of you who need a refresher, Jacob was the younger twin brother of Esau, and there was *a lot of bad blood* between the two (which was primarily Jacob's fault). Jacob wasn't exactly a good guy. He certainly wasn't a good brother. Needless to say, after Jacob tricks his poor old dad into thinking that he was blessing Esau, Jacob takes the blessing and gets out of Dodge. He has to. Esau is beyond angry. He wants to *kill* his brother, and Jacob isn't exactly the fighting type. He takes his blessing and heads for the hills. Fast-forward a few decades, and Jacob is married to not one, but two ladies—Rachel and Leah. He has a whole slew of kids along with all kinds of servants and wealth and goods. All these years later, and Jacob is now attempting to return home, not because he's homesick, but because he'd worn out his welcome with his father-in-law. Jacob is simply on the lam from an angry father-in-law. (Don't feel sorry for the father-in-law! He was a dishonest jerk too!)

Anyway... Jacob and his household find themselves on the river's edge that separated his homeland—the Promised Land—from the foreign land he'd been calling home for the past several decades. He wants to cross over into this good land; the land that had been promised to his grandpa Abraham and father Isaac and to him, by virtue of the blessing he stole... *but he was afraid*. He was sure Esau still held a grudge even after all these years. He was sure that Esau would kill him and his family on sight and plunder all his goods. So Jacob devises a plan. Rather

than trusting in God's Word and Promise, Jacob takes matters into his own hands. He'll split the party up into two—half and half. The idea was that Esau may get one, but he can't get both. It's after Jacob gets done sending both parties across the river under the cover of darkness that he lays down to get some rest. Notice: He's not with either party! What a guy, right?! All alone, Jacob lies down to get a little shut-eye. This is when God *actually/physically* comes to him and wrestles with him... *all night long*.

And you know how the rest of the story goes. After hours and hours of this brutal wrestling match, Jacob *finally* gets God in a leg-lock and demands that He tell him His name and give him a blessing. (He still doesn't know he's wrestling with God.) And how does God respond? He blesses Jacob, "*Because you have striven/struggled/wrestled with God and man and have prevailed.*" Okay...so the moral of the story is to fight and wrestle with God until you get your way? **NO! That's not what this is teaching us.** I know that's what we want to hear, but that's not the point of the story. Remember: Jacob was struggling and wrestling with *doubt*. He believed God and His blessings/promises (at least he believed that he believed God and His promises), and yet his prayers and actions revealed the fact that *he really didn't trust God*. He was afraid. He doubted. So God takes on human form and wrestles with Jacob (and lets him win) all so that God can teach Jacob a profound lesson on trust.

The lesson God was teaching Jacob (and is still teaching us today): God **NEVER** forgets His promises! God **NEVER** forgets His blessings! God had already promised that He would bless Jacob, and Esau wasn't going to be able to undo that. Did you notice in this account that the blessing Jacob receives is a *new name*? He didn't receive a blessing of "more stuff." It wasn't a material blessing, like God gave him winning lottery numbers or a nice hunk of property or made him ten years younger. It wasn't anything like that. In fact, you could even go further and state that Jacob's blessing had *already* been given to him before when God Himself had first promised to make his name and his family line great. Again, when life got tough and Jacob took his eyes and ears off of God, *Jacob doubted this blessing/promise*. All he saw/thought about was Esau and the trouble that he was sure was awaiting him. God doesn't bless Jacob with "stuff." He blesses Jacob with a new name—*Israel*—which means "*one who wrestled with/struggled with God.*" He also "blesses" Jacob with a *bum hip*, which he most-likely had the rest of his life. We're never told that he was healed.

How is any of this a blessing?! And that question right there reveals our lack of understanding of what it means to be *truly blessed by God*. Jacob had a new name. Every time he heard that new name; every time he had to limp somewhere, he remembered his face-to-face encounter with God. "*I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered.*" More than that, *he remembered God's promises and blessings*. God was merciful and gracious to

him. By means of this struggle, God was able to remind Jacob of the blessings that He had *already* promised him. Jacob—Israel—was a changed man; *a new man*; a man who truly walked (or limped, as the case may be) by faith.

Folks: In closing I'm not going to take the typical tact and ask you what things you struggle with and wrestle with. "*Be like Jacob and persevere as you wrestle with God in prayer, and you will overcome.*" That may be true. Then again...it may not be true. Believe it or not, but there are some things you simply can't control. There are some things you simply can't overcome or beat, *no matter how hard you try*. This past year is full of prime examples. Sometimes God says "no," and that's His final answer. Besides, if anything, these lessons show us that to be like Jacob isn't exactly something we should strive for. Now, the lowly woman who did trust in the mercy and the promises of God and persisted, *even when it seemed like Jesus was against her?* Sure. Absolutely. She's a great model of faith. Jacob, on the other hand? I hope and pray that it doesn't take a *whooping* to get you to wake up and remember God's promises and hold fast to them in faith. Jacob didn't trust in God's blessed promise, but the man who bore the new name "Israel" did.

And that's where we want to focus today and going forward. *You bear a new name*. You bear the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God Himself put that name upon your forehead and upon your heart in Holy Baptism. Hold fast to Him. Hold fast to the blessing that He has *already* blessed you with in Christ. No matter how bad things may get, *you belong to Christ*. You are a child and heir of almighty God, and nothing and no one can ever take that from you; not COVID, not murder hornets or blizzards or crooked government or wicked men. Not even the gates of hell can prevail against our Lord's Promise to you!

And I say all this with good reason. I live in the same fallen and sinful world that you do. There are going to be times that it seems like everyone is against you. There are going to be times that you will *doubt and despair*. There are going to be times that you will not let God work, be it His way or on His time schedule, firmly convinced that you know better than God; firmly convinced that He needs your help. *There are going to be times that it seems like even God is against you. He's not*. The Father turned against Christ so that He would never have to turn against you. He hasn't forgotten the promises He made to you in Holy Baptism. The Lamb of God stands before the Father's throne for the rest of eternity, bearing the wounds of His crucifixion, *forever reminding His Father that all our debt has been paid in full by Him*. It is finished, once and for all. Baptized into this victorious death and resurrection, this is God's unfailing and eternal promise to you. This is your blessing. May you never lose sight of or let go of this great gift.

AMEN