

GET A GRIP ON GOD
22nd SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

GEN 32:22-30
OCT 16, 2016

²² The same night he arose and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³ He took them and sent them across the stream, and everything else that he had. ²⁴ And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. ²⁵ When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. ²⁶ Then he said, "Let me go, for the day has broken." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." ²⁷ And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." ²⁸ Then he said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered."

I don't like either scary movies or roller coasters
so I have never done this,
but I could see why teenagers might go to either as a date.
It is good excuse to hold on tight to each other.
In text, which is one of stranger stories in Bible,
I think this is what God is doing with Jacob.
He is getting him to hold on tight to him.
I don't expect we will ever have literal wrestling match with God
but our text shows us what can happen
when we have spiritual struggles in life.

OUR STRUGGLES DO NOT ASSURE GODS' BLESSINGS.
OUR WEAKNESS SHOWS WE MUST DEPEND ON GOD.
GOD HUMBLER HIMSELF SO WE CAN HOLD ON TO HIM.

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President Regan had a phrase for his policy on mutual arms reductions with Russia: trust but verify.
This could also describe Jacob's relationship with God.
Starting even before birth, God promised Jacob his blessings.
He promised he would dominate his brother, Esau,

and that he would inherit the covenant promises
first given to his father, Abraham, including prosperity,
and a large family and also being a blessing to others,
which included being ancestor of the Messiah.

Like Abraham, he knew what God wanted for him
but he couldn't resist trying to make sure it happened
by his own efforts as he struggled with others
to get what God had promised all along.

When he is asked in text what his name is, he says Jacob,
which means something like "tricky"

He got that name because when he was born
it seemed like he was trying to grab and wrestle
with his twin brother Esau to be born first.

Later, he claimed that his name was not Jacob but Esau
when he was trying to grab the best blessing
by tricking his Father who favored Esau.

This is why Esau threatened to kill him and he had to run away
to live his uncle Laban. There this tricker met his match.

He and Uncle Laban traded tricks as Jacob struggled to get
Laban's daughters, Rachel and Leah as his wives
and to get large herds of his own livestock.

His wives struggled with each other too as they had 11 sons.
It came to the point that he didn't get along with uncle Laban
anymore and left, with more tricks along the way.

Now, in this text, he is almost back home.

In verses before text he prays to God and acknowledges
that it is because of God's promises and blessings
that he has everything he has.

But still, he is very worried about his meeting up with Esau
and so he does several things to stay safe.

including getting up in the middle of the night
to reposition his family and possessions.

He was carefully making and working out plans.

At this time of year, we are going to work on spiritual life plans.

We will think about what God wants for us in our lives,
blessings he wants to give through word & sacraments,
including lives that reflect his love.

And so we will think about what we want to do.

We make our plans in view of what God wants for us,
but like Jacob we need to be careful not to act as if God is
our navigator & copilot but we are still in drivers seat.

Devil would love to sabotage our prayers and Bible study,
donations and service, and every effort to follow Jesus
by tricking us into thinking because of all this
we especially deserve God's favor.

In Congregation, we believe God wants us to serve & grow
but it may seem there is some trick to accomplishing this
and we need some special schemes to make it happen,
or we need to manipulate some things behind the scenes
just to make sure things go the way they should.

We may even end up like boys riding tandem bicycle up a hill.
At top, one puffing says that was a very steep hill.

Other says, it sure was. If he hadn't kept brakes on
the whole time they may have rolled back down.

We can to things thinking we are helping God do his thing
when really we need to relax & stop interfering.

We always have to remember why we do what we do:
not so God will bless us but because he already has.

It is especially in times of stress or crisis, like for Jacob,
when guilt or fear causes loneliness or insecurity
and we end up wrestling with God
and trying to grab control of our lives.

But, as for Jacob,

OUR WEAKNESS SHOWS WE MUST DEPEND ON GOD.

²⁴ And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the
breaking of the day. ²⁵ When the man saw that he did not prevail
against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of
joint as he wrestled with him. ²⁶ Then he said, "Let me go, for the day
has broken." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless
me."

v. 24 says Jacob is left alone.

Maybe, like Jesus, he uses this time alone for fervent prayer.
but surely he is feeling very alone.

Then, all of sudden, he is jumped by man wrestling with him.

We don't know at first who this is, nor does Jacob.

Has he been sent by Esau to kill him?

He desperately struggles in the dark.

v. 25 literally says "he saw that he did not prevail against him."

This was true for both of the "he"s here.

Jacob seems to be pretty good wrestler.

Up to now he has been elbowing his way to what he wants

His Achilles heel it seems is his hip.
but still he holds on for all he is worth with his hands.
And it turns out, the one he is holding on to is God.
But God who had revealed himself to him before at Bethel
and just before this showed his angels were with Jacob,
this time conceals himself in the darkness.

When I got engaged, I had had a beard for years
which caused my mother-in-law to remark,
You can't marry him, you have never seen his face.
To which I replied, "This is my face."
In v. 30, Jacob says, "I have seen God face to face."
What did he see? It was dark. The face God shows us
in this life is not glorious but darkened.

We are not told why God does this.
In our lives, too, there may be strange, unexplained things.
It may seem all our efforts are for nothing
and even strangers are out to get us.
It may seem even God is working against us
or what he demands of us is too hard or unpleasant.
If God loves me, why is life so hard?

We may feel all alone, as if God himself has abandoned us
because of our ways that offend everyone.
But for Jacob this is when God is right there with him
without his realizing it.
And if he had, maybe he would have stopped struggling.
In our lives too, taking up our cross to follow Jesus is a struggle.
Difficulties in life can make us question our faith
or our relationship with God
or even if this is the God we want to believe in.

It can happen in relationships that one who is most annoying
but won't leave us alone is one we end closest too
as when a child fights with a parent until after grown up,
or girl falls in love with boy she couldn't stand at first.

God wrestles with us so we learn to trust him in him to bless us
even when everything is dark and difficult.
and to hold on to him no matter what.

Verse after text says after this he limps,
this is an enduring reminder of his weakness.
now it will be hard for him to run away from Esau
as he did before and as he ran away from Laban.
He will have to trust in God to take care of him.

God allows us also to have difficulties and weaknesses
that remind us of how we have to rely on him every day.
But God still works and blesses in spite of weaknesses.
In fact, God himself works through weakness.

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²⁸ Then he said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." ²⁹

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In musical "Oklahoma" rowdy Ado Annie say she when she
get into wrestling matches with boys she lets them win.

Fathers may get into wrestling matches or other contests
with their kids and let them win.

They win what the "loser" wanted them to have all along.

Why did Jacob win this wrestling match with God himself?
because that is what God wanted all along.

When Jacob confesses who he really is, Jacob the tricker.
he is given a new identity: Israel

The "el" part is the name of God.

The "Isra" part is more difficult. It means struggle & control.

All through his life Jacob has struggled to control others
and has struggled with God for control as well.

But how can it be true that he grabs and gets a grip on God
and can confidently lay claim to his blessings?

It is only because God graciously allows him to.

God, like a gentle father, allows us to get our way with him,
and he cannot resist our cries for help or forgiveness.

All this is because God comes to us as this man who is Jesus.

a weak man made to be a helpless infant in a manger,
a man who willingly suffered hunger & homelessness

although he was the creator of everything,

a man who endured ridicule and rejection

even though he is true and holy,

a man who was beaten and crucified by rulers

even though he is the Judge of the universe

a man who died even though he is the source of life.

He did this so in our struggles with God we can come out on top

And so that when we see God face to face
we will be delivered from our sins and death.
Jacob says he has seen God. We too see this same God.
Letter to the Hebrews says: we see him who for a little while
was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus,
crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death,
so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.
We see this Jesus when he comes to us
hidden in the bread and wine of Holy Communion
so that we too can hold on to him & receive his blessing
when we confess our identity as sinners.
God puts his name on us and gives us new identity in baptism,
showing he claims us for a relationship with him
and we can confidently claim his blessings.
God chooses to work through means of his word & sacraments
so that rather than forcing himself on us he can be resisted
because what we want from us is genuine faith & love.
And so we put our faith totally in him & cling to his blessings.
Like Jacob, we rightly expect to die because of
how we have treated God and our brothers
but God has let himself be defeated and die instead
so we can go to our homeland in heaven without fear.
No matter what fears & failures, hostility & weaknesses
we struggle with, we have this to hold on to.

Because of the good plans God has for us & has promised us,
we make plans for how we will follow him
and often this is struggle against ourselves and others.
OUR STRUGGLES DO NOT ASSURE GODS' BLESSINGS.
We must struggle to trust totally in what God does for us
rather than what we do for God.
To help us to this, God lets us experience weakness.
OUR WEAKNESS SHOWS WE MUST DEPEND ON GOD.
as we limp through life and even as we serve him.
GOD HUMBLER HIMSELF SO WE CAN HOLD ON TO HIM.
God may work in our lives in strange & mysterious ways
but because of the way he has worked through Jesus
he has humbled himself so that we can we can have faith
which keeps a firm grip on him because he holds to us
as we grab on to him to receive his blessings now & forever.