

“The Persistence and Perseverance of Faith”

Genesis 32:22-32; Matthew 15:21-28

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Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Rifle, Colorado

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I invite you to draw your attention with me to the Old Testament reading for today. In that reading, God’s word presents an episode in the life of Jacob. This episode teaches us about the persistence and perseverance of faith. Faith perseveres and persists against great enemies of faith and the soul, which are despair and acquiescence, or giving-up and giving-in. It does so in the strength of God’s promises and in the Spirit of God.

Now by resisting giving-in, I do not mean just being stubborn for the sake of being stubborn. God’s word is involved. So, giving-in has to do with giving-up in believing in God’s faithfulness, in believing in God’s promises, and in holding to what is true and right according to God’s word.

Let’s get into the story. Jacob was the son of Isaac, the grandson of Abraham. In this episode, a “man” wrestled with Jacob and changed his name from Jacob to Israel. Jacob, therefore, became the father of the people of Israel.

There are different takes on what the name “Israel” is supposed to mean. The King James tradition says “prince of God.” The version of this story that we read from the ESV, however, says that God changed his name to Israel because Jacob had “struggled with God and with men and had prevailed” (Genesis 32:28). Thus, the name Israel can also mean something like he who strives with God or God strives, as the ESV and NASB treat it.

In this episode, Jacob is on his way back to the promised land, the land of Canaan, with his whole household. His household consisted of his wives, his eleven sons and daughter Dinah, and all of his live-stock and wealth. He had accumulated all of those things by the grace of God in a place called Haran. He had just left Haran where his uncle Laban had deceived him to hold him captive for twenty years and benefit from Jacob’s labors and God’s blessing that rested on Jacob.

Laban was the brother of Jacob’s mother Rebekah. Isaac, largely due to Rebekah’s insistence, had sent Jacob to Haran to find a wife from Abraham’s clan that had settled there (Genesis 28:1-2). Laban was the grand-nephew of Abraham. So Isaac and Rebekah instructed Jacob to go to Haran to find a wife from among Laban’s daughters.

Jacob has now left Laban and is on his way back to the land of Canaan (Genesis 31:17). As Jacob got nearer to the promised land, he also got closer to the land where his older brother Esau had settled. It was Esau who gave up his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of stew (Genesis 25:29-34). Jacob had also tricked Esau out of the blessing from Isaac that would have ordinarily come to the oldest son, though that whole episode—which we are not going to go into here—was Jacob’s mother Rebekah’s idea (Genesis 27). The point here is that Esau was quite angry with Jacob when all that happened and had threatened to kill him once Isaac was dead (Genesis 27:41). It is twenty years later and Jacob is on his way to an inevitable meeting with Esau. Esau had also grown in character over the years.

So, our episode is sandwiched between two difficult realities in Jacob’s life. On the one hand, there was Laban. The Scripture says this: “When it was told Laban . . . that Jacob had fled, [Laban] took his kinsmen with him and pursued [Jacob] for seven days. . . . And Laban overtook Jacob” (Genesis 31:22-23, 25 ESV). On the other hand there was this regarding Esau: “[T]he messengers [whom Jacob had sent to Esau] returned to Jacob saying, ‘We came to your brother

Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and there are four hundred men with him” (Genesis 32:6 ESV). When Jacob heard this, he was greatly afraid, as you can well imagine that he would be (Genesis 32:6).

Jacob was escaping from Laban who had kept Jacob captive by deceit and had treated him oppressively and unjustly for twenty years. He was pursuing Jacob to take from him his wives and children and all of his possessions because Laban thought they all belonged to him. But as Jacob was escaping Laban, Esau was coming to him with four hundred men. Jacob would escape Laban because God had warned Laban not to do anything evil to Jacob and his household. But Jacob still had to face Esau. Things turned out well between Jacob and Esau. That is a good story that you can read about in Genesis 33.

During the night Jacob sent Rachel and Leah, his two wives, and their two maid-servants Bilhah and Zilpah, who had also become his wives—that’s a long story but you can read about it in Genesis 29 and 30—and his eleven sons and sent them across the brook called Jabbock. Jacob remained behind and was now alone (Genesis 32:24).

Then the Scripture says that a “man” wrestled with Jacob until the sun began to rise (Genesis 32:24). When that “man” realized that the sun was rising and that he was not prevailing against Jacob, he touched Jacob in the hip and put his hip out of joint. Still, Jacob did not give-up. The “man” told Jacob to let him go (Genesis 32:25-26). Jacob said, “I will not let you go until you bless me” (Genesis 32:26). Then the “man” asked Jacob his name and then changed Jacob’s name to Israel because Jacob had “contended with God and with men and had prevailed” (Genesis 32:28). In the context, the word “prevailed” has the idea of enduring, persevering, not giving-in or giving-up in the struggle. It is not really about power, at least not in any physical sense. It was about the “power” and tenacity of faith, in which faith in God on account of His promises does not give-up or give-in, does not despair or acquiesce.

In light of Jacob’s story, we can easily see the struggle with man part. He had struggled with the deceitfulness and oppressiveness of his uncle Laban for twenty years. In that struggle, he had not given-up on God’s promises and did not acquiesce to Laban.

But maybe we have difficulty with the struggle with God part. Does faith in God struggle with God? Maybe there is an idea that faith is purely passive, that it just kind of lies there. It is passive in the sense that it is generated in us by God and receives God’s promises. But this same faith is also active and is engaged in a struggle with God.

This comes into view with respect to this mysterious “man” that Jacob “wrestled” with. This man sought out Jacob. He found Jacob and came to him. Jacob did not find him. And he came to Jacob and began to wrestle with him. This wrestling match was physical but its point did not rest on the physical plane. It had to do with the prevailing of faith against despair. In the tenacity of faith in God, Jacob would not given-up in the struggle with God. The not giving-up was captured in this: “I will not let you go until you bless me” (Genesis 32:26 ESV). The man had come to Jacob to strengthen his faith and to show to Jacob the perseverance and persistence of faith with God.

But who was this “man?” We see that Scripture does call him a man and that he physically wrestled with Jacob. He really was a man. He had a human body, human hands. He spoke with a human voice. Yet, he seems to come out of nowhere.

But then he put Jacob’s hip out of joint. He did this by simply touching Jacob’s hip. The implication is that there was more than just a physical power at work there. This man possessed a power that humans do not possess.

And then the man exercised an authority to change Jacob’s name. This name change

involved Jacob's destiny in relation to God. You shall be called Israel. It also involved the naming of the great people that would descend from Jacob through his sons according to God's promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This is critically important because God had promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that a certain blessing would come to all nations through their offspring, that is, out of this great people (Genesis 12:1-3; 26:4-5; 28:14-15). This blessing would be the promised Messiah, who was at the heart and center of the promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. There is nothing less than God's plan of redemption for all human beings involved here. So this man changes Jacob's name in relation to all of this. Who has the authority to do such a thing? The man also blessed Jacob (Genesis 32:29). Who has the authority to do that?

The understanding of who this man was was clinched when Jacob asked this man his name. The man responded by saying, "Why do you ask my name?" This response has mystery to it which is precisely meant to point to who he was. The mystery points to his being divine, that is being God. Jacob understood this. So, he called the name of that place "peniel." This word means "face of God" in Hebrew. Jacob said that "he had seen God face to face and had survived" (Genesis 32:30). This man, therefore, was God, who had come to him and wrestled with him in the form of a man, a true human being.

It is somewhat difficult to know just exactly how to talk about this, what language to use. It was an epiphany of the Son of God in human flesh long before He was born at Bethlehem. Yet, there He was, wrestling with Jacob and changing His name to Israel as He Himself was the One who was at the center of the promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He was wrestling with Jacob to establish him in the faith in God's promises and faithfulness and not to give-up even as Jacob wrestles with God.

The wrestling with God is seen, therefore, because the man is God and wrestles with Jacob. This opens up a broader picture. The broader picture involves the circumstances of life and the difficulties, sorrows, pains, struggles, and encounters with the wickedness of fallen human beings we encounter. In such things, the struggle can be with human beings, but it is also with God.

Jacob had gone to Laban. Jacob had been honest and straight-forward with Laban. But Laban tricked him, and lied to him, and deceived him. Later, Laban treated Jacob oppressively and unfairly and would have taken everything away from Jacob had not God intervened directly and warned Laban. Up until that point, Jacob could have thought: "Where is God?" Yet, Jacob did not give-up. God was teaching him in all of this. He had been somewhat cocky when he left his father and mother to go to Laban to find a wife. He returned humble after twenty years of serving Laban, who had deceived him ten times (Genesis 31:41). Jacob had learned to confess to God: "I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff in my hand I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps of people and livestock" (Genesis 32:10).

Life does present a struggle when it comes to things that happen. The biggest question in the struggle is "where is God." This question is concretized in the wrestling match between the man and Jacob. It is concretized in the difficulties we face. The man came to Jacob to strengthen Jacob in the perseverance and persistence of faith by wrestling with him. The man wrestled with Jacob, but Jacob would not give-in; he would not give-up in wrestling with Him. And the substance of this not giving-up was "I will not let you go until you bless me." I will not let you go until the light dawns through this darkness. I will not let you go until you show me the path out of this difficult circumstance. I will not let you go until your promises prevail and life arises

out of death. Despair threatens us. But faith does not give-up or give-in with this: I will not let you go until you bless me. I will not let go until you cause the light to shine in the midst of this darkness.

Christ Himself is this light that shines in the darkness as He wrestles with you and you with Him in the struggles you face. Your faith in Him will triumph in the end because He triumphs in the end. So don't give-up and don't give-in. God is not letting go of you in the struggle because of Jesus. In your not letting go of Jesus, you are not letting go of God and all that God has to give in Him. Amen.