

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

²⁴And Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day.(Genesis 32:22-31)

This is the time of year when a preacher's thoughts often turn toward Martin Luther. For next Sunday will be Reformation Sunday, when Rev. Dr. David Lotz will take the sacred desk here at Immanuel and preach to us one of his magnificent Reformation sermons. Meanwhile, I too am thinking of Luther. Especially, this morning's story of Jacob wrestling with God inclines me toward Martin Luther of old, for that preacher loved this story and took great comfort in it.

There is a passage in St. Paul's letter to the Galatians in which the apostle urges the Galatians to beware of alternative forms of the gospel — what Paul calls “perverting the gospel of Christ.” Paul's fightin' words go thus:

⁶I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel -- ⁷not that there is another gospel, but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. ⁸But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed. ⁹As we have said before, so now I say again, If any one is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed.(Galatians 1:6-9, RSV)

Disregard even Paul if he should preach another Gospel. Disregard even an angel from heaven. Certainly disregard me if I should start preaching another Gospel. Simply chalk it up to madness and gently lead me away from the pulpit. So much for preachers and angels who dare preach a different gospel.

But Luther's interpretation of this morning's story of Jacob wrestling with God is even more radical than this. On Luther's interpretation, even if God himself should preach a different Gospel to you, then wrestle with him, till the daylight breaks and his words of love return.

Now, Jacob of old was a contentious man. He fought with God and he fought with man.

After this morning's liturgy, we are invited downstairs to the undercroft for Coffee Hour. Russell Collins, who was Project Manager for our recently completed Nave Lighting Project, is aiming to show us some fantastic photographs of the construction process for our nave lighting. One of my favorite photos shows the hands of Jesus in our reredos. None of us can see this detail from this distance, but up close you can see the mark of the nails in our Lord's hands.

Another group of photos shows Ann Siemer getting into the Denka Lift basket and being hoisted aloft so that she is entirely level with Jesus, and she is able to gaze at him with the love for Jesus that is so evident in our sister in the Lord.

But what did Jacob do when he saw Jesus? He wrestled with him! That was the nature of Jacob. He was a contentious man.

I just spoke of Jesus. What did Jacob do when he saw *Jesus*? This reference to Jesus is in accordance with Luther's interpretation of the story. If you are going to wrestle with God, then you are going to wrestle with Jesus, because Jesus is God incarnate. So, Luther took the mysterious man in this story to be our Lord Jesus — not an angel, but God himself in human form:

But our opinion is this, that the wrestler is the Lord of glory, God Himself, or God's Son, who was to become incarnate and who appeared

and spoke to the fathers... He Himself, our Lord Jesus Christ, tested Jacob...(Luther, Volume 6 of his 8 volumes of commentary on Genesis.)

Jesus, then, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity who in the fullness of time was born of the Virgin Mary, wrestled with Jacob. And it was the nature of Jacob that he wrestled back!

Only this time, he had to wrestle fair and square. Back when he was a young man, Jacob had been a conniver. For example, he had taken advantage of his brother Esau when that man was at low ebb. It seems that Esau had been working in the field — working until he was faint with hunger. He came home and found Jacob cooking stew, and naturally, he asked for some. And Jacob gave him some stew, but on the condition that Esau give him in return his birthright — his primogeniture, his rights as the first-born.

³²Esau said, ‘Here I am, at death’s door; what use is a birthright to me?’

³³Then Jacob said, ‘First give me your oath’; he gave him his oath and sold his birthright to Jacob. ³⁴Then Jacob gave him some bread and lentil stew; he ate, drank, got up and went away. That was all Esau cared about his birthright.(Genesis 25:32-34, NJB)

And then there was Jacob’s deceit by which he obtained the blessing of his father, Isaac — a blessing that the old man had meant for his first-born son, Esau. Isaac had grown old and blind. Before he died, he wanted to give his blessing to his first-born son, Esau. But Jacob, that deceiver, dressed himself up as if he were his brother. He camouflaged himself to the degree that he wore goat skins on his hands and on his neck, for Esau was a hairy man while Jacob was not, and he wore his brother’s clothes with the scent of the field. Thus he presented himself to his blind old father, and won for himself his father’s blessing. And it was a lovely, important blessing:

²⁷And [Jacob] came near, and kissed [his father, Isaac]: and [Isaac] smelled

the smell of his raiment, and blessed him, and said, See, the smell of my son is as the smell of a field which the LORD hath blessed: ²⁸Therefore God give thee of the dew of heaven, and the fatness of the earth, and plenty of corn and wine: ²⁹Let people serve thee, and nations bow down to thee: be lord over thy brethren, and let thy mother’s sons bow down to thee: cursed be every one that curseth thee, and blessed be he that blesseth thee.(Genesis 27:27-29, KJV)

And, you might already know, it is the way of blessings in the ancient world, that once they are spoken, they cannot be withdrawn.

So, Esau comes home ready for his father’s blessing and finds out that it has already been give to his rascal brother Jacob. In despair, Esau swears that he will kill Jacob:

And Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing wherewith his father blessed him: and Esau said in his heart, The days of mourning for my father are at hand; then will I slay my brother Jacob.(Gen 27:41, KJV)

These things are the background for this morning’s story. When he was a young man, Jacob had manipulated his brother Esau and unjustly deprived Esau of their father’s blessing. Esau has sworn to kill Jacob. Jacob had fled to a foreign land, where he married, had eleven children, had grown old, and now he wants to return home. The problem is, home means Esau, who hates him.

The one noble thing Jacob does is that as his approaches home, Jacob separates himself from his family. It looks that if Jacob is to die, he hopes that his family might be spared from the wrath of his brother.

So, Jacob is alone and it is nighttime. He has no family to comfort him. The nighttime is quiet, with nothing to distract him. And it comes to pass that Jacob wrestles with God.

I wonder: Perhaps you have wrestled with God too. After all, from time to time, you and I find ourselves in a situation like that of Jacob.

We have a guilty past behind us, an unknown future ahead of us, and threats abound in the present. The nighttime sky reminds us that this universe is immense, yet we feel alone amidst this vastness. The darkness of the night saddens the soul. Troubling memories from the past haunt us and fears of the future scowl at us. We are discouraged about our work and wonder whether we will ever find a good vocation. We are confused about friendships and wonder whether ultimately we are alone. We have heard bad news — perhaps about our finances, perhaps about our health. We have heard the gospel — maybe just recently, maybe we have heard it all our lives — yet nothing good seems to be working out for us. If amidst all such troubles, you nonetheless can send up a prayer to God, then you are wrestling with God. Wrestle on, Dearhearts. Wrestle on! That is the theme of today’s Bible stories.

And so it is that Luther loves Jacob, that old deceiver, because Jacob wrestles with the Lord. Luther imagines questioning Jacob as Jacob wrestles with Jesus through the long hours of the night. The Lord has used a good wrestling move and has dislocated Jacob’s leg from his hip, the way Marie Kohl’s leg was recently dislocated. Still, Jacob wrestles on:

Why do you not let him go? Your thigh is hurt and you are already lame; what will you do? “I feel no weakness,” says Jacob. Who is strengthening you? “Faith, the promise, and indeed, this weakness of faith.” In this manner God is conquered when faith does not leave off, is not wearied, and does not cease but presses and urges on.

Do you see what Jacob is doing? He is compelling God to be true — not just true to Jacob, but also true to Himself. For God really had blessed Jacob, and God must never prove a liar! In the story of Jacob’s ladder, which took place when Jacob was young, fleeing from Esau, the Lord God almighty had promised good things to Jacob:

¹²And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it. ¹³And, behold, the LORD stood above it, and said, I am the LORD God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac: the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed; ¹⁴And thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and thou shalt spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south: and in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed. ¹⁵And, behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest, and will bring thee again into this land; for I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of.(Gen 28:12-15, KJV)

Now, Jacob is requiring of God that he be a Man of his Word. And there is nothing wrong with that. Indeed, that is a true exercise of faith, to trust that God will be true to his Word. You are baptized (or invited to be baptized). You have received divine promises from the Triune God — promises of forgiveness of sin, of resurrection, or life everlasting. You have the right to declare, “But I am a Christian!” to every force in heaven or on earth who would try to discourage or reject you.

This morning’s Gospel Lesson makes the same point, this time under the category of prayer. The meaning of the parable of the Persistent Widow is not ours to choose. The Bible states the meaning in perfectly clear language:

And he told them a parable, to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.(Luke 18:1)

Never lose heart, Jesus says. He who wrestled with Jacob turns and says to you now: never lose heart. The night will not last forever. Eventually the dawn will come. As it came for Jacob, so it will come for you:

At daybreak, the fight ceases.(Cyril of Alexandria, ACCS II, pg. 220)

Both Jacob and the Persistent Widow are images for us of steadfast faith – yea, stubborn faith – in the goodness of our God. They are pictures for us of the cry of that ancient suffering man Job, who had the faith to cry out:

Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him.(Job 13:15, KJV)

Let me tell you how the story works out. Jacob spends that terrible night wrestling with the Lord. At last the dawn breaks and Jacob emerges from the darkness with a dislocated leg, but also with a blessing from the Lord — a blessing that he won fair and square, not through the deceitful ways of his youth.

And in the Lord’s blessing, Jacob to meet his brother Esau. Their reconciliation scene could bring tears to the eyes, it is so much like that reconciliation between the Prodigal Son and his Loving Father. Esau comes toward Jacob with four hundred men, but does he use those men to attack Jacob? No, Esau leaves his men behind and rushes toward Jacob:

And Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him: and they wept.(Genesis 33:4, KJV)

Listen to two of Luther’s concluding comments on this story of Jacob. The first of these words describes the holy defiance of Jacob, who wrestles with God all the way to victory. Luther imagines the nighttime wrestling conversation between Jacob and Jesus. Luther begins with the accusation of Jesus:

“You must perish, Jacob; you are in for it!” To this Jacob would have replied: “No! that is not God’s will. I shall not perish!” Yes and no there assailed each other very sharply and violently. Such things cannot be adequately expressed by word of

mouth, especially when God Himself is saying: “You will perish!” and the spirit shouts back: “I shall not perish, but live, etc. I was pushed hard so that I was falling, but the Lord helped me (cf. Ps. 118:17, 13).

And the last of Luther’s words is meant for your comfort if you should find yourself wrestling with God, with all the sadness and uncertainty that such combat brings. Luther says this:

The life of the godly appears to be an idle life and without any fruit and worth. But this is our great glory, that we know that our tears and each of the drops that fall from our eyes are numbered by God and that all things are written before the eyes of God and gathered in a golden vessel, so to say (cf. Ps. 56:8).

Now we come forward to the Blessed Sacrament, and in approaching the Table, we approach the One with whom Jacob wrestled, but also the One who numbers every tear that has fallen from your eye. If life should be hard for you now, so that you have known full measure of sighs and tears, know this as well: one day the mystery of these hard times will give way to blessings that you can see and will fill you with joy — joy like unto that of Jacob and Esau who embraced one another with tears of joy.

Always pray, and never lose heart, through the grace and merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.