PRAYER OF THE DAY

P Lord God, our strength, the battle of good and evil rages within and around us, and our ancient foe tempts us with his deceits and empty promises. Keep us steadfast in your Word and, when we fall, raise us again and restore us through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

C Amen.

[Note from Pastor Fryer: Our Midweek Lent Series this year is called “Some of Our Favorite Bible Stories.” People of the congregation submitted their favorite Bible stories to Vicar Caleb Douglas and me, and we mean to preach on them in Lent for our midweek liturgies. This go-round, we will preach on some of the Old Testament stories submitted to us. Next year, we might preach on some of the New Testament stories. This evening’s story is about Jacob wrestling with God.]

HOLY SCRIPTURE

Genesis 32:22-30, RSV

22 The same night [Jacob] arose and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. 23 He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything 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 the hollow of his thigh; and Jacob’s thigh was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. 26 Then he said, “Let me go, for the day is breaking.” 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 more be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.” 29 Then Jacob asked him, “Tell me, I pray, 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 is preserved.”

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

30 So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.”

(Genesis 32:30, RSV)
In his youth, Jacob was pretty much a rascal. But he was a rascal who was blessed by the Lord. By hook or by crook, Jacob wanted that blessing and he got it! He deceived his poor old blind father, Isaac. Jacob tricked the old man into giving the Lord’s blessing to Jacob rather than to Jacob’s older brother, Esau. The poor, misled father’s blessing was a strong one. It went this way:

29 Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother’s sons bow down to you. Cursed be every one who curses you, and blessed be every one who blesses you!” (Genesis 27:29, RSV)

Isaac was appalled when he discovered what Jacob had done, and Esau hated Jacob for it and resolved to kill him. We read about these things in Genesis Chapter 27. So, Jacob was a devious fellow who obtained the Lord’s blessing in a fraudulent way. Nonetheless, he did obtain that blessing. Now, in this evening’s dramatic story, we find Jacob in a life-and-death struggle to honor that blessing.

So, as we enter into this story, picture Jacob this way: he is the “promise bearer.” The promise made to Abraham—Jacob’s grandfather—survives through Jacob, or it does not survive at all! The Lord had promised Abraham that he would have descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and that those descendants would occupy Canaan:

And he said to him, “I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess.” (Genesis 15:7, RSV)

Because of Jacob’s guile against his father and brother, this promise now runs through Jacob. But Jacob has been living in Syria for the past twenty years. He went to Syria, to the house of his uncle Laban, to escape the fury of his brother Esau, who wanted to kill him. There, Jacob fell in love with Rachel and labored seven years to win her hand. But first he had to labor seven years for Rachel’s older sister, Leah. So that was fourteen years laboring for Leah and Rachel, and then another six years managing the estate of his uncle Laban. The action in this evening’s reading begins when the Lord commands Jacob to return to Canaan:

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1 This sermon owes much to David Yeago’s essay “Wrestling Till the Break of Day.”

2
Then the LORD said to Jacob, “Return to the land of your fathers and to your kindred, and I will be with you.”

(Genesis 31:3, RSV)

Time’s a wastin. Jacob has been in Syria for twenty years. But he is the promise-bearer. He is bearer of the promise made to Abraham, and so he must return to the land of his fathers. The great drama of this evening’s story is that before Jacob reaches Canaan, God wrestles with the man. If Jacob loses the contest, everything falls apart. Here is where Jacob shines. He refuses to let even God go until the Lord confirms his promise:

...Jacob said, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.”

(Genesis 32:26, RSV)

Jacob is injured and probably exhausted from wrestling with the Lord throughout the night. But he does not give up. He refuses to let the Lord go. He hangs onto the Lord’s fundamental promise. He hangs on for dear life, and in the end, he wins his victory.

It is a strange conflict. Sometimes this story is referred to as “Jacob Wrestles with the Angel,” but there is no mention of an angel in this story. Jacob wrestles with a “man,” but a man who in the end is called “God.” And so when the morning breaks, Jacob exclaims:

“For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.” (Genesis 32:30, RSV)

The Christological meaning of this is too good to miss. Jacob has wrestled with the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. Jacob has wrestled with the One who in the fullness of time will be incarnate of the Virgin Mary and be born a man. Jacob has wrestled with Jesus!

Jacob might be a flawed man, yet he bears the promise of God. And after all, who among us is not somehow a flawed man, a flawed woman, a flawed boy or girl? Jacob wrestles with God and obtains a blessing. He is injured in the contest and limps afterwards, but he goes on his way with God’s blessing. He goes on his way to the Promised Land and continues the path the Lord wants for him.

This story is a great prelude to the Season of Lent now upon us. In this evening’s Bible story, Jesus wrestles with Jacob for Jacob’s good. In this season of Lent, Jesus wrestles with humanity for humanity. He wrestles with folks on the way to Golgotha. He wrestles with his theological opponents, he wrestles with the High Priest, he wrestles with Pontius Pilate, he wrestles with the spikes driven into his arms and legs. He wrestles and wrestles till he dies. But he gains life for us.
If you are not yet baptized, then come to me or Vicar Caleb, and we will work toward your baptism. But if you are baptized, then you become Jacob. You become a bearer of divine promises. In Baptism, you enter into a new life with Jesus. He promises you every good thing he has. He promises you forgiveness of your sins, resurrection of your body, and life everlasting. He promises to be your God and you his person. The story of Jacob teaches us to never imagine that Jesus forgets you or gives up on you. Wrestle with Jesus all night, if need be, but never doubt that Jesus loves you.

In Martin Luther’s discussion of this evening’s story, Luther moves on from Jacob wrestling with God to the story of the Canaanite woman wrestling with Jesus (Matthew 15). Luther has great admiration for that woman. Jesus calls her a dog, but she will not give up and go away. She has heard the Gospel concerning Jesus. She has heard that he is a good man, with power to heal. She seeks healing for her daughter and she will not give up till she has wrestled Jesus to the ground. And so she hangs in there. She clings to the Gospel. She clings to the report that Jesus is a good man with power to heal. She perseveres in trusting Jesus, even through the darkness of life, and in the end, she wins victory.

For you who are living in Jesus, there is no such thing as “all hope is gone.” This might be a hard season in life for you, but hope remains—a hope that will not fail you because Jesus will not fail you. You might be facing a stretch of unemployment, you might be facing a broken heart, you might be facing illness, you might even be lying in the hospice bed, but for you, all hope remains—glorious hope. In this world you have Jesus to walk with you in any dark valleys that come your way. And in the world to come, every tear shall be wiped away from your eyes, and every good hope and desire of your heart shall be granted, for Jesus bears great affection for you and means to save you forever. Jesus wrestles with humanity. He wrestles with those who oppose him and despise him. He wrestles with those who condemn him and crucify him. He wrestles with Jacob, he wrestles with the Canaanite woman, he might well wrestle with you and me. But to all those looking on at him even as he dies, he says “Forgive, forgive…”

Therefore, never give up on Jesus and never surrender the hopes you have entrusted to him. When you were baptized, Jesus promised to be with you daily and to save you, and he will keep his word. To him belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.