

The Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost
October 24, 2010
Amazing Grace Lutheran Church - Pastor Chip Wilke

Genesis 32:22-30

That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maidservants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome." Jacob said, "Please tell me your name." But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared." (NIV)

If you are or ever were a wrestler, and not the WWF kind but real wrestling, you might read this Old Testament lesson and think: how did he do that? What persistence, and stamina, and perseverance! Wrestling, especially against a strong opponent, is just flat out physically draining. There is a reason you only wrestle for a few minutes at a time. I remember once being completely worn out after about one intense minute of wrestling. That's why, as God's Word points us to a rather strange wrestling match, any wrestler might have to ask: how could he persevere like that? For we witness a wrestling match that goes on all night long. There is a physical struggle where the opponent is no weakling. In fact, there is a wound even inflicted and yet the match still doesn't end. Jacob, with a wrenched hip and all, holds on and holds on tightly all the way till the morning light. This wrestling match, this struggle, this battle does not end until victory is achieved. Today, my prayer is that we are left shaking our heads in awe and asking:

How could he ever persevere like that?

This account will not make a whole lot of sense to us if we do not remember the Bible history behind it. Jacob was the son of Isaac, and the grandson of Abraham. If you recall Isaac and Rebekah were blessed with twins and while they were still in the womb the Lord made it clear that the older will serve the younger. The younger would receive the great promises once made to Abraham. From him would come a great nation, the promised land would go to his people, and most important through his line God will send the promised Savior. So when Rebekah gave birth out first came Esau, followed by a little baby grabbing the heel of his older brother. They called him Jacob which means heel grabber. And boy, oh boy, did Jacob ever live up to that name!

Jacob's life is filled with examples where he would try to grab things for himself by taking matters into his own hands. He used deception and trickery to get his way. He was self-reliant. One day when his outdoorsy brother Esau came in from the hunt starving to death as he put it, Jacob would not give Esau any soup he had made until his brother promised to give up his own birthright to him. Later Jacob, concerned his dying father was about to give the blessing that God promised him to Esau, schemed with his

mother to make sure he grabbed it. Jacob put on Esau's cloths, covered his own skin with goat's hair so his neck would feel like his brother's, and he lied to his father. The heel grabber pretended to be Esau and tricked his own father into blessing him. That left Esau hating his brother and plotting to kill him and is why the heel grabber decided to run away.

But now, 20 years later, at God's command Jacob is returning home. He had learned the hard way about what damage deceitfulness and trickery can cause. His uncle Laban and this heel grabber spent years trying to best one another. But now, on this night, Jacob realized this was no time to rely on himself. He couldn't. Jacob had just gotten word that Esau was coming to meet him and was coming with 400 men. This time tricks and deception would not work. Oh, not that the heel grabber wouldn't try. He made sure a wave of gifts met Esau first. He separated his family into two big groups thinking that perhaps maybe one group could escape and get away from an attack if necessary. But as Jacob's family and all his possessions crossed the river ahead of him, and Jacob sat alone, the truth was setting in. There was no getting out of this one on his own. As Jacob was about to face his brother Esau the next day, we are told Jacob is filled "***with great fear and distress.***"

Have you ever been there dear friends? Are we ever like this heel grabber? Have our lies and deceptions ever backed us into a corner? Where do our sins of self-reliance and self trust get us? Has it even blown up in our faces when we take matters into our own hands thinking we can do things our way instead of God's way? Do you maybe see now why God allows certain troubles and trials into the lives of His children? Perhaps God has recently allowed something big to come into our lives to upset the apple cart. Perhaps our backs are up against a wall. Perhaps we have started to realize that we can't do it on our own, that taking matters into our own hands will not help this time, that we need God's help. Perhaps like Jacob we are ready to turn to God in prayer and look to the Lord for our help. Perhaps God has brought us to the point where we are ready to turn away from our self reliant sins and to our Savior.

As Jacob goes in the dark night to talk to the Lord in prayer all of a sudden we read: "***and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."***" Out of the blue someone starts to wrestle with Jacob. We are not told why or when Jacob even knew just who this is he is wrestling. Did he think at first it was a surprise attack? When did he realize this was God Himself? We are not told, but the original language makes it clear that this was a physical struggle. Jacob battled and strained and would not be overcome. Then when this man, revealed to us as God Himself, simply touched Jacob's hip so that he was injured, Jacob still didn't give up. The heel grabber held on all night. He would not even let go at daybreak. He would not go without the blessing of His God.

What persistence? What perseverance? What a struggle and example of patience? And the amazing example for us today is not from Jacob, but from God! You see when I ask today: how could he ever persevere like that?, I am talking about God. How could God ever persevere like that? For God had been persevering in His grace and mercy toward Jacob his whole life. This heel grabber's entire life is an example of the patient love of God. The Lord had been persevering to teach Jacob not to rely on

himself. God had been patiently giving this heel grabber lessons about trusting His promises. God had forgiven Jacob for all the times he foolishly took matters into his own hands and selfishly tried to grab things for himself.

Think about what the most remarkable truth is in this lesson today. God and man wrestled and man won. God let man walk away with the victory. God was more than happy to bless Jacob whose name of heel grabber would no longer suit him. So God gave him a new name: ***"Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome."*** Israel, the former heel grabber, now realized he had seen God face to face and did not die. God could have defeated, punished, killed him in a second, but He didn't. But Jacob did walk away limping from this wrestling match with an injured hip and physically speaking Jacob is in worse shape to face his brother because the sore hip would make it even harder to fight or run away. But sore hip and all he was more ready than ever to face his brother. He went with God's promise. He walked in God's grace and blessing. He goes confident not in himself nor with a plan of deception and tricks, but with a trust in God. As he saw Esau coming, this time dividing his family he put them behind him and he boldly went ahead to meet his brother. And, as they say, the rest is history.

And as this loving and patient and persistent God persevered like that in His grace for Jacob, He does for us. Our God turns us away again and again from taking matters into our own hands, and teaches us again and again that self-reliance will not get us anywhere. The truth is we can't do anything without God. We need Him for everything. And just as God wrestled with man here and let man overcome so we have the greatest example of God letting man overcome so that He might bless us and give us everything. God was overcome by man when He willingly allowed men to beat Him, spit on Him, scourge Him, arrest Him, and lead Him away to a hill outside the city. There He allowed men to fasten His beaten body to a cross, to crucify and even kill Him. That was Jesus becoming sin for us so that we might be forgiven and have the righteousness of God. That's what our almighty God, our Savior Jesus, was willing to do so that you and I might have an eternal victory. Now, as Jesus grave still remains empty, we walk in God's grace confident of new life and trusting in all of God's other promises that are ours.

Every time the former heel grabber touched his sore hip, every day he limped away, think of the great reminder for his life. God persevered and finally won as He blessed Jacob. The former heel grabber learned to trust in God and His promises. He looked to his Lord for help and strength, and relied on his God. God may not have touched our hip, but sometimes He injures in the same way. The Lord may knock us off our feet when we least expect it, but God does it because He loves us. He wants our trust. He wants us to wrestle with Him in prayer all night if need be. He wants us to hold tightly to His promises. So hold on to your God for dear life, my friends, because you can be sure your patient and persistent God will persevere by holding on to you. Cling to the cross. Cling to your Savior and you will be blessed. Amen.

