

St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)
Lent 2 (Reminiscere) – February 25, 2024
Matthew 15:21-28 – Wrestling with God
Rev Peter Wagner

In the name of Jesus. Amen. Last Sunday was about wrestling with Satan, struggling with temptation and overcoming, like Christ in the wilderness. Today is about wrestling with God, struggling with God himself and overcoming, like Jacob at the fords of the Jabbok.

Wrestling with God sounds presumptuous. Even sinful. But it's really an act of faith.

Consider an example from parenting. If you're a parent, you know children are masters of debate. When whining doesn't work, when arguing and complaining fail, every kid knows the trump card. If you ever said something differently, if you ever made a promise, they'll be sure to bring it up. "But you said I could!" Parents, you have the right to change the rules. Kids, you shouldn't be doing this. But as every kid knows, "Mom, you promised!" has a good chance of working.

You see that kids know intuitively what Christians often forget. As children of the heavenly Father, we have a trump card. We can hold God to his promises. We can say, "But God, you promised!" You promised you would never leave me nor forsake me! You promised to forgive and help the children you baptized and claimed as your own. "Remember your mercy, O Lord, and your steadfast love."

And unlike human parents, when God makes a promise, he never goes back on his word. "God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?" So our God always remembers his mercy, his steadfast love never fails. His promises are perfect and sure. Joshua 23:14, "Not one word of all the good promises the LORD your God gave you failed. Every one was fulfilled."

So as God's children, Christians are invited to struggle with God and prevail. We are privileged to pray boldly and hold God to his promises. In fact, that is the prayer of faith. God is pleased with a wrestling prayer. It shows him that we believe his promises, and we believe he can do it. So he's pleased to answer us and help.

Today's reading from Genesis illustrates this privilege. Jacob wrestled all night, refusing to let go of the man who was God. "I will not let you go unless you bless me." It was because he finally realized how much he needed God's blessing and protection. And he was terrified. His brother Esau and was coming, with 400 armed men. Surely, Esau still hated him for stealing the birthright. Surely, Esau was about to kill his family and all he had in a bloodbath.

But Jacob remembered God's promise, 20 years before when he first fled from Esau. On another night when he slept and dreamed of a ladder up to heaven. Then God said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

So now, as Jacob waited in fear for Esau and his army, he wrestled with God, to hold God to this promise. How could Jacob's descendants become like the dust of the earth, if Esau was about to put them all to death? So Jacob lived up to his name, a name that means Grabber. He grabbed hold of God in a wrestling match. He grabbed God's promise and refused to let go. Unless you bless me, unless you promise to save me and my family, I will not let you go.

And God yielded. He blessed Jacob, renewing his promise. He gave him a new name. Israel, the man who struggles with God, who holds onto God and prevails. And in the morning, when Esau arrived, by God's grace the two brothers were restored in forgiveness and in peace.

In the New Testament, the Canaanite woman is perhaps an even greater example of amazing persistence, wrestling with God in prayer. Even though she was not descended from Israel, she shared Jacob's faith. She wrestled with Jesus, the God-man, and prevailed. "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon." She came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." His answer sounded harsh, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs," but she did not despair. She knew this man was God, a God merciful and gracious, abounding in steadfast love. She knew the promise to Jacob, that in his offspring all the nations would be blessed. So she held him to his promise. "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat

the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly.

These examples from Scripture teach us three things. First, if we want to hold God to his promises and wrestle with him in prayer, we need to know exactly what God has promised. Second, we must learn to recognize our constant need for God's help. And third, these examples teach that Jesus, the God-man, is the one we have the right to wrestle with. Only in him can we dare hold God to his promises.

First of all, if we want to wrestle with God, we must know his promises. And God certainly promises to provide for all our daily needs. He promises everything we need to support this body and life. Psalm 84, "No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly." Yet this doesn't mean God will never send us trials. In fact, he brings about good through trials. So clear your mind of the vague notion that since God is love, he'll do whatever I want. No parent tolerates that thinking; neither does our Lord. Whatever I want is probably not the loving thing to give me. No, God provides what I really need, whatever he sends is truly good.

When we come to understand how richly God provides our daily needs, then we also start to see his eternal gifts. For God has not only promised the food and clothing of today, but he also promises forgiveness, life, and salvation. Forgiveness is the promise of 1 John 1:9, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Life is the promise of John 11:25, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live." And salvation is the promise of Acts 16:31, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved."

To bring us these spiritual blessings, Christ promises to be with us, to never leave us or forsake us, to stay with us always in the church. He says in Matthew 18:20, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them." And he says in Matthew 28:20, "I am with you always, to the end of the age."

And to bring us into the church to receive these spiritual blessings, Christ promises a baptism for the forgiveness of sins. Acts 2:38, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself."

These, therefore, are the chief promises of God. Wrestle for these. Pray for your daily needs, not because God is unaware of them, but so you learn to trust him. Pray also for your spiritual needs, for your salvation and for others. Pray that God keep us in the church and bring those who do not believe here, so all may have life in his name.

And start to learn how much you need God's help. Jacob knew his need, as did the Canaanite woman. But most of the time, we're oblivious of our helplessness. We feel confident, until trouble comes. A disease, a death, the loss of a job. Then we return to Christ and the church, though we should have been here all along. God is using these times of distress to strengthen our faith, to drive us back to himself. But really, we're always in danger, constantly under attack from Satan. The devil lulls us into false security, to think we're okay apart from the church. We need God's saving protection every moment of our lives.

Finally, through it all, remember that you can only wrestle in and with Christ, the God-man. Only in Christ can you dare to hold God to his promises. As Jesus said, "Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do." All the promises of God find their Yes in Christ Jesus. Our prayers are only pleasing to the Father when we pray in the name of his Son, in whom he is well pleased. "Through him – our Lord Jesus Christ – we have obtained access by faith."

Praying in the name of Jesus means praying on the basis of the promises you received in baptism. You were baptized into his name, Jesus chose you and put his name on you. He brought you into the church, and gave you his word and sacraments, and promised that nothing will ever separate you from his love. So pray in his name.

And most importantly, Jesus went to the cross. There he cried out to his Father, and it seemed that his cries went unheard. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" But that was a cry of faith, not of despair. A wrestling prayer that called on the Father's love and mercy, even though his face seemed turned away. Our God-man wrestled with his Father and refused to let go. Therefore the Father raised him on the third day, so that now in him you have the right to wrestle too.

So, be found in Christ and in his church. Know your need, know what your God has promised, and wrestle with him in prayer. Do not give in, for your God loves to hear the prayer of faith. He knows what you need even before you ask. Yet he wants you to pray so you will learn to seek all good from him. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.