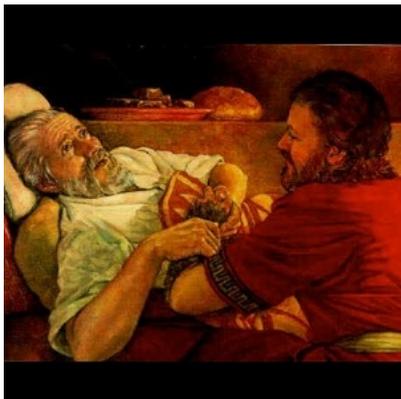


# Wrestling with God

## Genesis 32:22-31

My guess is that everyone here has, at one time or another, wrestled, struggled with God. We may feel ashamed to admit it, but we shouldn't. Human nature being what it is, and life being as complex and tough as it can turn out to be, we become anxious, concerned about the future, wondering about where the hand of God who promises to save and guide us actually is. Sometimes our worries are driven by the fact that we know that we have failed God so many times over that we wonder whether he's given up on us. Other times we are simply impatient and we simply can't wait to see how God might help us, and so we take things into our hands, making rash decisions or harsh judgements that we live to regret.



This is the story of Jacob. Someone once wrote that there are no heroes in the Bible, only God alone. And Jacob is perhaps the greatest anti-hero. We might wonder why his story is written into the pages of Scripture at all. And yet his life is truly an exemplar of God's grace against the background of his grasping and thieving. He begins life grabbing on to the foot of his elder brother. He steals his brother's birthright, and then his father's blessing which was meant for his older brother Esau. He then flees from his cheated brother, in fear of his life, and along the way he himself is cheated by Laban, tricked into marrying the daughter he didn't want and then having to slave another seven years for the one he does. As Frederick Buechner writes in a wonderful

essay on Jacob: "This shrewd and ambitious man who is strong on guts and weak on conscious, who knows very well what he wants and directs all his energies toward getting it, the Jacobs of this world, all do pretty well."

He is a liar and a cheat, and yet remarkably, he is loved by God. While he's on the run, he encounters God in a dream of angels ascending and descending on a staircase linking heaven and earth. In this dream he hears a most remarkable and undeserved promise: "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land of which you lie I will give to you and your offspring... Know that I am with you and I will keep you wherever you go."

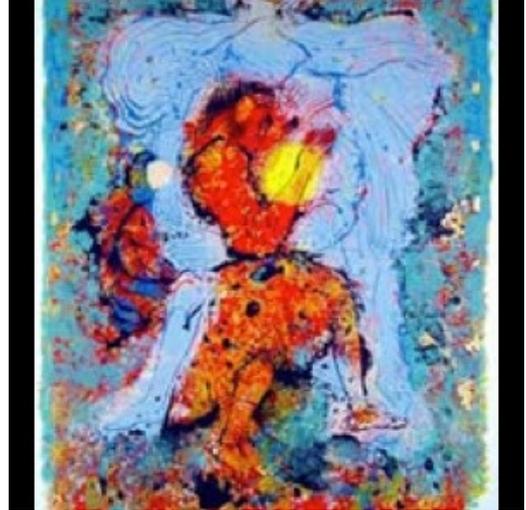
But despite this, Jacob continues his old tricks. He tricks Laban out of some of his land. When he hears that Esau is catching up with him, he strategises about how we can save his skin, and that of his family. Then, after he's made his plans, he decides to pray, almost as an afterthought.



As one author notes, "Because of his shrewdness, Jacob can plan. Because of his vulnerability, Jacob must pray, 'Deliver me, please, from the hands of my brother.'"

And after he prays, he tries to buy his brother off with the gift of hundreds of goats, ewes, camels, bulls and donkeys. The offering goes ahead of him, and he also sends his immediate family across the River Jabbok.

When night falls, Jacob is alone. Fearful, anxious, dwelling on these thoughts. You never know when all of your deceit and lying is going to catch up with you. Tomorrow will come the confrontation he has been dreading. And then, out of nowhere comes an unknown, unwelcome assailant. "Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak." Who was this man? Was this Esau, or Laban, both of whom had legitimate grievances against Jacob? Was it an angel, sent by God to shake Jacob up? Or was it someone much more mysterious and frightening? Was this God himself?



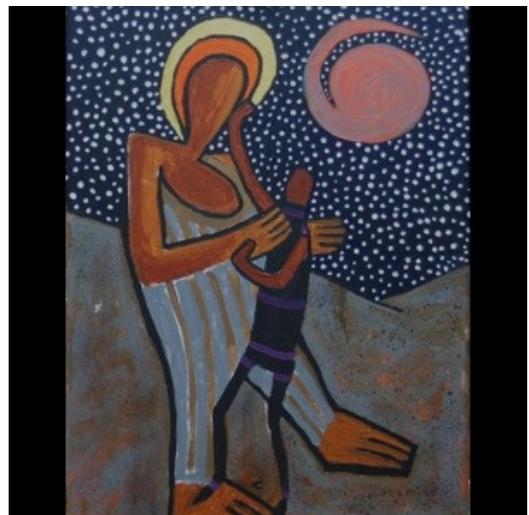
They wrestle all night long. Jacob will not give up. He twists and turns. God finally reaches out and cripples him by simply touching the socket of his thigh. One can only wonder why God didn't do this from the beginning. Why did God allow the wrestling match to rage for the entire night when he could win so easily?

This makes Jacob even more desperate. He grabs on to God and begs, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." He's not going to get out of this by any of his tricks. He knows he needs God. He can't run away, and he can't hide. Buechner writes: "[God's blessing] is not a blessing that Jacob can have

now by the strength of his cunning or the force of his will, but a blessing that he can only have as a gift."

No matter how many times he has tried to deal himself out of God's grace, he can't let go of the promise of God that he heard in the dream. The only thing he has left is God, and his unyielding grace. And God just wouldn't let Jacob alone. God wanted to lock Jacob into his purposes. It took God getting his hands on Jacob, his fingers on the flesh, to wrestle Jacob to the point of understanding the way of grace. The limp he would carry as a permanent reminder of that way, of the strength of God which is stronger than human strength.

You and I are like Jacob, more than we would ever like to admit. Like Jacob, God has come to us and blessed us unconditionally. In our baptism, he made us children of the new covenant, the birthright won for us by God's Son. We didn't deserve this blessing. But we received it nonetheless.



Like Jacob, we often have tried to cope under our own steam. Although we confess that “I cannot by my own understanding or effort believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him...” we, like Jacob, scheme and plan and organise, hoping that we might impress God, hoping that we might make life happen. Sometimes this is way beneath the surface, and we're not aware of it.

Like Jacob, we fail and we sin, we struggle and we fall. Then God comes to us, perhaps in the dark night, when our plans have fallen apart, when we're afraid. In his peculiar grace, he wrestles us to the ground and makes us realise that we have nothing but him. And he still blesses us despite everything we've done.

Jacob limped home, defeated and yet full of life. We are challenged by weakness, our inability to stay the spiritual course. We confessed these things at the beginning of our service — not loving and trusting you with our whole heart... not keeping holy your name and your word... and the eight other commandments we've failed to keep. Yes, we know our weakness that we chafe against. And God knows it too, and yet, as with Jacob, he keeps intervening. We know this to be true because we know his greatest blessing. We know his Son, Jesus Christ, the one called Immanuel, God with us, God with skin on, God who made himself vulnerable to us, God who wrestled with the Evil One on the cross, who “was pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him.” But this was God's victory over sin, death and Satan, the enemies of all that steals, kills and destroy; God's confirmation that good will triumph over evil, in the end.



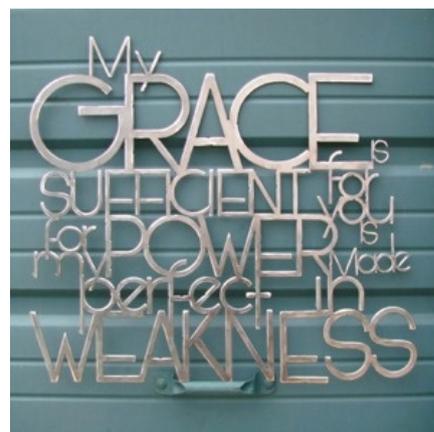
Jacob tried to so hard to make his future, but God loved him too much to let him his own way. He wrestled him, humbled him to receive the blessing he needed. God wins. He always does. That's good news for us, at a personal level, as God continue to pour out his grace on us, even in our weakness. It's also an encouragement to us as a church, as we seek to be faithful to God, and as we wrestle in prayer to know what it is God is calling us to do, especially in response to the changing environment around us.



Pastor Aldi and I attended a conference run by Alpha Australia, called Faith and Culture Forum. The first speaker, Evert-Jan Ouweneel, a Dutch philosopher, spoke about the place of weakness the church no finds itself in over against Western secular culture. For a long time, one millennium and more, the church was immensely powerful. It schemed and planned, hand in glove often with political power. But power has corrupted the church as much as

it does secular institutions.

Now the church is weak in human terms, and questioning, wrestling, wondering, praying about its place and its future. We



have come to the point where must confess Jesus' words to Paul: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." I must admit to times of worrying and wrestling, of tossing and turning as I think of the immensity and complexity of the decisions St Paul's has to make in the next years. Are we up to the mission God has placed us in? I hope that you, like me, are wrestling with God in prayer about all this, wanting to know his will.

But at the same time, I pray you know, personally, and we know as God's people together, that we are not going down this path alone. We don't believe in the world's mantra, "If it's going to be, it's up to me." Jacob tried this again and again, but God has to wrestle it out of him. But the truth is that God wins. God's kingdom will come. The death and resurrection of Jesus is conformation, this strange victory. Be encouraged as Aldi and I were at this conference, with these words: "Stay calm. Don't be afraid. God is in control. The planet is not slipping through God's fingers. Persevere in prayer. Love until it hurts."

Lord Jesus, your kingdom come. Amen

