Thriving: Wrestling with God

Genesis 32: 22-32

052321 (Pentecost Sunday)

We have progressed through the Lent and Easter seasons by talking about

* Rooted: The Practices that ground us in God.
* New Life: What Resurrection Means for us.

Today we begin

* Thriving…a series aimed at exploring the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the followers of Jesus.

I pray a prayer each morning that gets my mind in the right place to talk with God.

Here is how I begin:

“God of all creation; God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; God of Israel; God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ; true and living God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; have mercy on me and hear my prayer.”

It is a daily reminder of **who** I am talking to; that this is the **solitary** God of the Universe; that I am a part of very long **history** of God’s gracious interactions with humanity; and that I should not be too **cavalier** in my address of God.

I must confess, however, to being perpetually **bothered** by the phrase, “…God of Abraham, Isaac, *and Jacob*.” Abraham, I get…Isaac, for sure…but Jacob?

I know **chronologically** this makes sense, but **theologically** it has bothered me for years.

Jacob comes into the world holding on to the heal of his second’s older brother Esau (Gen. 25). His name literally means “Heal Grabber.” He grows up to be a deceitful, power-seeking manipulator. He tricks his starving brother Esau out of his birthright and tricks his dying Father Isaac into blessing him (Gen. 27). How does this guy get the honor of being named with Abraham—the no-resume, faith-filled Friend of God, Isaac; the son of promise; obedient in a way that foreshadows Jesus own self-surrender?

I was “last week years old” when God taught me something and that something I want to share with you on this Pentecost Sunday.

Read Genesis 32: 22-32, (on screen)

Jacob is in a difficult place expecting the wrath of his brother.

God initiates a wrestling match with Jacob, but initially we are left to wonder if it might be Esau.

God touches Jacob in a way that causes him to stop fighting.

Jacob holds on and asks for a blessing.

* This seems kind of true to the Jacob we know (heel grabber, birthright thief), but this time the wrestling is with God, not with man.
* Jacob seems to realize that he cannot win, so he stops fighting and asks God for help.

 God requires Jacob to own up to his name. (v. 27)

* The OT name carried huge significance. It was a revelation of the deepest and truest character of the individual.
* Jacob was the Deceiver/Heal Grabber.

God gives Jacob a new name that reveals the change in Jacob’s nature.

* Because of this encounter with God, Jacob is no longer the deceiver, the one grasping for power and fortune.
* Jacob is transformed in this moment into the Father of the People of God
* His new name, Israel, would mark God’s people for all time

Jacob walked away with a limp.

* His life would be forever marked by this encounter with God.

The reason that Jacob gets included among the Old Testament greats is not his heritage -- he manipulated that. It is because he wrestled with God and in the blessing of God, he became a different man. A man after whom God could name his people Israel.

It was:

* the wrestling
* the seeking
* the naming
* the blessing
* the limping

that made him God’s chosen.

**[I’ll be preaching on each one of these in the coming weeks. Don’t miss it!]**

So what, right?

What does that have to do with you?

Everything…especially this Pentecost Sunday.

A day when we celebrate that on this day so long ago, God forever altered the way that he chose to interact with humankind.

God’s Spirit used to be given occasionally to certain greats of the faith like Moses, or David or John the Baptist…or Jacob.

But after Jesus’ death and resurrection, in answer to the promise Jesus made to his disciples, on the Day of Pentecost, God chose to give his Spirit to everyone who would believe in Jesus his Son.

You might say again, So what?

So, what if you are Jacob, and God needs to change your name in order to redeem your present and rescue your future?

* You want God’s blessing, right? I sure do.
* I’d love for God’s promises to be fulfilled in me, wouldn’t you?
* I want those who come after me to see evidence of God’s work in and through me, don’t you?

Here’s the thing: You can’t short-cut the process. If you want what God alone can give, it will require of you what it required of Jacob:

* wrestling
* seeking
* naming
* blessing
* limping

**Here’s what I mean:**

We can get into difficult places, like Jacob.

* I’ve found that a lot of the time, the problem really isn’t the problem.
* I am the problem.
* Someone famously said, “Everywhere I go I take me with me, and I ruin everything.”

We wear ourselves out wrestling with our problems and all the while we’re the foundational problem and God could help us…**if we’d do a little wrestling with him.**

God initiates a wrestling match with us.

* Everything in this story is an act of grace that God uses to reach us and communicate his better way for us.
* We usually think of grace as this nice thing that God offers us when we don’t deserve it…and that is certainly true.
* But sometimes people like us need God to get us by the scruff of the neck, knock us down a few notches, and really get our attention.
* New Testament Saul/Paul knew a little about this…
* Jacob’s struggles and ours may be God’s way of getting our attention. That’s grace
* The struggle = Grace.

Jacob holds on…but so does God.

* Jacob was willing to wrestle with God and so should we.
* There comes a time when the wisest among us stop trying to overpower God. We give in and ask for a blessing.
* This, again, is God’s grace. The Spirit of God grips us to the point that we realize that something has to give.
* We finally get to the point where we are willing to tap-out and receive what God has for us, but God has one more thing that is required.

Like Jacob, God asks us our name.

* Why? Because in the Bible the name was super important.
* The name communicated not just what you were to be called but gave expression to the very core of one’s identity.
* So, when Jacob has to confess his name, he is forced to confront his nature…who he really is.
* We must confess our true nature to God.
* When we are able to own our nature, see it for what it is, realize that it is flawed and powerless to save us, then God is free to work.

When we finally give up fighting

When we finally ask

When we own up to our true nature

God is prepared to bless us, but not until.

Jacob gets a new name (nature) and we can, too.

* When Jacob surrenders and God blesses, Jacob’s nature is changed so dramatically that he gets a new name.
* The name signifies the nature
* No longer “The Deceiver,” now “Israel, the Father of God’s People”

**(Nick comes up here)**

**How does this happen for us?**

* God isn’t probably going to tackle you this morning, but some of you are wrestling right now.
* God has a grip on your heart, and you can’t shake it
* It’s time to give up and ask for the blessing
* When you do, you’ll have to confess your nature/name. Own it. Repent. Seek God.
* God will bless you and fill you and change you.

How? The Power of Pentecost makes it possible.

* Because God changed his methods then, you can be changed now.
* God’s Holy Spirit is present right now, holding on to you, whispering to you, asking you to surrender and let the change begin.

**Prayer (Maybe altar…just follow the Spirit’s leading)**

**Close**:

Jacob walked away with a limp, and we must, too.

* God gave him an undeniable reminder of their encounter
* You can’t fight with God and not be changed
* Our limp today is the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit in us
* We sense it. We feel it. It is evident to others.
* **Best of all, It changes the way we walk!**

**Benediction:**