

SERMON FOR SUNDAY, September 22, 2019      FIRST LUTHERAN CHURCH, AITKIN  
Pastor Douglas Larson

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ. Amen  
James Thurber, a humorist said once, "No man who has ever wrestled with a self-adjusting card table is ever quite the same." I'm not sure what a self-adjusting card table is or if there even is one. But the picture that this statement makes, is one of desperation and chaos in my mind.

About 1700 years before the birth of Jesus, a man named Jacob wrestled with God. And he was never the same afterwards. Jacob had left his home twenty years earlier, running from his brother Esau. Jacob, with the help of his mother had cheated Esau out of the birthright. He had run to his uncle Laban's home and lived there. Laban and Jacob mutually cheated each other but now the Lord had told Jacob to return home.

Jacob had sent word to Esau that he wanted to return. He wasn't sure what reception he would get. He heard that Esau was coming with 400 men. So Jacob, afraid, split his family and animals into two groups. He had two wives, Leah and Rachel and each took half of his family and belongings. Jacob sent them across the Jabbok River and he crossed back over the river to sleep.

There was to be no sleep for out of the dark came a man who wrestled with Jacob all through the night, neither gaining an advantage. As the sun came up the man tried to get away. Jacob refused to let go until he got a blessing from the man. The man knocked Jacob's hip out of the socket and said, "From now on you shall be called Israel for you have wrestled with the Lord." Jacob walked with a limp ever after, with a new name.

What's going on in this story? What is the meaning of the Lord coming out of the dark, wrestling with Jacob? When Jacob, twenty years earlier had fled his homeland, the Lord has appeared to him in a dream and promised to go with him and bring him safely home sometime. The Lord had not abandoned Jacob. But now, was the Lord, in this wrestling match, asking Jacob, "Who are you going to be? What kind of person are you going to be from this time on? Will you continue to be Jacob the trickster, the cheating one or will you become a different person?" Was this wrestling match a way of saying that God was wrestling with the soul of Jacob? Jacob was a different person; the limp and his new name a sign of that change. God had come to Jacob to confront him about who he would be as he lived in God's kingdom and family.

Do we wrestle with God? How have we wrestled with God? Some people like Jacob experience the dark night of the soul. They experience God wrestling with their soul, asking who will you be, what will you be, calling forth a dramatic change. They are never the same.

Some have wrestled with God more out of their Baptismal covenant. As Martin Luther explained the meaning of baptism he asked the question, "What does Baptism mean for daily living?" He went on to say that in Holy Baptism the sinful self with all its evil deed and desire should be drowned through daily repentance and that the new person should come forth to live before God in holiness and righteousness. Luther said we should look over the Ten Commandments and confess 3-4 sins that we have done that day, confessing them to Jesus.

This is a daily wrestling with God as we look at our lives in contrast to what God wants for us. It can be painful or give us a jolt of reality. Luther said that there are some sins that we will never do. Some we will do only once or twice. But there are other sins that we will fight with every day of our life. As we wrestle with God, we may call out again and again, "Lord help me."

Some wrestle with God over the question of "why". Why does God allow these things to happen? How come this or that happens when it is so damaging to people and our world? This wrestling may take the

form of arguing with God. Out of the Nazi control and WWII, some in the German nation asked God how God could allow the lies of Hitler and the relentless propaganda of Goebbels to continue. Goebbels learned that if you told lies enough times, people will start to believe them. Many felt powerless to stop this national policy. They wrestled with God through these times. Many of the Psalms take up this same question.

Sometimes our wrestling with God is like a marriage, where you fight with your spouse in the morning and want to make love in the evening. Or like good friends who get along most of the time and then something happens and there is a fight, they separate for a day or two or more. Then all is forgotten and they are best of friends again. Wrestling with those we love is natural. Wrestling with God is also a natural part of our life in God's Kingdom.

God coming out of the dark to wrestle with Jacob is a sign that God will come to us also. God comes to wrestle with us so that we can have examine ourselves, look at what we are and what we want to be. God is asking us to answer the question of who will we be and what kind of person will we be.

Do we wrestle with God? It's not really a question of if, just when and how or for what reason we wrestle with God. It might be a question of who starts the wrestling match, but there will wrestling matches. God is in our life and we are not the same after wrestling with God. And that is a good thing. Amen