

22nd Sunday after Pentecost – October 16, 2016
Baptism of Ethan Kean Nelson
Sermon preached by the Rev. Daniel Vélez Rivera
Readings: Genesis 32:22-31, Psalm 121, 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5, Luke 18:1-8

The Jacob stories in the book of Genesis must be important to God and to the biblical writers because ten whole chapters of the book of Genesis are devoted to him. That is significant given that in the book of Genesis for example, there are eleven chapters devoted to Creation, and fourteen to the first patriarch Abraham. In today's Genesis story Jacob wrestles with God and who do you think won that match? Well, both God *and* Jacob won, thanks be to God! God's intention was to give Jacob a good shake up and to remind him that their covenant was based on trust, but trust wasn't an easy thing for Jacob. He wrestled all his life with issues of trust, and well, he had good reasons, given his family history.

Let me give you a brief review of Jacob's ancestry so that you can get a sense of the issues of trust that were built into his family history. Jacob was the grandson of Abraham and Sarah, and the son of Isaac and Rebekah. His father, Abraham, had his faith tested by God and he trusted God to the point of almost sacrificing his own son Isaac for the love of God. The patriarch Abraham also lied to a king about his wife being his sister to save his skin! Isaac and his wife Rebekah had twin boys; Jacob was the younger twin of Esau, whose birthright Jacob stole by tricking his ailing and blind father into thinking that he was blessing the older of the twins, thereby passing on the birthright to the younger son, Jacob. And by the way, Rebekah, Jacob's mom and blind Isaac's wife, was the mastermind of the deceit because she favored Jacob. Sounds a bit like a Hollywood reality TV show, doesn't it? So, some of the crazy things we witness today in culture and society, dare I say in the political world as well, seem to come from a script that has surely been acted out before!

Let me share with you a synopsis of the story leading to Jacob's wrestling match with God in today's lesson. Jacob decided to return home after many years. He fled in fear of his brother Esau's retribution after the birthright incident. The Genesis story tells us that as he got closer to home he began to panic, fearful that his brother had not gotten over the matter and might want to kill him – a birthright was a very big deal in that time and place. So, as Jacob and his family got closer to home, he sent a few servants to notify Esau who responded saying that he would meet him alright, but he wouldn't be alone, he would come with 400 men. A grudge? Nah! So, Jacob tried every which way to save his skin, devising another plan to deceive his brother - yet again! This is where today's story begins, Jacob is in panic mode, he has touched bottom and is desperate. In his despair, he reached out to God in prayer, he trusted. And how did God respond? God, sent an envoy to wrestle with Jacob, which in fact was God's manifestation to Jacob. It was one of those God moments where God presents God-self, and shows up to make sure that Jacob understood that he was not alone and to help Jacob understand who Jacob belonged to, he was God's beloved son. That's when

Jacob's name was changed to "Israel" which means, "he who fights with God" – a way of stating that the presence of God had been manifested to Jacob. By the way, in the next chapter we learn that Esau and Jacob reconciled, without a war or mass killings! This was how God paved the way for Jacob to return to the promised land, fulfilling the covenant between God and Jacob and between God and his ancestors Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah.

We sit here today, perhaps wrestling with God for God knows what reason. And we, like our ancestors before us, are reminded through the story of Jacob that we too struggle. Perhaps we wrestle with the Word of God, or the love of God, maybe because we don't feel worthy of God's love. Nevertheless, our Maker knows all of our shortcomings and all of our graces, as Psalm 121 puts it, "the Lord shall preserve your going out and your coming in from this time forth and even for ever more". We too are invited into the story to wrestle with God. To wrestle with God doesn't mean putting up our dukes, but to wrestle with scripture, the Word of God, the love of God, the presence of God, and with our responsibility and accountability as children of God. What does it mean to you to wrestle with the wisdom of God through Scripture? The Holy Bible isn't always easy to interpret, but we have inherited God-stories, Jesus-stories, Mary-stories, Abraham and Sarah, Rebekah and Isaac, Jacob and Esau stories; stories of the faithful servants of God with issues like ours; people who doubted and trusted, just like us. People to whom God became manifest, so that they would know who they belonged to, people who then passed on their stories of hope, love and trust in God.

We are called to wrestle with Scripture so that God could be manifested to us through the Word. Wrestling with Scripture opens not only our eyes but also our souls. Remember how I said at the beginning that both God and Jacob won the match? That is a fact, God wants us to realize that there is no competition taking place, just an awareness and a reverence of His presence. God gave his only begotten Son, Jesus, so that we could rest with the knowledge and trust that we are called to live forever in grace, love, light, and the spirit of God.

In a few moments, I will baptize Garrett Kean Nelson here at St. Gabriel's Chapel in the Woods, and together as a faith community we will commit to pass on the stories of hope, trust and love in God, that is the vow we will make on his behalf as his new Christian family. God is commending us with a spiritual charge to pray and hold Garrett with Christian love in the same way that we hold one another and all of creation in prayer. In today's gospel Jesus taught his disciples to be persistent in prayer, to seek the Lord, and to trust. We are here today to remember those words and to pass them on. Amen.