

Reminiscere
1 March 2026
Matthew 15:21-28 (Genesis 32:22-32; 1 Thessalonians 4:1-7)

Wrestling With God

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ—Amen

The text for this morning's sermon is the Holy Gospel appointed for today from the Holy Gospel According to St. Matthew, the fifteenth chapter.

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit—Amen

God told Jacob to do something very difficult. He had cheated his twin brother many years before and had run away from home. He made a good life for himself. But now, God told him to bring his family and all his riches and go face his brother Esau—who had vowed that he would kill his brother.

Jacob was afraid of Esau, but he was more afraid of God. He made the long journey home, expecting that there was a good chance that God was leading him back to be killed as punishment for his sins.

And then, to top it all off, while he was alone at night, he got mugged. “A man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day.” And the mugger had an extraordinary fighting technique. “He touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint.” But Jacob did not give up. When the sun rose, the mugger asked Jacob to let him go. Jacob said something very strange, dear friends, “I will not let you go until you bless me.” You see, Jacob realized that this was a supernatural encounter. This was not just some random mugger. Rather, this was God in human form. And God took flesh to teach him something. And in fact, God changed Jacob's name to Israel, which means, “He wrestles with God.”

Jacob remembered this wrestling with God—and he even had a limp to remind him. His faith in God was strengthened as he went back to face his brother. Jacob said, “I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered.” In spite of his sin and unworthiness, God took mercy on him and saved him through his fears and struggles.

This mugger, wrestler, and teacher—who is God in human form—had more people to mug, to wrestle, and to teach—as well as to give faith and to save. The incident with Jacob was a preview of what would come later.

In fact, the descendants of Jacob became God’s chosen people, the Israelites. And the mugger, wrestler, teacher, and Savior, God in human form, would be born an Israelite: a descendant of the very same Jacob nearly two thousand years later. And, in fact, He would be called “Teacher,” and He would gather to Himself students, called “disciples.”

And one day, this Teacher and His disciples encountered a Canaanite woman (not an Israelite) who had heard of the Teacher’s supernatural powers. And she knew who Jesus was as she revealed His title as the King of Israel, calling Him: “Son of David.” Jesus didn’t surprise her in the form of a mugger in the middle of the night, rather this woman is the one who initiated this confrontation.

“Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David.” She prays for mercy right before asking our Lord for something specific—just as we do to this day in our liturgy. Today, we sang “Lord, have mercy upon us” right before we prayed: “O God, You see that of ourselves we have no strength. By Your mighty power defend us from all adversities that may happen to the body and from all evil thoughts that may assault and hurt the soul.” Her prayer, knowing that of herself, she has no strength, is for Jesus to defend her daughter from all adversities, and from evil to body and soul. She says: “My daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.”

Jesus is the Savior. She has come to the right place. But Jesus is still the Teacher. And in His capacity as Teacher, he is also the wrestler. In order to teach this woman to have Jacob's faith in facing her own fears, Jesus wrestles with her by remaining silent, "He did not answer her a word."

Our Lord's disciples, in one of their many less than stellar moments, show no compassion, but ask Jesus to "send her away." Our Lord tries to throw off this Gentile woman who has essentially mugged Him by saying, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But like Jacob, who refused to let Jesus go without a blessing, the Canaanite woman holds on for dear life. She will not be dissuaded in her prayers. "She knelt before Him saying, 'Lord, help me.'"

Once again, Jesus pushes her away by appealing to God's promise to His chosen people, the Israelites, descendants of Jacob. He rebuffs her saying, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." But once more, the Canaanite woman, praying to Jesus on behalf of her daughter, refuses to let go without receiving a blessing. "Yes, Lord," she says. This is a confession of humility and unworthiness. And this unworthiness is why we pray with her, "Lord, have mercy," and why we are bold to pray. "Yes, Lord," she says, "yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." This Canaanite woman had faith. Somehow, she had learned of the promise in Scripture that the Savior would not only rescue the children of Israel, but would also be a blessing to her people. Somehow and somewhere, she heard the prophecy of Isaiah: "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." She held on to this promise which was for her and for her daughter and for all the people of earth.

She knew that the Teacher and Savior had come for her too, and she wrestled with God until the daybreak of His mercy came to her. She said, "Yes, Lord," not only to our Lord telling

her that He came for the children of Israel, but she also said, “Yes, Lord” to the prophecy of Isaiah. She said, “Yes, Lord,” because she believed. And she refused to let go until He gave her a blessing.

Her faith was not in vain, dear friends. Jesus said, “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.” And “her daughter was healed instantly.”

Our Savior is indeed a teacher. We are His students. He teaches us about the kingdom. He teaches us through His Word and through His actions in this world which not only save us, but also teach us who He is and how His kingdom works. He teaches us through the Scriptures and through the saving and healing sacraments. And these means of our Lord’s mercy work through faith.

Scripture teaches us that Jesus has come not to condemn, but to save. And the Lord’s Supper teaches us that we are forgiven and made worthy of God Himself to visit us and to dine with us, to be both the host and the guest—and we believe, we ask for mercy, and we pray, praise, and give thanks. You see, Jesus has also mugged us, in a way, dear friends. We did not go looking for Him, but somehow, He found us. He makes us wrestle with His Word. He tests our faith. He teaches us. And He saves us.

He hears our prayers. He frees us from the power of the devil. He welcomes us into the kingdom regardless of our ancestry, whether we are Israelite or Canaanite. And even when nobody else will listen—and even when we think He is not listening—He listens, He hears, and He saves.

He teaches us with His Word—with these two incidents which happened nearly two thousand years apart. He teaches us where we stand nearly two thousand years after the verbal wrestling match with the Canaanite woman. He teaches us that we are to hear the promises of God and believe them. And based on those promises, we can live our lives in confidence, in faith. And

we pray with boldness, knowing that whatever the outcome, He hears us and He gives us the outcome according to His will.

And as the teacher of our Catechism instructs us: “The good and gracious will of God is done even without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may be done among us also.”

It is God’s will to free us from bondage to the devil, and to lead us to trust Him, to pray for His mercy, and to refuse to let go of Him until He has blessed us with forgiveness, life, and salvation.

“Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David.” And He does. And He has. And He will.

“Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David.” And He forgives you for all of your sins.

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit—Amen

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus—
Amen

Sermon based on one by the Rev. Larry Beane