

3.16.2025 Lent 2 (Matthew 15:21-28)

The book of Genesis tells the story of Jacob, who had a twin brother named Esau. These twin boys were the sons of Isaac and Rebekah, and the grandsons of Abraham and Sarah. At the time of their birth, Jacob was born second, and Scripture tells us that he “*came out with his hand holding Esau’s heel, so his name was called Jacob*” (Genesis 25:26). The name Jacob comes from a Hebrew word (‘aqab) that literally means “seize by the heel,” and figuratively, this name signifies the act of having someone “by the heels,” or secretly following them very closely in order to deceive, manipulate, or take control.

Not everyone lives up to the meaning of their name, but Jacob certainly did. At the moment of his birth he seized his brother’s heel, and later in life had his brother by the heels. Who can forget the day Esau came home tired, hungry, and asked Jacob for some of the stew he was cooking. To which Jacob replied, “*First sell me your birthright... Swear to me now...*” (Genesis 25:31-33), and on that day Jacob bought from Esau all the rights and privileges given to the first-born, at the cost of a bowl of beans. On another occasion, Jacob, with the help of his mother, impersonated Esau and tricked his elderly, blind father into giving him the blessing Isaac intended to give to his first-born son. When Isaac realized what happened, and said to Esau, “*Your brother came deceitfully, and he has taken away your blessing.*” Esau said, “*Is he not rightly named Jacob? For he has cheated me these two times. He took away my birthright, and behold, now he has taken away my blessing*” (Genesis 27:35-36).

Jacob lived up to his name, to such an extent that *Esau hated Jacob*, and planned to kill him (Genesis 27:41), but when Rebekah heard of it, she sent Jacob to live with her brother Laban, hoping that time would heal this wound that separated her sons. Jacob lived with Laban for 20 years. During this time he was blessed with two wives, twelve children, and many flocks and herds, but after deceiving Laban on several occasions, and being deceived by him many times, Jacob made the decision to leave Laban’s house and return to the

land of his fathers - Abraham and Isaac.

Twenty years is a long time, but as Jacob headed back toward his homeland, he still feared Esau, and therefore as he approached the point where they'd likely meet, Jacob decided to spend the night alone, sending his family and all his possessions across a stream to keep them safe. On this night, the Genesis account describes Jacob wrestling with a Man until daybreak, a Man who is later identified as God (Genesis 32:30). As they wrestled, the Man said, *"Let me go, for it is daybreak."* But Jacob replied, *"I will not let you go unless you bless me."* *"What is your name?"* the Man asked. *"Jacob,"* he replied. Then the Man said, *"Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men, and you have prevailed"* (Genesis 32:26-28). Jacob the deceiver was now Israel, which means, one who wrestles with God.

The season of Lent is often seen as a time to wrestle against those forces that oppose us. We wrestle against the world, the flesh, and the devil. We wrestle *"against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places"* (Ephesians 6:12). However, in the story of Jacob, now Israel, we recognize the importance not only of wrestling against the forces of evil, but wrestling with God, entering into His holy presence, seeing God, as Israel said, *"face to face"* (Genesis 32:30), and like Israel, refusing to let Him go until we receive His blessing.

In this example we learn this important lesson: If our desire is to be blessed by God, then we must wrestle with God, and in our Gospel lesson, we learn that truth not only applies to Israel and his descendants, but to the Gentiles as well. In the passage we read today, a Canaanite woman, a Gentile outsider, cried out to Jesus, saying, *"Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil. But He answered her not a word"* (Matthew 15:22-23). So the wrestling match begins with this woman crying out to our Lord and God, but receiving no reply, and her struggle with Him only increases in difficulty as the passage continues. After He answered her not a word, the disciples approached Jesus, asking Him to *"send her*

away,” and He seemingly grants their request, saying to this Gentile woman, *“I am not sent but to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”* (vs. 24).

Consider the way this Canaanite woman is wrestling with God. Up to this point she’s confronted silence (He answered her not a word), rejection (the disciples want her sent away), refusal (I am not sent but to the lost sheep of the house of Israel), and now it would seem God intends to finish the match, for the woman came *“and worshipped Him, saying, Lord, help me. But He answered and said, It is not meet to take the children’s bread, and to cast it to dogs”* (vs. 25-26). Such harsh words would no doubt be the end for many, but like Israel, who wrestled all night with God, and would not let Him go until He received His blessing, this woman also refuses to let go unless she is blessed by God.

She holds on, undeterred, even agreeing with the truth of our Lord’s statement about the difference between children and dogs, but then she replies with a fact of her own, saying, *“Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table. Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was made whole from that very hour”* (vs. 27-28). At last, the Canaanite woman received the Lord’s blessing, but like Israel, it came only after she wrestled with God.

When God changed Jacob’s name, He gave to Israel and his descendants a holy vocation. Their Divine calling is to wrestle with God. Israel wrestled with God until daybreak. Israel wrestled with God during the 400 years they were slaves in Egypt. Israel wrestled with God in the wilderness. Israel continues to wrestle with God today, and in the example of the Canaanite woman, a Gentile outsider who wrestled with God, we recognize this calling is intended not only for Israel, but for us all. Our holy vocation, our Divine calling is to wrestle with God. We hold on to Him, refusing to let Him go until we receive His blessing, and the blessing we desire is not riches or reputation, it isn’t power, prosperity, or personal gain. Instead, as we see in the examples of Israel and the Canaanite woman, the blessing we desire is to

be set free from the world, the flesh, and the devil.

Free from the world - free from the cares and riches and sinful pleasures of this life. Free from the flesh - free from addiction, lust, and every unhealthy desire. Free from the devil - free from the lies and schemes and temptations that lead to sin which separates us from God. The blessing we desire is freedom from those forces that seek to enslave us, to the end that we may find peace and rest in the holy presence of God. So, whether it's Israel's slavery in Egypt, a Canaanite woman who's daughter was enslaved, who was *grievously vexed with a devil*, or our own struggle against slavery to sin and evil in this world, if our desire is to be set free, then we, like Israel, must wrestle with God until daybreak. Until the long, dark, difficult night ends, wrestle with God, enter in to His holy presence, see Him "*face to face*," wrestle with Him in this world to the end that you may be happy with Him forever in heaven.