

Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church (Columbus, OH)
Lent Midweek 2 – March 16, 2022
Genesis 32:22-32 – The Sons of Dust Cling to God’s Blessing
By Vicar Peter Wagner

In the name of Jesus. Amen. Our text is the Old Testament reading for the second Sunday of Lent, from Genesis 32.

Last week we heard that we are sons of dust, sons of Adam returning to the dust from which we came. For our sin, we’re cursed to a life of futility. We inherit a human nature that toils in the dust, thinking we can produce what we need by the sweat of our own brow, we can please God by our works. But God promised to redeem the sons of dust. He cursed Satan to eat the dust, crushed underfoot by the woman’s offspring. As Psalm 72 says, **“May his enemies lick the dust!”**¹ And while Adam spent his life fighting thorns to earn his bread, our Redeemer wore a crown of thorns for us. Bloody sweat poured from Jesus’ brow, so we might freely eat his bread of life.

That was last week. Today we meet another son of dust, the patriarch Jacob, wrestling with God, clinging to Adam’s hope of redemption. In Hebrew, Jacob’s name means Grabber. As the Grabber, he struggled against his twin brother Esau in the womb. He grabbed Esau’s heel at birth. He grabbed Esau’s birthright for a pot of stew. And he grabbed Esau’s blessing by disguising himself in animal fur. But now the tables are turned. His grabbing and cheating have caught up with him, his blessings are drying up. Esau is coming to grab him, coming with four hundred fighting men for revenge. And God himself grabs Jacob to wrestle in the dust. What else can the Grabber do but grab God back? He holds on for dear life, wrestling all night for a blessing. The son of dust refuses to let go, he holds on even though God himself fights against him.

On another night twenty years earlier, when Jacob first fled from Esau, God promised him a part in Adam’s hope of redemption. Sleeping with his head on a stone, Jacob dreamed of a ladder with angels going up and down to heaven. Standing atop the ladder, God spoke to him and promised his son of dust descendants as numerous as the dust of the earth. He said, **“I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”**² So God extended the covenant he made with Abraham and Isaac, the promise of land, offspring, and blessing. In Jacob, the ancient promise to Eve was being fulfilled. Through him would come a Redeemer to crush Satan, to bring blessing to the world. And now, as he returned from his years of exile, Jacob prayed in faith to his God, **“Please deliver me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him, that he may come and attack me, the mothers with the children. But you said, ‘I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.’”**³

By refusing to let God go without a blessing, Jacob only held God to his own promise. He struggled with God and prevailed. He wrestled the mysterious man until daybreak, neither one gaining the advantage, till at last the man touched Jacob’s hip to put it out of joint. The pain reminded Jacob of his mortality, that he was a son of dust. It also revealed God’s supernatural strength, proving who he was. So Jacob recognized the face of God. He saw God’s face without perishing. But he only survived because he held on by faith.

Like Jacob, we wallow in the dust our whole life long. As sons of dust, we grab whatever we please, we are only after our own interests. Also, through the dark night of our earthly life, we’re so confused and disoriented.

¹ Psalm 72:9

² Genesis 28:13-15

³ Genesis 32:11-12

In our daily troubles, we can't tell who we're fighting. If Satan causes our suffering, why isn't God in control? And if it's God, why does he let us suffer? When you wrestle with these questions, hold on to God. Hold him to his own promised salvation. Remember that God only seemed to be Jacob's adversary. God actually grabbed Jacob in love. He struggled with Jacob to bring him to repentance and faith. He came to earth to wrestle his son of dust who hardly recognized him, a son who stubbornly kept on struggling, who stubbornly thought he could climb the ladder up to heaven by his own grabbing efforts.

The same man who wrestled with Jacob also went to the cross to fight for you. He revealed himself as God by enduring pain on your behalf. So when Jesus wrestles against you now, know that he wrestles for your sake. He prevails against your sinful nature. He refuses to let you go down to the dust of the grave. He touches your sinful flesh with his supernatural strength, to cleanse you and redeem you. He grabs you until you recognize him as your Redeemer. And he fights with you till the sunrise, till you finally see him by faith.

On top of all that, Jesus also wrestles with his Father for your sake. He wrestled in prayer in the garden of Gethsemane. Because we have no strength in ourselves, he wrestles for us to obtain our blessing. He intercedes for us to the Father, refusing to let God leave us without his blessing of forgiveness.

When Jacob crossed the Jordan river, he thought Esau would kill him. Instead, crossing the river drowned the Grabber right out of him. His encounter with God left him limping, a changed man with a new identity. He limped away on the other side with a new name, Israel, the man who wrestles with God. In the same way, God meets us violently in baptism. He comes to drown our old Adam, to wrestle and kill our sinful nature. He gives us a new name, a new identity in Christ. We're no longer grabbers and sons of dust, but Christians. And baptism leaves us limping. No longer do we walk on our own, we walk by faith in Jesus.

Just as Jesus keeps his promise of love toward you, he kept his promise toward Jacob. He changed Esau's heart. The next day, Genesis 33 tells us, "**Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.**"⁴ And Jacob said to Esau, "**I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of God, and you have accepted me.**"⁵ Just as Jacob saw his Redeemer's face in the man he wrestled, he even saw his Redeemer's face in the brother who once sought to kill him.

So God preserved Jacob. He let Israel wrestle with him and survive. He established his sons as the nation of Israel, the nation that wrestles with God. And God invited Israel to bring their complaints to him. He taught them to wrestle in prayer like in Psalm 38. "**O Lord, rebuke me not in your anger, nor discipline me in your wrath! For your arrows have sunk into me, and your hand has come down on me... But for you, O Lord, do I wait; it is you, O Lord my God, who will answer... I confess my iniquity; I am sorry for my sin... Do not forsake me, O Lord! O my God, be not far from me! Make haste to help me, O Lord, my salvation!**"⁶

The man who taught his sons to wrestle also teaches you. Jesus sealed his covenant of love towards you by giving you his body and blood in the Lord's Supper, as a guarantee that he will never let you go. And since he won't let you go, you can lay hold of him. You have the right to wrestle with him. You have a relationship with God, you have access to the Father through Jesus. You can bring your complaints and your suffering to him, seeking his blessing of forgiveness, holding him to his promise of life and salvation.

Therefore, O sons of dust, hold on to God. Even if God himself seems like your adversary, refuse to let go of his promised love. He is faithful, no matter how often you grab sin or wallow in the dust. Jesus stays with you, to bring you to the dawn. He's pleased to make his face shine on you. And when you awake from the darkness of this earthly life, you'll open your eyes in heaven, to see his radiant face. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

⁴ Genesis 33:4

⁵ Genesis 33:10

⁶ Psalm 38:1-2, 15, 18, 21-22