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Pentecost 19

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The God Who Wrestles For You”

Text: Genesis 32:22-30; Luke 18:1-8; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Trust but verify. Some of you will remember when President Ronald Reagan used that phrase when negotiating with the Russians during the cold war. He was clever, because it is actually a Russian proverb that he turned around and used against the Russians themselves! *Doveray no proveryay.* I'm sure I'm not pronouncing that very well, but the *meaning* of the proverb is clear: *trust only goes so far.* We trust BUT . . . still make preparations, hedge our bets, make sure we have a back-up plan. In case we are betrayed. In case our trust turned out to be foolish.

Well, *doveray no proveryay* seems to be what Jacob is doing with God. I trust you God, BUT . . .

You see, Jacob was about to meet his estranged brother Esau for the first time in twenty years. His brother who first he took advantage of to get his birthright, then tricked their father to steal his blessing, and who on that day said he was going to kill that lying, stealing, conniving, no good brother of his. So Jacob fled. Lived with his uncle for the past 20 years. But now the Lord said it was time to go home. The Lord promised to be with Jacob. Even as the Lord had been with Jacob the past 20 years in his exile and had prospered him greatly. The Lord had given him great and precious promises. And even right before this that we heard about today, Jacob had seen the angels of God with him and confessed, *This is God's camp* (32:1)!

But still . . . *doveray no proveryay.* Jacob can't quite trust the Lord. He hedges his bets. He sends gifts to Esau to soften him up. First a servant with 200 female goats and 20 male goats. Then after him another servant with 200 ewes and 20 rams. Then 30 milking camels and their calves, then 40 cows and 10 bulls, and then 20 female donkeys and 10 male donkeys. One after the other after the other, to win Esau's heart . . . or at least, a little mercy. Then, as we heard today, he sends his family away for their protection, and he is alone. Not knowing what tomorrow will bring. But knowing he's done all he could. *Doveray no proveryay.* It's the way of the world.

But it's not the way of God.

So God comes to Jacob that night, as we heard today, in this strange overnight wrestling match. He didn't have to. God could have just appeared to Jacob, told him to shape up and trust! But Jacob already knew that, just as we know that. This wrestling match was emblematic of what Jacob had been doing all along: **wrestling with God**. *Doveray no proveryay*. Because that's what sin has done to us. It has made us no longer trust God. Oh, we do . . . but we don't. We do with this . . . but not that. At these times . . . but not all the time. **Sin has made us no longer trust God as we should, and no longer trusting God as we should is why we sin!** We take matters into our own hands. To get the outcome we want.

But what has this gotten Jacob? Well, like that night, he's kind of in a stalemate with God. God has been wrestling for him but all his life he has been wrestling against God. So no more. God injures him. So he will have to just *doveray*, trust. Trust in the God who - whether he knows or understands it or not - **has been wrestling for him and blessing him all along**. A fight that began when Adam and Eve were driven from the Garden, and that will not end until we are safely through the gates to everlasting life.

Now, I don't really have to tell you about this - *you know it*. The battle against evil in our world. The battle that rages on inside you! That trusts God, BUT . . . but wonders, doubts. Can I be sure? Will He still? Have I been too sinful? Have I used up all my chances? 'Cause things don't look so good right now! I'm afraid of what tomorrow will bring, of my Esau on the other side of the river. *Doveray . . . no proveryay!* I trust . . . but I have to verify! I have to do this. I have to protect myself. I have to hedge my bets. I have to prepare. I have to . . . *what?* What do you have to do that God cannot do for you? Why are you relying on yourself, your own reason or strength? Why are you trying to be your own wrestler? Why are you wrestling with God?

So Jacob is forced to trust God, and, turns out, God had it handled! Esau didn't want the gifts, didn't want to kill his brother anymore. All Jacob got out of his *proveryay*-ing was a limp.

And for you and me, too. Our lack of trust, our wrestling with God is only hurting ourselves. Making life harder for ourselves.

For yes, we have a God we can *doveray*, we can trust, who is wrestling for us, fighting for us. And not just Jacob's story, but *the whole Old Testament* testifies to this. God's care for Abraham, Isaac, and yes, Jacob. God leading His people out of their slavery in Egypt and giving them the promised land. God protecting them from the nations around them. And when the people got in trouble, when things went

south, it was because they stopped *doveyay*-ing, trusting, and took matters into their own hands, doing what they thought best, worshipping false gods. And so sometimes God had to hurt them, so that they would have to turn to Him and trust Him again.

But all that was just the prelude to the real wrestling match to come, when the Son of God came and wrestled for us, fought for us. When He took our sins upon Himself and took them to the cross. When He shed His blood on our behalf. When the Lamb of God was far more than just injured for us, but died in our place. And when three days later, what looked like the greatest defeat of all time turned out to be the greatest victory of all time, with sin, death, satan, and hell all conquered in His resurrection. What we could never do, He did. **A victory He now gives to us.**

For, to move into the Holy Gospel we heard today, our God is no ***unrighteous judge***, only in it for himself, and not wanting to be bothered. No! Jesus is only using that as an example . . . that if we're like that widow, with people in our world like that unrighteous judge, why not also with a loving, merciful, gracious, giving heavenly Father, and His Son who not only *wants* to bless us, but laid down His life for us. *Why not go to the righteous one who will always do the right thing?*

We should. We know we should. We can *doveyay*, trust, and we don't have to *proveyay*, verify, because Jesus has already done that for us in His resurrection. That's all the proof we need that the victory is His. That the One who came to wrestle, to fight for us, has won. There on the cross is where **we** see God face-to-face and our life is delivered. There on the cross is our *Peniel* - the **face** of God. And there in the Font is the *yad-el*, the **hand** of God, who in those waters made us His own. And there on the altar is the *lehem-el*, the **bread** of God, who feeds us and strengthens us. And here is the **Word** of God and the **forgiveness** of God and the **life** of God . . . for here **IS** God, in the Church of God, *for you*. The God who wrestles for you, fights for you, and will not stop.

So you come, maybe injured, bruised and beaten up again by the world, and He is here to heal your soul.

Maybe you come, like Paul warned Timothy, with ***itching ears***, wanting God to approve of what you want and to say what would make your life easier. But you will not hear that here. Your God is here to speak the truth in love.

Maybe you come filled with guilt and shame for what you have done again this week, rolling around in the cesspool of your sins, and the One who died for those sins is here with His forgiveness for you.

And what else? Maybe you come filled with fear, or anger, or bitterness, or sadness, and your wrestling with these hasn't made them go away or get any better. And here is the crucified One for you, to fight for you, to fight *these things* for you, and win. You'll gain the victory no other way.

I won't let you go unless you bless me! Jacob said that today, and the widow we heard about did that. Jesus told that parable so we would, too - ***pray and not lose heart***. But even greater than that is having a Saviour who is here for us and says to us, ***I won't let you go unless I bless you!*** And He does. Blessing upon blessing here. Blessing that will never run out.

And when you're facing the greatest fear of all, when you don't know what tomorrow will bring, when your Esau on the other side of the river **is the enemy called death**, and there's nothing you can do to win that battle . . . like Jacob, you'll find out that *God had it handled*. He took care of it for you. You'll pass from life to life in your Saviour, who went through death to life for you.

But the story of Jacob teaches us that you can live in that life, that freedom, even now. On this side. Because in the midst of fear, of uncertainty, or whatever, *your* God who *wrestles* for you and *fought* for you is *here* for you, and *your* life has been delivered.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.