

## Fight with God

### Sermon on Sunday Quasimodogeniti Genesis 32:23-32



That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. <sup>23</sup> After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. <sup>24</sup> So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. <sup>25</sup> When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. <sup>26</sup> Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

<sup>27</sup> The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. <sup>28</sup> Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel,<sup>[f]</sup> because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome." <sup>29</sup> Jacob said, "Please tell me your name." But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there. <sup>30</sup> So Jacob called the place Peniel,<sup>[g]</sup> saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared." <sup>31</sup> The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel,<sup>[h]</sup> and he was limping because of his hip. <sup>32</sup> Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip, because the socket of Jacob's hip was touched near the tendon.

Family stories are complicated, especially when you have to reunite after a long time. We all know this situation: family members gather at their grandmother's funeral, sit around the coffee table afterward, and exchange small gifts. But there remains a tense atmosphere because the past between them is like an elephant in the room. The one who squandered Grandma's savings on the stock market sits apart with a gloomy look, while the one who stole Grandma's cuckoo clock boasts about how well it fits in her living room. Despite smiling faces and superficial conversation, real problems are swept under the rug. Such events can be very stressful. There is a tension in the air, and the upturned eyes and whispers of the children in the next room reveal a different reality than the friendly smiles of the parents.

We also know a similar story from the Bible: the story of Jacob and Esau. Esau was Isaac's firstborn and was to receive his father's inheritance. But through deception, Jacob acquired his brother's birthright and received his father's blessing unlawfully. As a result, Jacob had to flee penniless and live as a stranger in another land for many years. But Jacob was a fighter and was able to build up a considerable fortune through hard work. When he eventually returned to his homeland as a rich man, many questions and fears plagued Jacob: What would Esau, who hated him, do? Could he even keep the stolen blessing? And was such a stolen blessing effective at all? Would there be a bloody battle between the brothers? In this situation, Jacob prayed to God. And God heard him. However, He heard him in a way that Jacob did not expect. God stood in Jacob's way and challenged him to a fight! What followed is one of the most peculiar stories in the Bible. We see a depiction that does not suit us at all. A God who appears as a human and challenges Jacob to a wrestling match. And what is even more bizarre is that it is not immediately clear who will emerge as the winner of this fight. Jacob and God remain locked in combat for some time. In the end, the situation ends in a stalemate. God touches Jacob's hip socket and paralyzes him, and Jacob holds God in a chokehold and refuses

to release Him until He finally blesses him unequivocally! Even though this narrative may seem strange to us, we should not dismiss it hastily. Similarly, we should not idealize Jacob's struggle with God as a spiritual fight too quickly. After all, in a spiritual fight, a man does not normally sprain his hip. Jacob's fight with God can be very helpful to us. Because the story shows us a different side of God that we otherwise would not know. Normally, when it comes to a spiritual fight, the sides are clear to us. Because we believe that God must always be on our side, and Satan, with his horns and pitchfork, is the great opponent. It is clear that Satan roams around like a roaring lion, seeking to devour us. But we often make it too easy for ourselves by placing our will above God's and daring to make God a partner in our own plans and desires. What we sell as God's holy will is often nothing but our own sinful lust. The story of Jacob shows us another side. Namely, that God can be our opponent. God can stand in our way and say, "Not like this!" It can be an extremely difficult fight when God stands in our way like this. It can be a fight where we do not come out unscathed. Perhaps we can even say that our toughest battles are not the ones where we fight against Satan, but the fights where God opposes our will. The fight against God, where it is difficult for me to say "yes" to God's will, can be harder than the fight against Satan. We should also dwell on the physical struggle between Jacob and God for a while before we reinterpret this fight as a symbolic act. Obviously, Jacob engaged in a physical fight with God. But this fight was about much more than just a show of strength. In the middle of the story, it becomes clear that Jacob was not dealing with humans, but with God. And the story ends with Jacob's realization that he has seen God face to face. So what is being shown to us here is a physical confrontation with God. However, during the fight, Jacob spoke with God. And God spoke with him. So Jacob's struggle with God is clearly also prayer! But Jacob certainly did not pray in a Gregorian manner. Nor did he hold his hands in a pious prayer posture. No, Jacob's prayer is completely different. It is such that prayer challenged him completely, body and soul. We should already know from Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane that prayer also has a bodily dimension, where it is said that Jesus sweat blood. If we assume that prayer is a real encounter with God, then it is clear that prayer can take on different forms. And it is entirely possible that prayer can consume us completely, body, mind, and soul. Prayer can be a bitter struggle.

The exciting question is, how did this prayer with God end? Jacob's struggle reaches its climax when God asks for Jacob's name: "What is your name?" By saying his name, Jacob confesses his sin. For in the story of Jacob's birth, it becomes clear why he is called "Jacob." It says there that Jacob grabbed his first-born brother's foot during birth. His mother, who saw all this, immediately gave him the name Jacob, which means "grappler" when translated. This word "grappler" can just as easily be translated "deceiver." For Jacob seized his brother Esau's birthright through deception. Thus, Jacob's struggle with God comes to a dramatic climax when God asks, "What is your name?" And Jacob must answer, "Deceiver!" By saying his name in this way, he must also confess his sin: he must say, "I am a deceiver." And Jacob had to say this as a condition before God would bless him. By asking Jacob for his name, God demands a confession! And something strange happens at that point. God lets Jacob go. He even lets him be the winner. And gives him the name "Israel," which means "struggled with God."

And then suddenly everything was over. Groaning and gasping, Jacob limped away. But he became aware that the sun was shining in his face. Suddenly Jacob understood everything again. The hidden God, with whom he had struggled all night, was none other than the same one who had been there from the beginning. The God who had also shown him in a dream that He would bless him forever. Jacob suddenly understood everything. He had completely lost his way. He had cheated his brother and now wanted to cover up this sin with a bar of chocolate and let grass grow over it. God stood in his way. Not like this! Jacob had to come

before God and reveal his soul. It was a bitter struggle. A struggle that had not passed sparingly on Jacob. For he now went on his way limping. But the sun shined in his face, and from that moment on, he knew: it will be okay! For God is at my side with his blessing. Dear congregation! We, like Jacob, are all on a path that God has prepared for us in different ways. Just like Jacob, not everything goes according to plan for us. There are mistakes and sometimes hard sins that weigh heavily on our souls. It may be that we do not get away without injuries. And when God stands in our way, it can happen that God is our adversary. Because he has to handle us in some tough places. That hurts! But it is precisely at the point where it hurts that we can rely on God's own promises. God bless me! Not because I deserve it, but because you yourself have promised that I am your child and belong to you! God bless me! You have promised it yourself. "Whoever believes and is baptized will not be condemned but will inherit eternal life." My name is thus connected to yours, and I am your child by right. Amen.