

## **Wrestling by Night, Persisting by Day**

### **Prayer of Illumination**

Present God,

Settle our hearts.

Still our minds.

And stir our imaginations,

That we might hear your Word for us this day. Amen.

### **Genesis 32:22-31**

That same night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

### **Luke 18:1-8**

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my accuser.'

For a while he refused, but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'

And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to God's chosen ones who cry to God day and night? Will God delay long in helping them? I tell you, God will suddenly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

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## Wrestling by Night, Persisting by Day

You've probably heard the line: "Religion is the opium of the people."

Karl Marx said it looking at a church that helped people escape the pain of life instead of engaging it—a faith that soothed suffering but rarely challenged it, that promised comfort in heaven while ignoring hurt on earth. In Marx's eyes, faith was something that helped people survive hardship but not confront it. And Marx wasn't entirely wrong. Faith can lose its edge; it can forget that God calls us not to escape the world, but to love it fiercely.

But that isn't the faith we encounter in our stories for this morning. The faith we find in Scripture isn't one that is numb to the world's pain, but one that engages with it. It doesn't retreat from the world's ache but leans into it. Both of our stories this morning—Jacob's long night by the river and the widow's daily visits to the judge—are stories of struggle. But they are also stories of courage and transformation, of persistence and a faith that refuses to be silenced.

In our first story, we meet Jacob at one of the most pivotal moments of his life: alone in the dark, camped by the river Jabbok, anticipating a reunion with the brother he wronged so many years before. We first meet Jacob in scripture when he is still in his mother's womb, wrestling with his twin brother, Esau. When the boys are born, Jacob comes out clutching Esau's heel as if refusing to be second—and that grasping never really stops. He cons his brother out of his birthright, tricks his father into giving him the family blessing, and then flees for his life.

Away from home, Jacob meets his match in his uncle Laban. He falls in love with Laban's younger daughter, Rachel, and works seven years to earn her hand. But when the time comes, Laban deceives him, marrying him to his eldest daughter, Leah, instead. So Jacob works seven more years for Rachel, and rivalry soon takes root between the sisters and their sons. Yet Jacob remains as shrewd as ever, matching deception with deception, always trying to stay one step ahead. His life becomes a tangle of struggle and scheming—one conflict giving rise to another, one deception answered by another. Jacob wrestles his way through the world, always reaching, always grasping, never quite content.

After a lifetime of striving, we find Jacob alone in the dark, beside the river Jabbok, waiting for whatever will come next. And a man appears and wrestles with him until daybreak. The two are locked in struggle for hours, neither one yielding. At some point, Jacob's hip is struck and knocked out of joint, but even then he will not let go. The night stretches on, and when the first light begins to rise, the stranger says, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob refuses. Hip out of socket, exhausted and aching, he clings tighter still: "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

Only then does the struggle end. The blessing comes, but not without a cost. Jacob walks away with a new name, a new blessing, and a new limp—the wound and the blessing bound together. The struggle leaves its mark, as faith so often does. From this moment on, Jacob will

walk differently—a daily reminder that faith rarely leaves us unchanged.

Some of us heard this same story yesterday as we gathered to remember Kathy Jaeck's life—a life that knew something about wrestling and about refusing to let go. Kathy's faith, like Jacob's, was fierce and alive. It held on when it would have been easier to give in. It looked reality square in the face and engaged the struggle rather than avoiding it. It did not deny pain or disguise doubt, but met them head-on. And in that way, her faith reminds us that real faith isn't about certainty—it's about staying in the struggle and trusting that God is in it too.

Jacob's story (and Kathy's), helps us recognize that every life of faith faces nights of wrestling—times when we question, when we wait, when we can't quite hear God's voice. And in those times, faith has to become a trust that outlasts our understanding—a determination to stay present even when the silence stretches long. In those times, faith holds on even when you're not sure what you're holding on to. It keeps praying, even when the words come out more like sighs than sentences. It doesn't come with clean answers, but sits beside grief, asks hard questions, and reaches for God in the dark—sometimes finding only silence.

Faith like this doesn't anesthetize us to the world; it awakens us to it. It refuses to accept suffering as inevitable or injustice as normal. It wrestles and prays, questions and persists—it insists that the very place of struggle can become a place of blessing. In Jacob's story, we see that faith doesn't stand apart from the struggle; it lives within it. Faith is the wrestling—the ache, the reaching, and the holding on.

And while Jacob wrestles in the dark of night, the widow in this morning's story shows us what it looks like to wrestle in broad daylight.

“There once was a judge,” Jesus says, “who neither feared God nor had respect for people.” And in that same city there was a widow who kept coming to the judge, insisting that he grant her justice. The judge was unmoved, but the woman persisted and eventually the judge relented, not out of compassion, but sheer annoyance.

According to Luke, the parable is “about the need to pray always and not lose heart”—and that's not wrong. If we stop there, however, we risk mishearing the story and thinking that prayer is simply a matter of pestering God until we get what we want. But that's not what's happening here, and that's not who God is. This story may begin with prayer, but it leads us deeper—beyond the words we speak to the faith that keeps breathing beneath them.

What Jesus offers here isn't a formula but a portrait of faithful persistence. The widow's pleading is her prayer; her persistence is her trust. Day after day, she keeps showing up, trusting that justice—and the God of justice—are still worth hoping for, even when the odds are long and the silence is heavy.

Perhaps it is this kind of faith that Jesus is wondering about at the end of the parable, when he asks, *“When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”*

The faith of the widow is a faith that refuses to retreat from the world’s struggles but instead steps straight into them. It is the kind of faith the world needs right now—a faith that does not give up on the possibility of goodness, or on the slow, stubborn work of justice. In a time when it feels easier to turn away, to grow cynical or numb, the widow’s faith is a faith that continues to show up, to believe that persistence still matters, that hope can still take root, that love is not naïve but necessary. In an age that prizes speed and certainty, where everything from news to attention spans moves fast, persistence can feel out of place. Waiting, hoping, working for what doesn’t come quickly—these are not our natural habits. But faith invites us to settle in, to stay with the struggle long enough for grace to take root.

In the widow, we see that faith is not only private or inward—it is public, embodied, and persistent in the face of power. Where Jacob’s wrestling happens in the solitude of night, the widow’s persistence unfolds in the full light of day. Jacob struggles for personal blessing and reconciliation while the widow struggles for justice—something that benefits her whole community. The same tenacity that clung to God by the riverside now stands up before an unjust judge. The faith that refuses to let go of God also refuses to let go of the world that God loves.

And because no one can hold on alone, God gives us one another. Which is why we come here—not to shield ourselves from struggle but to be part of a community that stands with us in the struggle. Here we remember, week after week, that we don’t face the darkness by ourselves. When one of us grows weary, another can hold on for a while. When one of us can’t pray, another’s words can carry us. Together, we become a people who wrestle and persist, who keep believing God’s promises even when the evidence is thin. The church is not a gathering of the triumphant; it’s a fellowship of those who keep showing up. It’s where we practice the stubborn hope of Jacob and the courageous persistence of the widow. And in a world quick to give up, that kind of hope might be the most generous gift we can offer.

In this season of stewardship, the faith of Jacob and the widow remind us that faith is not only what we believe but how we live. It’s what we do with our time, our energy, our resources, and our hope. Faith is the way we keep showing up and holding on—to God, to one another, and to the work of love and justice that still needs doing. We give not because everything is perfect or certain, but because we believe that what we offer can help bring a measure of blessing and justice into the world. Each act of generosity, each offering, each prayer is another way of saying, *“We will not let go until the blessing comes.”*

As Jacob’s long night finally gives way to dawn, the stranger blesses him and says, *“You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed.”* Israel—the one who struggles. It becomes not just Jacob’s name, but the name of all God’s people. To be part of God’s covenant is to be part of a people who wrestle—with God,

with the world, and with ourselves—a people who refuse to let go.

And when we set Jacob beside the widow, we see the fullness of faith—a faith that wrestles with God in the dark and a faith that wrestles for the world in the light. Because the truth is, both struggles are holy. The nights when we cling to God and the days when we stand up for justice or mercy—they're both ways of holding on. Because that's what it means to be people of faith: not that we never struggle, but that we stay in it—that we keep showing up—with our questions, our courage, our persistence, our doubts—trusting that God meets us both in the wrestling and in the rising of the dawn.

Faith isn't about having all the answers; it definitely isn't about being certain. Faith requires something much harder—that we stay in the struggle; that we continue to show up and do our best: to love even when it is hard, to work for justice even when the night seems long, to trust that God is present not only in moments of triumph but in the wrestling itself.

So, if you find yourself struggling—if your faith limps, if your hope wavers, if your prayers feel like wrestling in the dark—remember that you are in good company. You come from a long line of people who have wrestled and prevailed, simply because they refused to let go.

Jacob's story ends with the sun rising over Peniel, light spilling across the ground where he wrestled. It's a small dawn, but it's enough. And maybe that's how faith works—one dawn at a time. We hold on through the night, and somehow the light breaks in again. Not because we've conquered God or the world, but because we've refused to let go of either.

So may we be a people who wrestle by night  
and persist by day,  
bearers of stubborn hope  
who trust that even our struggling can become a blessing,  
and that God's justice will rise with the dawn.  
Amen.