Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen. The texts for this morning’s message are the lessons for this day, particularly the Old Testament lesson from Genesis.

He was the grandson of converts. The strong faith of his grandfather had led him to a far off country – the land where his father was born and carried on the new-found faith of his father. He was not the eldest son but was the son who would carry on the dynasty of faith. Going off to a far place himself he learned much – had what one would have considered a “defining moment of faith” but there was another, some would say far more important moment ahead of him. One would have thought the large family – a dynasty in themselves that would grow “countless as the sands” would have been defining enough but there was more in store – a crippling moment that allowed the greatness of God to shine forth in a more miraculous way.

So, you think, is the story of Jacob. And certainly it is – but couldn’t it be the story of any number of the heroes of faith throughout the millennia? Aren’t there echoes of Jacob’s journey – his defining moments of faith in the lives of countless women and men? Don’t we all come to defining moments of faith? Yes, we do. As Christians, Lutheran Christians to be specific, who believe that the church is most clearly seen in the gathering of professing people of faith around God’s Word and the Sacraments we look to the baptism, the confirmation of that baptismal faith, and to God’s grace miraculously, mysteriously, and sacramentally applied to us in the washing of water, the speaking of the Word, and through the bread and wine where we receive the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ as the places where our faith is most clearly defined. This is most certainly true! But, to be honest, while that is the “party line” the real business of the church which is certainly that neat and tidy in eternal and theological terms remains incredibly messy because in God’s church God is dealing with some pretty messy and messed up sinners – not just you, me too. And certainly God’s anthropomorphic hands were full with Jacob ben Isaac ben Abraham. Embryonic Jacob wrestled with his red and hairy brother Esau in the womb – before they were even born. His very name means “heel-grabber,” “tricky one,” “the one who usurps or takes the place of,” – doesn’t sound like his parents were too amused by his hand reaching out of the birth canal grabbing onto twin Esau’s heel so they stuck him with this monniker.

Searching in the Mishnah for information on this defining moment in Jacob’s life I found an online Torah Study (Bible Study) where they kept referring to Jacob as “the heel” – a sneaky, tricky, underhanded Mama’s boy who wrestled with honesty and following God and trusting God’s will throughout his life until this defining moment. In rather uncomplimentary terms the commentator said Jacob would not have had equal status with the other Patriarchs – Abraham and Isaac, unless he’d wrestled with the angel (this was the Mishnah – the Hebrew commentary – they believe the angel Jacob wrestled with was the Archangel guardian/protector.
of Esau/Edom whereas Christian commentators – Luther included, would say that he wrestled with God/Jesus).

I found it hard to believe that the dream at Bethel with angels ascending and descending would not have been enough to distinguish Jacob – but this womb wrestler was in a long-term (life-long) match with God. His faith in the God of his fathers, revealed in great part by his mother, Rebekah, who knew God had a special plan for her son, kept him safe – caused him to learn to trust in God when he met up with a much trickier Uncle Laban who passed off his weak-eyed daughter Leah on Jacob instead of his little lamb Rachel (Leah’s name, like all Hebrew names, has many meanings: gazelle, cow-eyes, poorly seeing eyes – imagine a beautiful gazelle that’s very near-sighted leaping over a precipice. Whereas Rachel means “innocent lamb,” “little lamb,” or “female sheep.”). In long years of forced labor God was faithful in giving Jacob all the blessings possible as he dealt with his less-than-honest father-in-law/uncle.

So Jacob’s household grew: 11 sons and a daughter, flocks and herds that made him a wealthy man. But now he is going home to meet his brother. Playing it safe as he’s heard his brother has amassed an army he sends generous gifts - signs of his wealth, success and supplication ahead while he waits one more night on the other side of the river. One writer of the Mishnah says Jacob stayed behind at Jabbok to get some jars. The Midrash says he stayed to help a shepherd with a large flock – but as many sheep as he sent across there were still more – until he realized it was not just a shepherd but an angel.

Scripture tells us that in the night he sent his wives and children, man servants, maidservants – all his retinue across the stream and stayed behind where he wrestled with a man until daybreak. Now I mentioned to the children that wrestling is a sport where to stay in the match you have to know your own strengths and weaknesses, you have to be able to anticipate the moves of your opponent and adapt and change quickly to anything unexpected and then learn from it. It is, in its way, a kind of dance – and Jacob danced with God hour upon hour. Think of it! To Dance with God …sounds delightful but imagine how grueling that must have been. Still – Jacob who had learned all kinds of moves on his long journey of faith was able to stay even with this heavenly opponent and wasn’t going to let go as the dawn was breaking. Here is one of the main clues in the text that the opponent is God – to see the face of God kills you…the dawn was breaking God had to leave Jacob before he could see God’s face but Jacob would not let go without first receiving a blessing (another clue as God is the source of every blessing). That blessing came in a most unusual way, however, with a dislocated hip that never healed as well as with a new name for our Heel-grabbing Hero. The early Jewish commentators will tell you the hip was a badge of honor – it didn’t hurt because God numbed the Sciatic nerve – and you can’t keep Kosher if you eat any meat that has the Sciatic nerve running through it (no Filet Mignon!). Jacob – no longer the “tricky one” becomes Israel – “God rules, God is strong, God has authority over/judges,” or “Wrestled with God.” Again another complicated name with a constant but not painful limp to remind him he’d wrestled with God and prevailed in receiving a blessing. The name, the blessing – this is his defining moment of faith.

It is also where this text intersects with our Gospel as another unlikely hero emerges in the parable of Jesus – a woman begging from a judge – an unjust judge who had “no fear of God and no respect for anyone.” You see, at the time of Jesus women weren’t allowed to plead a case...
before a judge except in extraordinary circumstances. When such an exception was made and the woman’s voice was allowed to be heard in court she was regarded as a man – her case considered equal to any the judge would hear – not that this judge cared. Worn down by the persistence of this woman the judge gives in (another amazed AHHHHHHH from the audience Jesus was speaking to as it would have been unthinkable for a woman to find such favor).

So – we should wrestle with God and whine our way into getting what we want? Yes! Yes? Wrestle with God – Dance with God – meet God in the Word – open your heart to know God’s heart – make yourself vulnerable to God moving in your life in new and glorious ways – challenging you, taking you to limits you didn’t realize you could reach, humbling you – making you more and more like God as you learn to move together. Whining? Well, I guess I was thinking how so many of my own prayers must sound to God: “Give me this God…please! I really, really need/want/have to have this or that!” No, don’t whine – but do persist in prayer and if you’re confused about what it is you are to persist in – well, look back to what Jacob did…it’s in your Bibles not in the lesson for this day but just before it. Jacob speaks to God – prays to God, if you will and boldly calls on God to be the just judge God is and claims the promises God has revealed to him through all his years of wrestling with sneaks and sneakiness:

‘O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O Lord who said to me, “Return to your country and to your kindred, and I will do you good”, I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan; and now I have become two companies. Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children. Yet you have said, “I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted because of their number.”’

Jacob humbles himself before God and acknowledges he is not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness God has shown. He honestly tells God his deepest fear – that his brother will kill him and his family – and then he asks God to remember him according to God’s promise to love and care for him and make of him a great nation.

And in the end – after this defining moment of faith – Jacob/Israel is surprised. Limping joyfully across that river he finds God has changed his brother’s heart. Esau no longer hates him. He is home in the land God promised with his entire family. There was much more ahead for Israel – much more treachery and deceit that this father of 13 would witness – great sorrow and loss, but there was always that limp to remind him he’d “Danced with God” and won the great blessing from the Righteous Judge.

So is the story of Jacob recorded for all to read. Early on in the sermon I mentioned such defining moments of faith are present in all our lives. I even had in mind to share with you a story or two of incredible but not well-known people of faith and their defining moments of faith but I will leave you with the challenge to think of your own closing illustration – someone you know who has wrestled and danced with God and trusted in God’s unfailing/steadfast mercy and love. Remember their story – take heart from it – and share your own defining moments of faith in Jesus and how God has changed you for eternity.

AMEN
Early on in the sermon I mentioned such defining moments of faith are present in all our lives but I had in mind to share the story of a specific man of faith with a similar defining journey of faith. He was not a man I knew well – he was 56 when I was born. His grandparents were converts to the faith – to Christianity – who came to a far land (the United States) as missionaries. His father, like his grandfather, was a pastor and when he was a young man he served as his father’s assistant at a church with 3000 members. Married to his little sister’s best friend (the lawyer’s daughter – not his cousin) he went on to serve in tiny Lutheran churches in Wisconsin and Nebraska. He had four sons and three daughters – three of his sons became Lutheran pastors, his other son and one of his daughters were Lutheran educators, his oldest daughter, a nurse, has two sons in the ministry; descendants like the sands…but for me his defining moment of faith didn’t come at his ordination or in the blessings of his large family. When he was 50 he had a stroke. He had to learn to walk, to speak, to read and write. A gifted musician and organist he eventually learned to play quite well with one hand. Against great odds he went back into full-time ministry with an arm that didn’t work and a leg that dragged. When he placed his hand in blessing on my brother’s head at his ordination I was struck with the immensity of faith and faithfulness that had brought him to that day. He was my uncle, Pastor Hans Boerger. I doubt you’ll ever hear his name again but his witness of faith lives on – lives touched for eternity by a man who was not let go of by God – who wrestled, who danced, who walked with God.

His is just one story and I want to leave you today with the challenge to think of another - your own closing illustration, if you will – someone you know who has wrestled and danced with God and trusted in God’s unfailing/steadfast mercy and love. Remember their story – take heart from it – and share it and your own defining moments of faith in Jesus and how God has changed you for eternity with others – let others see and hear how Jesus has worked in you!

AMEN