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✠ I preach in God's name for God's people. Let my words be from God and for God's people. **Amen**

Good morning.

*Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.*

**We** heard these words on Ash Wednesday, as we sauntered into Lent. These words tell us something we know; in fact, everyone knows this. One of the few guarantees in this life is that death will come.

We had just heard a glimpse of the Holy Week story on Transfiguration Sunday, where we heard that Jesus had come not just to transfigure his clothes and his face into radiant glory, but that Jesus came to transfigure Death into Life. But though Jesus is the very radiance, resplendence, and image of God, his path to the Cross was one of suffering, hunger, and conflict. His coronation ceremony was enacted through betrayal and finished in his death on the cross. But Holy Week is still not yet. And so, we must continue to wade through the life of Jesus in this Lenten season.

I've made *fasting* the hallmark message of this season; though really not me, but the Scriptures we've been hearing have urged us in that direction.

Our Lord *assumes* his followers fast. Our ancestors fell into sin by *not fasting* from that forbidden fruit. Fasting really can reprogram, rework, and reorient our desires towards our Lord Jesus. We are not the monks of the middle ages who had lost the fruits of fasting because they refused to fast from fasting. We are not the ascetics of the desert, living on crumbs of bread and retreating from society. We are Americans: wealthy, well-fed, comfortable—too comfortable. And all the while, we are urged towards *more* comforts. We tend to almost believe that the more comfortable we are, the more ready we are to face what comes at us in this life.

What a surprise then that we encountered last Sunday in the Temptation of Jesus. Our Lord Jesus fasted for forty days and forty nights in the wilderness; he was famished, fatigued, parched. What more could his body take? Then the tempter came—tempting Jesus with bread, with the care of angels, with a shortcut to his mission of becoming king. But as fatigued and famished as he was, nothing that Satan offered Jesus was worth a little more hunger, a little more suffering, a little more exhaustion. Slowly we came to realize the now obvious answer to this question: *Was Jesus at his weakest or at his strongest after fasting for forty days in the wilderness?* Jesus was undoubtedly at his strongest. His fasting had prepared him to resist Satan.

And his fasting and his withstanding temptation prepared him for the rest of the suffering that was to come—his rejection by the priests and Pharisees; his betrayal by Judas; his beatings—and ultimately his death.

*Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.*

No, fasting will not save our souls. But fasting from food, from comforts, from pleasures, from shopping, and from any of the rest, will help to keep us steadfast in the One who *has saved* and *will save* our souls. And that is our desire, to remain faithful to the One who is faithful to us, the One who will bring us through death into life.

We can be sure that situations, events, times, things will challenge our faith. Or, if not our faith directly, we will be challenged by suffering, by loss, by grief, by confusion, and all the rest.

**Our** passage from Genesis 32 is one of my favorites out of the whole Bible. It is the physical picture of faith. It's what faith looks like. Jacob, all night, wrestles with God. He doesn't give in; he doesn't give up. And at daybreak, he still doesn't let go. He won't let go until he receives a blessing. And Jacob gets it; a new name—Israel.

The long setup for this passage is necessary. Jacob is journeying with his family — two wives, two maidservants, eleven children — and he is about to run into his brother, Esau. He arranges his caravan with an enormous gift

for his brother ahead of him: just one of these gifts were thirty milking camels and their calves. Jacob was so wealthy and the gift was so large that he split his possessions into two camps, one going ahead of the other. The gifts, one camp, another camp. But it was dusk, and so he sent his family across the ford, and only he remained behind. Then he encountered the man, the angel, of our story; and there they wrestled all night.

But why such an enormous gift for his brother? Jacob had not seen Esau for fourteen years—on purpose. Fourteen years before, Jacob had nothing, no wife or wives, no children, no livestock. Nothing except the blessing and the birthright he *wrangled* from Esau in deceit. And so, Esau set to put Jacob to death. Jacob had taken both his blessing and his birthright, and so Esau would kill him. So Jacob fled to Laban, and there he toiled for fourteen years, and there he married Leah and Rachel, and there he had eleven children.

So this night—the night he wrestles with God—is the night before he will run into his brother again, the same brother who fourteen years ago had set out to kill him. Are you beginning to see why he stayed up all night? I suspect that even if the angel were not there, he would have had a sleepless night.

This, I think, adds another dimension to our series on fasting. There are simply some things worth losing sleep over. There are simply some things for which it's worth *fasting from sleep*. Wondering whether your brother will kill you, or whether you will be reconciled, seems to be one of those things.

There are certainly times when we need to simply put our mind to rest, because we are just constantly worrying or wondering or anxious about this or that. Paul tells us flat out: “Do not be anxious about anything.” But how does it continue: “but in everything by prayer and supplication, and thanksgiving, make your requests made known to God.”

This is what Jacob did. He wrestled with God until he received a blessing. There's a connection here; I wonder if you see it. What caused Jacob to run away from his brother fourteen years ago? The fact he taken his brother's blessing. What does he ask for now from God? A blessing. Here, God gives to Jacob what he had taken; here, God reassures Jacob that the blessing is his—and in this reassurance, there is also the promise (I think) of reconciliation with his brother.

That is what happens after all. Jacob and Esau are reunited and reconciled the next day.

In our own lives, there seem to be some questions, some “Why's?”, some answers we will not find out on this side of the grave. But there are also those things and those questions which we give up asking too quickly, too easily—sometimes, we just get tired of the wrestling match, and we give in or give up, and let things go.

But perhaps, for some of you, you have wrestled with God until the break of day, and perhaps you have been blessed, just as Jacob was. Finding the truth—receiving the blessing—isn't always pain free, is it? The angel touched Jacob's hip socket, and he was injured for life. The blessing of God and the suffering of this world are often connected.

Isn't this the way of our Lord Jesus—the way of the cross?

**The** Canaanite woman also wrestled with God. There are, unfortunately, so many attempts to make this story into something it is not, that the clear and obvious point is missed. We do not need to apologize for the way Jesus spoke to her; he knew what he was doing. What we need to clue in on is what this woman did and said, for her words and her deeds are among the top treasures of faith in all of Scripture.

Jesus was in gentile territory. We find out from Mark's Gospel that he was in one of their homes, and this is where he encounters the woman. In fact, he had retreated there—to the region of Tyre and Sidon.

Though Canaan as an empire had long since dwindled, its religion continued in its ethnic descendants. Right from the start, we should note two things in Canaanite/Phoenician religious practices: child sacrifice and temple prostitution. These are demonic. It's therefore no surprise to see a demon in this story, and a demon afflicting a child. It likely wanted the child dead.

The first incredible thing we see from this woman is her confession: “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David.” She calls him, in other words, the Christ, the Messiah, the Lord. Here is a Canaanite gentile whose faith is placed in the Savior of Israel. This is striking!

But Jesus is in no hurry; he says nothing. He knows what he is doing. And the same can be said for his silence to us, when we cry out to him in prayer, and we get no response. He knows what he is doing; will we stop crying out to him, or will we continue?

The woman continues—why would she give up now?—and continues to such an extent that the disciples become, at the least, greatly annoyed. Whatever social decorum may exist is gone out the window. There is a woman, in the home, unceasingly crying out for Jesus. The disciples, seeing Jesus say nothing, ask him instead to send her away. This would be quite the scene.

But Jesus does not send her away; he simply tells the disciples that he was not sent except to the Lost Sheep of the House of Israel. This, at first, seems to have closed the door for good. How often do we stop our prayers and petitions too soon, because we settle for silence or settle for not knowing?

She kneels and asks for help from the *Lord*. Remember, she has already called him the *Son of David*. There is nowhere else she can go; for she believes he is the Messiah. He is her only hope.

Finally, Jesus speaks to her: “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.”

Remember they are in a home; and here, we should not read this exactly as “pets” but as “house dogs.” This is the lifeline that Jesus extends, and that she sees, and that she capitalizes on. Perhaps there are even house dogs in this home, gobbling up the crumbs that have fallen.

This woman *fasts from her pride*. She is glad to be a house dog so long as her daughter is healed and she is helped. She is delighted to be *the least* in the kingdom of God, so long as she is *in* the kingdom of God—so long as she is with the only one who has the power to heal. “All I need is your breadcrumbs.”

This woman’s faith is truly a treasure of the Scriptures, a treasure of the church, and is worthy of imitation. Like this woman, let us be delighted to be *the least* in the kingdom of God, for the kingdom of God is *great*.

**We** have heard two of the greatest passages on faith in the Bible: Jacob wrestling with God; the woman wrestling with Jesus. Jacob was injured; the woman gladly laid aside her pride.

So, too, when we wrestle with God, when we cry out *nonstop, unceasingly* in faith, when we insist on being answered, we may find a certain sweetness in suffering. Not that suffering is good by itself, but that suffering is a gift—if we are willing to hear it—that God gives to increase our faith and draw us near to Him.

Jacob fasted from sleep; the woman fasted from pride. Both never let go of God’s Word. May we be given a faith like theirs.

**Christ** the Lord is worthy of all worship and praise and glory and honor and majesty, now and forever. **Amen and amen.**