

In Genesis chapter 12 the Bible narrows in on one man, one couple, Abraham and Sarah. God said, “I will be your God and you and your descendants will be my people.” Boiled down to its essence, God is saying, “I am yours and you are mine. We are together.”

Abraham and Sarah could have responded in various ways. They could have disbelieved that they were God’s and God was theirs. They could have ignored him and gone on living as they had. But they believed him. They packed up and left all that was familiar to go to the land of Canaan that God had promised them.

One might think that you being God’s and God being yours would mean the end of all troubles. The logic goes like this: God likes you—that’s why he’s claimed you as his own. When someone likes you, they do nice things for you. So God liking you should mean the end of all bad things and the beginning of all nice things. As far as I can tell, this logic is flawless. However, from cover to cover, the Bible leaves no doubt that this is *not* how life goes for those who believe in God’s promises.

Abraham and Sarah had many difficulties. Some of these difficulties they brought upon themselves, but some difficulties God brought upon them. The prime example would be when God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. That was unreasonable and awful. Abraham did not ask for that. God imposed it.

You are not as different from Abraham as you might think, even though he lived thousands of years ago. God has not appeared to talk to you, but he has baptized you. The core meaning of baptism is the same as that which God said to Abraham: “I’m yours and you are mine. We are together.”

Just like with Abraham and Sarah, this message can be disbelieved, ignored, or embraced. This can change with time. Our faith can wax and wane. Some days we might feel very strongly that God loves us and will take care of us. Other days we might not think of him; others, very serious doubts.

Also, like Abraham and Sarah, we experience troubles. Some of them are of our own making. Sins have consequences, and those consequences can be severe. But at other times *God* can crush us, altering the course of our life. He can bring about the death of someone we love. He can destroy our health. He can take away our wealth. These are frightening possibilities.

It is understandable to react to these troubles by saying, “If God is like that, then I don’t want to have anything to do with him.” God has said in our baptism: “I am yours, and you are mine,” but we can say, “I don’t want to be yours anymore.”

In our Old Testament reading we heard about Jacob, who was Abraham’s grandson. He inherited the promise made to his grandfather: “I’m yours and you’re mine. We’re together.” Jacob believed this promise.

Jacob experienced all kinds of trouble, much of which was of his own making. He tricked his father Isaac into believing that he was his brother Esau, stealing the blessing that was intended for him. Jacob was tricky, and people were tricky with him in turn, including his father-in-law Laban.

Consequently, at the time of our reading, Jacob was at one of the all time lows of his life. He had just gotten done dealing with his father-in-law who had chased him down, thinking that Jacob had taken his property. He also had just heard that his brother Esau was coming to him with over 400 men. Years before, when Jacob left home, it was because Esau had said that he was going to kill him. Their mother, Rebekah, sent Jacob away so that she wouldn't lose her sons to murder. Now Esau was coming with a small army. Jacob thought his family would be slaughtered. Talk about trouble!

Then, to top it all off, God shows up in the middle of the night as a mysterious stranger, and Jacob is in a fight for his life. Jacob wasn't a pushover, however, and he wasn't just going to play dead. But God is no pushover either. He put his hip out of joint, which must have been excruciating. Hammer and tongs they went at it until the break of day. Then *God* had had enough. He said, "Let me go," but Jacob said, "I will not let you go until you bless me." And he didn't; and God did.

We've talked about trouble. One way to navigate life is to try to minimize suffering at all costs. It's as though there's nothing worse than feeling pain, so do whatever is necessary to make the pain go away. This philosophy will not work well for anyone who wants to follow the Bible. It's simply not the way that God interacts with those whom he has chosen.

If Jacob had lived by that philosophy he would of cried out in fear and horror when this mysterious man first appeared instead of wrestling with him. He would have whimpered and said, "Leave me alone!" He certainly wouldn't have clung to this stranger who was hurting him and demanded a blessing. At the first opportunity he would have limped away saying, "Good riddance! And don't come back!"

We all have a deeply seated fear of pain and loss. We all want our plans to succeed. We all have visions of what our life should be like, what our future should be like. How do we react when these visions don't come to fruition? I think our first reaction is to say, "That's mine, God! You can't have it!" And what if God wrestles it out of our hands nevertheless?

Because we tend to be rather cowardly we might just try not to think about it—"Hopefully God will never do any such thing to me!" Or to excuse him—"God wasn't responsible for our troubles, something else was." We don't have the guts to throw ourselves into the fight with God with all our might to try to dislocate *his* hip or his shoulder.

Have you ever tried fighting, wrestling with God? This is often thought to be against the rules. It is often thought that we have to accept whatever God throws at us with stoic passivity. "Stuff happens. Get over it. Move on. Hopefully the future will have less suffering." But this is not faith. This is more like ignoring God. Although it has a pious veneer because it looks like you are treating God with polite respect, underneath there can be a secret hatred of God for placing upon you unwanted troubles.

Instead of politely ignoring the God who has harmed you, the Bible teaches us a different way—a more sane way, even if it be more daring. It's more sane, because do you really think that God is fooled by your superficial politeness? Do you think God doesn't see the frustration lodged in your heart? So why pretend?

The psalms teach us to pray things like: “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?” Or: “Wake up God! Get up and help us!” Or: “Why do you stand so far off while I am in trouble? Why do you hide yourself when I need your help?”

If there is anyone with whom we can be honest, surely that must be God. We can express the entire range of emotions we have as his creatures. We do not need to make ourselves presentable or attractive. He already knows what we’re really like. So if you feel compelled to get his attention, then wrench on his arm or his leg with all your might! Let him have it! Don’t worry. You won’t break him.

You just might get to know him.

And getting to know God is at the root of all of this. Do you want to know him? Are you afraid of what he might do to you or do you trust him? Do you trust him enough to be honest with him? Do you believe the promise God made to you in your baptism: “I am yours and you are mine. We are together.”?

The example of Jacob teaches us to cling to the God who makes promises to us even though massive troubles come upon us. Faith doesn’t feel compelled to make excuses for God or try to get him off the hook. Faith has hope that even this very same God who has dished out so much pain will also dish out indescribable blessings. As the Psalmist prays, “Let the bones that you have broken rejoice.” God broke the bones, but now that he has healed them, they rejoice. Though Jacob walked with a limp the rest of his life he rejoiced that he had seen God face to face.

God knows you, just like he knew Jacob. God has chosen you, just like he chose Jacob. Believe that you are his and he is yours. You belong together.