

Sermon, Pentecost 19C
October 20, 2019
Genesis 32: 22-31, Luke 18:1-18

Stewards of Hope

Last week my extended family joined my daughter Bethany and her husband Matt in welcoming their newborn daughter to the world. Freya Reign Leadley made her entrance after a season of endless precipitation, flooding and a snowstorm that blanketed the Dakotas. Her parents like all who prepare for the birth of a child, had spent hours of research – reading names, discussing their meaning, surveying family and friends for opinions.

It's often the case that in naming a child, we're expressing our hope for their life lived together with us in this world. Whether we choose a name based on family heritage, whether we seek a creative or cleverly memorable name, we do so as a way of launching our child into a positive future. We know the power that comes in naming. We name our son or daughter carefully because our *hope* is for good things for our children.

For hopefulness is a core characteristic of our nature as spiritual beings. Hope does two things. First of all, it trusts in a good God. As the same time, when things aren't right, either in our lives or in our world, it's our *hope* that propels us to seek change. When we are baptized, adopted as God's children, we are plunged into the waters of *hope*. Marked with the cross of Christ, we carry this *hope-filled identity* with us, all of our lives.

It was just two weeks ago, we gathered in this sanctuary, our vote to issue a call to Pastor Al Schwarz, felt like a new birth for our congregation. For indeed, during the duration of our interim, we've been living in hope. One of the important things we did during this time was to look at our history, remembering that this church was named after a pastor who partnered with members for the purpose of bringing blessing to this community. For God has a mission, to redeem and bless the world – and incredibly, God chooses to work through us, the people of his church, to accomplish this!

Today's scriptures bring us such encouragement. They tell us stories of people at points of transition – just like us now... people struggling in hope, longing to enter into a new reality, healed and whole. Jacob wrestles with inner demons of his past. First century listeners to the letter of second Timothy are encouraged to claim their identity as evangelists – people sent to courageously announce the Good News even in difficult conditions. The poor widow embodies the persistence of hope that doesn't quit – until the future she pictures that includes justice becomes her reality! These stories of tenacious trust touch us in the deepest places of our own spiritual hunger.

The curious story of Jacob is one about the power of names: names we've been given, names we've taken on for ourselves or given to others, names that limit us – or others – and finally – the *new* name God gives to each one of us in baptismal hope.

The drama about the life of Jacob takes place in two acts. The first tells the story of his family of origin. Jacob is the second born of twins given to Isaac and Rebekah. As the younger and smaller of the two boys, he learns early on to live by his wits. His brother Esau becomes a rugged outdoorsman. As the eldest, he's the heir to his father's blessing and two thirds of the family's fortune.

In this family, sibling rivalry is fed by an unhealthy kind of parenting. Esau is favored by his father and Jacob by his mother. Tension erupts on two distinct occasions. The first when Jacob demands from his famished and foolish brother Esau, his birthright in exchange for a pot of stew. The second occurs a few years later when Jacob, coached by his mother, deceives his old and half-blind father Isaac into thinking he is his brother, in this way stealing Esau's blessing. The first act in the drama closes with his brother's distraught and enraged wails as Jacob flees, escaping to his Uncle Laban's household.

The second act reveals that old saying, "Wherever you go, there you are." Jacob the schemer, caught in a generational process marked with deception, Jacob meets his match in his uncle. Over and over, these two match wits until the relationship becomes so toxic, so filled with mistrust that Jacob must flee once more. He departs with Laban's two daughters as his wives, his children and most of his flock. But this time, Jacob, in prayer had sought God's intervention – and had received a message of grace. *Return to the land of your kindred, and I will be with you.*

Today's text opens with a scene with Jacob under enormous pressure. Receiving word that his brother Esau is coming to meet him with an army of 400, Jacob is filled with anxiety. He quickly hides half his wealth, then with what's left, he sends three caravans of gifts ahead with hopes of appeasing his brother's anger. Fearful of failure, he sends his family across the river, hoping that if Esau refuses these gifts of repayment, that he might take pity on Jacob, at the sight of his defenseless wives and children.

All alone, pacing the in the dark, he prays. And there by the river, beside the waters of hope, confronted by his past, he does what we all must do; he wrestles with the truth. He faces himself, his mistakes, his regrets. Part of his wrestling meant acknowledging the pain of being born into a family whose parents failed to love their sons equally. Another part meant facing the truth about himself – the emptiness of his efforts to grasp at security by manipulating and scheming to take from others. He takes responsibility. In wrestling with God, he learns he has to give up relying on his own efforts. Exhausted, he simply holds on to God for dear life. And in doing so, he reveals his hope, his trust in God's goodness for his life and his future in the world. "I won't let you go until you bless me!"

Can you see his opponent grinning? "Ah – now we're getting somewhere! What's your name?" Jacob confesses all that he has done and been to that point. In Hebrew, Jacob's name has various meanings: grabber, supplanter, swindler, cheat, scoundrel. "What's your name?" Sheepishly, he answers, "My name is what I'm doing now: 'Grabber.'" "No more!" answers the other. "No longer does your past define you, not your mistakes, your broken family, your

shame, your guilt. Your new name is Israel, God-Wrestler, for you have struggled with God and with people and you would not give up!" And there, we're told, God blessed him.

Aren't we all scoundrels named "Grabber?" Caught in a broken system of self-preservation, we are like Jacob: schemers, con-artists, fearfully manipulating others to protect ourselves. But the Good News we hear is that Jesus has entered our broken human system to rescue and change us. He comes into our darkness with forgiveness, wraps his arms around us, pulling us into the light of his love. Renamed in the waters of baptism, we are given a new identity: *beloved child of God*. Together, we are blessed to be a blessing, tasked with being stewards of hope for one another and for the world.

We have been re-named people of persistent prayer. We are "Israel." This is our new identity. Wrestling in prayer is our task. And as people of faith, we struggle, don't we? We have so many questions about prayer. We wonder if our prayers are really heard. We pray for health, but some illnesses become chronic. We pray for our children and they still make crazy choices leading to trouble! We pray for the church to be faithful in this time of enormous cultural change. Wars, violence, racism and polarized politics make us weary, even as we continue praying for God's peace.

Our deepest problem with prayer is that we lose heart. *We just lose heart*. We quit praying. We lose confidence that our prayers are effective. Jesus told his disciples a story so that they might pray always, and *not* lose heart.

A persistent widow goes to see a despicable judge. Everyone knows the heart of Jewish law: "You shall love the Lord your God with all you heart, your soul and strength, and your neighbor as yourself." But not this judge! This judge doesn't go to synagogue, sleeps in on the Sabbath, and doesn't really even like people. He's totally corrupt. Appearing in his courtroom is this poor widow who'd been wronged. She has no resources. No money, no relatives, no power, social standing; nothing. Well almost nothing. Because what she did have was the integrity of her position and persistence. She had the capacity to be a pest – and she used it. She showed up in the courtroom: "Give me justice!" She knocked on his chamber doors, left messages on his voice mail, pestered him at the golf course. "Give me justice!" Finally she wears the judge down. Says the judge, "Because she keeps bothering me, I'll grant her justice so that she may not wear me out." The Greek word translated 'wear me out' is a term used in boxing: *hypopiazo*. It means 'to hit below the eye.' The woman, by demanding justice exposes the crooked judge to the community. She gives him a shameful black eye, so to speak, that reveals the truth about him to everyone. *How much more, says Jesus, will our just God listen, respond and act on our heartfelt prayers?*

For indeed, like this judge - there are structures of authority in our world that support injustice. There are unholy and unhealthy practices in our culture that glorify what is toxic. There are generational patterns in our families that we need help to dismantle. How are we to respond? With persistent, insistent prayer that upholds God's vision for goodness to break into our world – a vision for compassion and integrity. Persistent prayer is what's needed to overcome

systems of evil that have been years in the making. And although we can hardly believe it, the way God chooses to bring the Kingdom of Heaven to earth is to use us to make it happen! It's not God who needs our persistent prayer – it's the world. And it is we ourselves, who need our own wrestling prayers so as to be transformed by the truth into the likeness of Christ.

So do you know, now, who you are? Your name, my name is "Israel." We wrestle with God and with humans in our prayers – and Jesus assures us that our prayers will prevail. But he does more than that - he shows us – with his arms outstretched. There on the cross, he helps us see what prayer looks like. So when we pray our prayers in the dark nights of our soul, we remember his dark night. We take comfort that he knows the agony of our own wrestling. ***Because on the cross, Jesus has shown us the kind of prayer that holds firmly onto God's promises, even when there's nothing, nothing in the present to confirm it.***

And then... from that empty tomb, we hear the echo of the angel voices: "He's alive!" Hearing and remembering, we *know* the power of persistent faith in the goodness of our God who is always at work to bring about resurrection, in our lives, in this - our church, and in our world.

So, my sisters and brothers, when you pray for that lost child, when you pray from that deep well of sorrow, from that dark place of anxiety... when you pray for your vision of the church as a place of welcome for all, when you lift before God your hopes for the reality of our world as the beloved community – remember Jesus' prayer from the cross and the glory of the empty tomb! Never, never lose heart. Be who you are called to be – stewards of hopeful prayer, trusting in the goodness of our God who has been with you, is present now, and will be your faithful guide into a blessed future, as the people of God at David Lutheran. Amen!