

Sunday, February 19th, 2017

PRELUDE "Come, Christians, Join to Sing" - Mary McDonald **Dr. Elizabeth Davis**
CHORAL CALL TO WORSHIP "This Is the Day!" - Dan Dykema **The Choir**

After the Prelude, the liturgist should step to the lectern and say,

"Would you join me in reading the responsive call to worship adapted from Psalm 149 and printed in our bulletins?"

CALL TO WORSHIP

(adapted from Psalm 149)

Praise the Lord! Sing to the Lord a new song!

Sing his praise in the assembly of the faithful.

Let Israel be glad in its Maker;

Let the children of Zion rejoice in their King.

Let them praise his name with dancing,

Let them make melody to him with tambourine and lyre.

For the Lord takes pleasure in his people;

He adorns the humble with victory.

Let the faithful exult in glory;

Let them sing for joy from their beds.

Let the high praises of God be in their throats.

This is glory for all his faithful ones. Praise the Lord!

Let us worship God beginning with prayer.

PRAYER OF INVOCATION

God and Father of us all, teach us today as Jesus taught the crowds long ago. May we hear the voice of compassion and sense the healing touch which we need as much as they did. Multiply among us the food of your Word, that as we are fed, we may be eager to pass on your gifts to us with a transforming generosity of spirit. Point us beyond our cries and complaints that we might realize our capacity to act in your name for the sake of others. As we wrestle with issues of faith and trust, help us to risk our false security for the venture of feeding others in the spirit of Christ. Amen.

Would all of you who are able please stand with me and join in singing our opening hymn, "Great Is Thy Faithfulness", number 276 in our Hymnal.

The liturgist should step back from the microphone for the hymn.

***HYMN OF PRAISE**

"Great Is Thy Faithfulness"

The Hymnal #276

After the hymn, the preacher will step into the pulpit and say...

***CALL TO CONFESSION**

All of us need times of wrestling with God over issues in our lives. These moments of confession offer us one such opportunity. Bring your own distress to this time of prayer so that you may receive God's blessing. Let us pray together the prayer of confession printed in our bulletins, pausing at its conclusion for a brief period of silent reflection and prayer. Let us pray...

***PRAYER OF CONFESSION**

(In Unison)

Sovereign God, you have called us to struggle against evil, but we find it far easier to surrender to the the temptations that attack us. Whether from laziness or cowardice, we find it easier to ask for forgiveness than to call upon you for reinforcements. In refusing to struggle against our baser motives and the desires of our egos, we have missed out on the blessings of lives lived wholly within your will. Strengthen us for the struggle against the wickedness of this world, especially when that evil is a part of us. Amen.

***SILENT CONFESSION**

Pause for about 30 seconds of silence.

***THE ASSURANCE OF PARDON**

The proof of God's amazing love is this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. God has heard your prayer and has forgiven your sins. Friends believe the Good News!

In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven! Thanks be to God!

*GLORIA PATRI

The Hymnal #579

Glory be to the Father, & to the Son, & to the Holy Ghost;

As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, World without end. Amen, Amen.

*PASSING OF THE PEACE

Having been reconciled to the Father through the love and sacrifice of Jesus, his Son, let us now be reconciled one with another and share the peace of Christ. The peace of Christ be with you.

And also with you.

Share the peace of Christ with others as you will.

After a few moments, liturgist will step into pulpit and say...

“At this time I want to invite all of our younger friends to come forward for a Word from the Lord brought to them by Ms. Karen.”

The liturgist will take a seat.

CHILDREN’S SERMON

(All Singing)

***Jesus friend so kind and gentle, little ones we bring to thee;
Grant to them thy dearest blessing. Let thine arms around them be;
Now enfold them in thy goodness, from all danger keep them free.
As the children leave, the Liturgist will return to the lectern and say...***

“Would all who are able, please stand and join in one voice to sing our next hymn, “God of Our Life” hymn #375 in our *Hymnals*.

*HYMN OF PREPARATION

“God of Our Life”

The Hymnal #275

After the hymn, the minister will step to the pulpit and say, “Be seated. This morning we are privileged to have as our guest to tell us about the work of Gideons International & how we can help is Mr. Larry Polk. Larry...

A MINUTE FOR MISSION

The Gideon’s

Larry Polk

After the Minute for Mission, the liturgist will return to the pulpit and say,

THE INVITATION TO THE OFFERING

God has created a world of abundance, yet many do not share in the bounty. Christ calls us to find sufficiency among us and to make sure that all are fed. Let us give as generously as we have been blessed as we continue our worship with the presentation of our tithes and offerings.

The liturgist will sit down until the Doxology begins to play.

THE OFFERTORY "The Lord's My Shepherd" - Mary McDonald

Dr. Elizabeth Davis

*DOXOLOGY (In Unison)

The Hymnal #592

***Praise God from whom all blessings flow; Praise Him all creatures here below;
Praise Him above ye heavenly hosts; Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.***

After the Doxology, the liturgist will return to the lectern and say...

*OFFERTORY PRAYER

Let us pray... Thank you, God, for all you have given to satisfy our needs. You quench our thirst and alleviate our hungers when we turn to you. You turn scarcity into plenty and give us the opportunity to help others. May our offerings proclaim your goodness and mercy. Keep our words and actions attuned to your will, that we may offer to all what they need from your hand. Amen.

THE AFFIRMATION OF FAITH

"The Apostle's Creed"

Let us remain standing and reaffirm our Christian faith using the traditional words of the Apostles' Creed printed in our bulletins. Let us say what we believe...

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth; And in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; He descended into hell; the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Amen.

Invite the congregation to... "Be seated," and take a seat.

THE ANTHEM

"Praise to God, Immortal Praise!" - Mary Lynn Lightfoot

The Choir

After the choir finishes, the Liturgist will return to the lectern & say....

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Our first lesson this morning is taken from the twelfth chapter of Paul's Letter to the Romans, beginning at the first verse. You are encouraged to follow along and you can find the passage on page 986 in your pew bibles. Listen now for the word of God...

"I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."

The liturgist will return to his seat.

When the liturgist finishes, the preacher will step into the pulpit & say...

Our sermon text today is taken from the thirty-second chapter of Genesis, beginning at the twenty-second verse. You are encouraged to follow along and you can find the passage on page #28 in your pew bibles.

Twenty years after being forced to flee from his home after tricking his older brother out of his birthright with a pot of stew and stealing his father's blessing intended for his brother, Jacob now longs to return. He has grown wealthy in his time away. God has blessed him. And he is ready to attempt to buy his brother's forgiveness. But coward that he is, he sends his herds and flocks, his wives and his children ahead-- across the Jabbok River-- so that they can run interference for him with his brother Esau. And then alone for the first time in many years, he lays down under the night sky, only to be set upon by a stranger. That is where we begin reading at verse 24. Listen once more for the word of God....

"And Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and Jacob's thigh 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."

And he said to him, "What is your name?"

And he said, "Jacob."

Then he said, "Your name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed."

Then Jacob asked him, "Tell me, I pray, your name."

But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him.

So Jacob called the name of 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 thigh."

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

THE SERMON

"The Magnificent Defeat"

The faith of Israel goes back some five thousand years to the time of Abraham, but there are elements in this story which were already old before Abraham was born, almost as old as man himself. It is an ancient, jagged-edged story, dangerous and crude as a stone knife. If it means anything, what does it mean, and let us not assume that it means anything very neat or very edifying. Maybe there is more terror in it or glory in it than edification. The place where you have to start is Jacob. Who and what was he?

Go back in Jacob's story and recall the image of his father, Isaac. The old man sits alone in his tent. Outside the day is coming to a close so that the light in the tent is poor, but that is of no concern to the old man because he is virtually blind, and all he can make out is a brightness where the curtain of the tent is open to the sky. His face is cobwebbed with wrinkles, especially around his ancient, sightless eyes.

For the old man there is no longer much difference between life and death, but for the sake of his family and his family's destiny, there are things that he has to do before that last sunset.

And one of these in particular will not let him sleep until he has done it: to call his eldest son to him and give him his blessing, but not a blessing in our sense of the word-- a pious formality, a vague expression of good will that we might use when someone is going on a journey and we say, "God bless you." For the old man, a blessing is the speaking of a word of great power; this final blessing of his firstborn son is to be the most powerful of all, so much so that once it is given it can never be taken back. And here even for us something of this remains true: we also know that words spoken in deep love or deep hate set things in motion within the human heart that can never be reversed.

So the old man is waiting now for his eldest son, Esau, to appear, and after a while he hears someone enter and say, "My father," and the old man, who lives now only in the dark, asks, "Who are you, my son?"

Jacob lies and says that he is Esau. He says it boldly, and disguised as he is in Esau's clothes, and imitating the flat, blunt tones of his brother-- even the sighted can almost believe that it is him. But a parent can see through the lies told to them by their children-- and the old man reaches forward as if to touch the face he cannot see and asks again, "Are you really my son, Esau?"

The boy lies a second time. It is hard to know what the blind see and what they do not see; and maybe it was hard for the old man to distinguish clearly between what he believed and what he wanted to believe. So in the silence, the old man stretches out both of his arms and says, "Come near and kiss me, my son."

So the boy comes near and kisses him, and the old man smells the smell of his garments and gives him the blessing, saying, "See, the smell of my son is the smell of a field which the Lord has blessed." The boy who thus by the most calculating stealth stole the blessing was of course Jacob, whose very name in Hebrew may mean "the grasping one," or, more colloquially translated, "the go-getter."

It is not, I am afraid, a very edifying story. If Jacob, as the result of duping his blind old father, had fallen on evil times the moral of the story would be easier to grasp.

Instead, once his dishonesty is exposed and the truth emerges, there is really surprisingly little fuss. Old Isaac seemed to take the news in stride. Rebecca, the mother, had favored the younger son from the start, so of course there were no hard words from her. In fact only Esau behaved as you might have expected. He was furious at having been cheated, and he vowed to kill Jacob the first chance he got. But for all his raging, nobody apparently felt very sorry for him because the truth of the matter is that Esau seems to have been pretty much of a fool.

One remembers the story of how, before being cheated out of the blessing, he sold his birthright for some bread and some lentil soup simply because he was hungry, no sense of delayed gratification and its benefits. Although everybody saw that Esau had been given a raw deal, there seems to have been the feeling that maybe it was no more than what he deserved, and that he probably would not have known what to do with a square deal anyway.

In other words, far from suffering for his dishonesty, Jacob clearly profited from it. Not only was the blessing his, not to mention the birthright, but nobody seems to have thought much the worse of him for it, and there are no signs in the narrative that his conscience troubled him in the least. The only price he had to pay was to go away for a while until Esau's anger cooled down; and although one can imagine that this was not easy for him, he was more than compensated for his pains by the extraordinary thing that happened to him on his way.

For anyone who is still trying to find an easy moral here, this is the place to despair: because in the very process of trying to escape the wrath of the brother he had cheated, this betrayer of his father camped for the night in the hill country to the north, lay down with a stone for his pillow, and then dreamed not the nightmare of the guilty but a dream that nearly brings tears to the eyes with its beauty. The wonderful unexpectedness of it-- of life itself, of God himself. He dreamed of a great ladder set up on the earth with the top of it reaching into heaven and the angels ascending and descending upon it; and there above it in the blazing starlight stood the Lord God himself, speaking to Jacob words of great benediction and great comfort: "The land on which you lie I will give to your descendants, and your

descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go."

This brings us to an ignoble truth about life: the shrewd and ambitious man who is strong on guts and weak on conscience, who knows very well what he wants and directs all his energies toward getting it, the Jacobs of this world, all in all do pretty well. I do not mean the criminal who is willing to break the law to get what he wants. I am talking about the man who stays within the law and would never seriously consider taking other people's lives, but who from time to time might simply manipulate them a little for his own purposes.

Only what does it all get him? I think it can get him a good deal, this policy of dishonesty where necessary. It can get him the invitation or the promotion. It can get him the job. It can get him the pat on the back and the admiring wink that mean so much.

But at some point, the chickens come home to roost. We have to face those we have manipulated. Those we have wronged morally, if not legally. It is time for Jacob to go home again. He has lived long enough in the hill country to the north, long enough to marry and to get rich. He is a successful man and, as the world goes, a happy man. Old Isaac has long since died, and he has every reason to hope that Esau is willing to let bygones be bygones. Jacob wants to go home again, back to the land that God promised to Abraham, to Isaac, and now to him, as a gift. And so Jacob, who knows what he wants and how to get it, goes back to get that gift.

When he reaches the river Jabbok, which is all that stands between him and the promised land, he sends his family and his servants across ahead of him, but he remains behind to spend the night on the near shore alone. One wonders why. Maybe in order to savor to its fullest this moment of greatest achievement, this moment for which all his earlier moments have been preparing and from which only a river separates him now.

And then it happens. Out of the deep of the night a stranger leaps. He hurls himself at Jacob, and they fall to the ground, their bodies lashing through the darkness. It is terrible enough not to see the attacker's face, and his strength is more terrible still, the strength of more than a man. All night long they struggle in silence until just before morning, when the sun is about to break and Jacob is still not beaten. By some miracle he is still alive and holding on. The stranger cries out to be set free before the sun rises. Then, suddenly, all is reversed.

He merely touches the hollow of Jacob's thigh, and in a moment Jacob is lying there crippled and helpless. The sense we have, which Jacob must have had, that the whole battle was from the beginning fated to end this way, that the stranger had simply held back until now, letting Jacob exert all his strength and almost win so that when he was defeated, he would know that he was truly defeated; so that he would know that not all the shrewdness, will, or brute force that he could muster were enough to get this. Nonetheless, Jacob, the grasper, will not let go of his adversary-- only now it is a grip not of violence but of need, like the grip of a drowning man.

The darkness has faded just enough so that for the first time he can dimly see his opponent's face. And what he sees is something more terrible than the face of death-- the face of love. It is vast and strong, half ruined with suffering and fierce with joy, the face a man flees down all the darkness of his days until at last he cries out, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me!" Not a blessing that he can have now by the strength of his cunning or the force of his will, but a blessing that he can have only as a gift.

Power, success, happiness, as the world knows them, are his who will fight for them hard enough; but peace, love, joy, are only from God. And God is the enemy whom Jacob fought there by the river, of course, and whom in one way or another all of us fight-- God, the beloved enemy. Our enemy because, before giving us everything, he demands of us everything; before giving us life, he demands our lives, our wills, our treasure.

Will we give them, you and I? I do not know.

Only remember the last glimpse that we have of Jacob, limping home against the great conflagration of the dawn.

Remember Jesus of Nazareth, staggering on broken feet out of the tomb toward the Resurrection, bearing on his body the proud insignia of that defeat which is really a victory, the magnificent defeat of the human soul at the hands of God.

THE PASTORAL PRAYER & THE LORD'S PRAYER

Would you pray with me...

O God, when you wrestled with Jacob, you marked him, named him, and called him your own. We give you thanks for our struggles and for the blessings we receive when we refuse to release our hold on you when times are difficult.

We rejoice Lord, that yours is a love that will not let us go... that neither life nor death can separate us from you. When we are tempted, you are near to give us strength to resist. When we sin, you forgive and lead us to repentance. When we suffer the loss of earthly possessions, you increase our treasure in heaven. When the world about us is full of darkness, you are our light and our hope. When we battle forces of evil, you are our courage. When we are separated from those we love, your presence unites us. When old age and weariness overtake us, you are our bright future. When we are alone, we are never alone, for you are deeper than our thoughts and closer than hands and feet.

Help us, O God, to want to be as close to you as you are to us. Send us forth from your presence to bear the hurts of others, lest the care you have given us turn rancid in our selfish hearts. Steel us with the knowledge that wherever we go to do your will you are with us. And help us to know your constant companionship in joy and in sorrow, in victory and in defeat; through Him who is our light, our hope and our joy Jesus Christ, our Lord, who taught us to pray saying...

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Let all of us who are able stand and join in one voice to sing our hymn of dedication, "O Love, That Wilt Not Let Me Go", #384 in our *Hymnals*.

*HYMN OF DEDICATION "O Love, That Wilt Not Let Me Go" *The Hymnal #384*

*THE BLESSING

*THE CONGREGATIONAL RESPONSE *Tune: Londonderry Air (O Danny Boy)* Psalm 139

O Lord you know my laughing and my weeping.

You see my thoughts and deeds from every side.

Before my birth, my life was in your keeping.

I can't escape, no matter where I hide.

For if I flee from you, through joy or sorrow,

To heaven or hell, I find you waiting there;

Or ride the wings of morning till tomorrow,

Yes, even there, yes even there, I'm in your care.

*POSTLUDE

Dr. Elizabeth Davis