

“Don’t Lose Heart”

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Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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Genesis 32:22-31

Luke 18:1-8

In preparation for this sermon, I cast a net on our church Facebook page for stories of anyone who had scars. One woman shared that she has 3 C-section scars, that came from bearing life. Jack Peters shared the story behind the red mark on his face. Turns out it is not a scar-- as many who have seen him on duty as a fire chief have assumed. It is a birthmark, something that has been part of Jack his whole life. As a child, his peers were relentless in taunting him. But Jack has grown to embrace the mark as part of him, and it has taught him to never bully others who are different, and to be ready to help people who are weaker than him. In that sense, his birthmark has marked him in more ways than meet the eye.

I spoke with my sister Alice last week and learned that her son had fallen off the front porch. As a child who loves to perch upon things, of course he had been sitting on the railing of the porch instead of a perfectly good and safe chair, when he fell backwards, off the porch, and hit his head upon a rock. Since then, he has been recovering from a concussion, and in addition to being told he shouldn't do any schoolwork that requires concentration, the doctors also told him not to run, climb, play video games, or read or watch suspenseful stories. As you can imagine, there is not much else for a 10-year old to do, but we suppose his boredom and desire for action is a good sign that his brain is healing.

My daughter has had a couple of accidents that left scars and needed stitches. It is remarkable, my sister and I noticed, that both of our kids--each one an only child--have been physically marked by their childhood, while my sister and I-- who constantly tortured each other-- escaped childhood unscathed. My sister Alice is 5 years older, and I was constantly jockeying for her attention. When my invitations to play went unanswered, I had to step it up a notch, which included things like reading her diary, or pouncing on her stomach in surprise while she was peacefully reading a book. She was no saint either. I was the kind of child who literally bounced off the walls. To control me, she would wrap her fingers around my wrist with her fingernails digging in. Her fingernails were like talons, and they would leave pink and purple half-moons

embedded in my skin. But neither Alice nor I bear outward marks from our childhood struggles with one another-- and now, though we live several states apart, we are good friends.

In Genesis, Jacob and his twin brother Esau had their struggles too. In fact, scripture tells that their mother Rebekah even felt them struggle within her womb. When they were born, Esau came out first. Like Jack Peters, Esau had red skin, and so his name-- Esau-- means red. Jacob was born grabbing onto Esau's heel. The struggles continued when later Jacob tricked Esau out of his birthright by cooking Esau's favorite stew; when Esau asked for some stew, Jacob demanded that Esau sell him his birthright. When it was time for their father Isaac to give the eldest son a blessing, he sent Esau to hunt food and bring it back for him. As Esau was out, Jacob put on an animal skin to make himself hairy like his brother, and presented savory food for his blind father. Isaac, the father, was tricked, and so he blessed Jacob, thinking he was Esau. Esau then hated Jacob, and made a plan to kill him. So, Jacob fled, leaving home for another land far from his brother. And from there, he built his fortune. Indeed, his father's blessings were upon him as his livestock, property, and family grew and grew.

Today's scripture finds Jacob years and years after this trickery happened, and it seems Jacob has matured. He wants to reconcile with his brother. And so he heads towards Esau's land, sending ahead of him a parade of property as a gift, and people to serve Esau. But still Jacob feared their encounter. And so, after sending everyone and everything precious to him on the way ahead to Esau, Jacob spends the night by the river Jabbok.

When Jacob was finally alone, the bible says he "wrestled with a man of God until daybreak." All night long, Jacob wrestled with an angel, or maybe his struggle was directly with God. Either way, it went on through the night and somehow, this man, or angel, or God, was not able to defeat Jacob. Realizing this, the man of God struck Jacob on the hip then demanded, "Let me go, for the day is breaking!" But Jacob, always gaming for a blessing, said, "*I will not let you go unless you bless me.*" And so, Jacob received yet another blessing: a new name, Israel, which means "*struggles with God.*" And because he forever walked with a limp from where the angel disjointed his hip, his body always showed the mark of that encounter.

Israel becomes more than a man. Israel becomes a tribe, and then a nation, and even more than that, the name grows to symbolize all the people of God. Let that sink in: our name, as descendents of God's blessing, is this: Struggles with God.

The theme of struggle gets repeated in today's gospel passage. Jesus' parable tells of a widow who keeps struggling for justice against her opponent. But her pleas fall on the cold ears of a judge who "neither feared God nor had respect for people." Still, the widow persisted, until she wore the judge down so much that he said, "because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she does not wear me out." The Greek translation gives an even more dramatic description-- there, the judge says he will grant justice "so that she won't give me a black eye."

When we hear this parable of the woman and the unjust judge, we easily place God in the role of the unjust judge. To many of us, that is exactly who God is: distant and unconcerned with justice and even with us, unless we annoy God enough with our prayer. Yet, the scripture uses the judge as an example of earthly justice, to contrast with divine justice; if even an *unrighteous* judge would eventually grant justice to a widow who will not leave him alone, imagine how much more God, a judge who actually *desires* justice and *deeply loves* God's chosen people-- we ARE Israel, after all-- would respond quickly.

So we can cast God into the role of a judge who is *more* loving, *more* responsive, and *more* just than the unrighteous judge. But what if we were to cast God in the role of the widow? What if it is God who constantly comes to us, begging for justice, throwing herself in our way so that we might notice her? What if we are in fact the unrighteous judge-- who neither fears God, nor respects people? Will God's relentlessness eventually give *us* a black eye, because we simply refuse to see? In Genesis, Jacob is not willing to let go of God until he finds blessing. In this gospel parable, maybe it is telling us that God is not willing to let go of us until we bless God with our response. Luke reports that Jesus tells this parable so that the people would not lose heart. We should read that two ways: do not lose faith in the struggle; and also, do not lose your compassion-- your heart-- with others who are in need.

Here, like in Jacob's wrestling match with the angel, the long struggle with the holy grants a blessing or reward: a new name for Jacob, and justice for the widow. And struggle leaves its mark: the dislocated hip socket for Jacob, the angel who cannot be freed until he begs Jacob, and the judge who fears a black eye. Our bodies all have seen and unseen maps of where our struggles have led us, don't they?

One struggle I have faced in certain points in my life is a struggle people cannot outwardly see. It is the struggle of fear. This struggle leaves no outward scars; it does not grab me and make me limp. When I have struggled with this kind of fear, people still may perceive me as calm and optimistic. But the truth is, this fear has been

something I have had to wrestle with, sometimes long into the night. A rational person could try to talk me out of it: after all, I was never in immediate danger. There was no beast threatening me. I was not in danger of losing my home. My loved ones were healthy and safe. And yet I wrestled. During one of these periods of fear, God offered me a word: Jabbok-- it is the name of the stream where Jacob spent the night, wrestling with the angel. I looked up the meaning of the word, and it can mean two things: In Hebrew, it comes from the verb that means to empty. Jabbok can also be the word, according to a rabbi, for the sound that water makes when it rushes over pebbles: *jabbok, jabbok, jabbok*. So, I started to meditate on that word only, to silence the voices of my fears and literally empty myself of them. In that emptiness, I filled myself with *Jabbok, Jabbok, Jabbok* and I did not let that word go until it blessed me. With it came the life-giving waters that flowed beside Jacob in his struggles, the waters that carried Moses as a baby in a basket and later parted as Moses led his people from slavery to freedom. Jabbok brought to me the waters that baptised Jesus and would later baptize me and all the Christians I have baptised in my ministry and those Christians who I never baptised but share in the same promises anyway. It helped me to know that my fears do not have to make any marks on me, but I am *absolutely* marked by the living water shared with me through God's love. That assurance helped to carry my fears away, and to not lose heart.

We were never promised a faith without struggle. But we can count on the promise that the God who loves us will not let us go in our struggles-- even if our struggles are with God.. And so, when we feel the weight of the struggles in our own lives, when we are broken by the struggles with our family members, when we are tormented by the struggles of this nation, when we are so burdened by the struggle for justice that our hearts just might turn cold, the scripture tells us, "Don't lose heart." Just as surely as the sun rises after each and every night, our daybreak will come, and there we will find our blessing.