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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, October 16, 2022
19th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 29/Year C
2023 Annual Stewardship Campaign
First Reading: Genesis 32:22-31
Second Reading: 2 Timothy 3:14—4:5
Gospel Reading: Luke 18:11-8
Sermon Title: “Hope Happens Here – Week 2”

Theme

Pray always. Do not lose heart. This is Christ’s encouragement in the gospel today. Wrestle with the word. Remember your baptism again and again. Come regularly to Christ’s table. Persistence in our every encounter with the divine will be blessed.

Texts:

First Reading: Genesis 32:22-31

²²The same night [Jacob] got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. ²⁴Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. ²⁵When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. ²⁶Then he said, “Let me go, for the day is breaking.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” ²⁷So he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” ²⁸Then the man said, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.” ²⁹Then Jacob asked him, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And there he blessed him. ³⁰So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.” ³¹The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.

Second Reading: 2 Timothy 3:14--4:5

¹⁴But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, ¹⁵and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶All

scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

^{4:1}In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: ²proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. ³For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, ⁴and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. ⁵As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

Gospel: Luke 18:1-8

¹Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. ²He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. ³In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ ⁴For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, ⁵yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’ ” ⁶And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? ⁸I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

Sermon

Welcome to our 2023 Annual Stewardship Campaign, "Hope Happens Here." During this week's sermon and the next two week's sermons, I will re-introduce you to three families who find hope here, to emphasize the important and vital ministry we do *corporately* here at Zion.

Sara Michaliszyn is the daughter of Bob Fleet and she has two daughters with her late husband, Corey; Riley, and Natalie.

Sara's, Riley's and Natalie's story is the perfect illustration for this week's stewardship campaign sermon because I am emphasizing Time and Talent, and because this weekend's readings focus on struggle, persistence, and hope, something the Michaliszyn's know about.

Sara and Corey, Sara's late husband, met on Match.com and the single issue that initially attracted them to each other's profiles was their common love of dogs. Eventually, they met, and Sara fell in love with this guy she described as having a sarcastic dry wit, a great sense of humor who was artistic and creative, many of the things she is not. "Opposites attract," she said. They were married in 2008, and that marriage produced two beautiful daughters, Riley and Natalie.

Sara described Corey as the definitive family man. She told me, "He could have really lived his life just for us." He loved his kids with all his heart and being, and liked nothing else than to play board games with them. She said that when it came to playtime, "He was on it!" One of his favorite activities was coloring with the girls. I detected a hint of resentment when she told me, "Yea, he was the fun parent, a child-like Dad."

In 2020, Corey was diagnosed with glioblastoma, an aggressive and terminal form of cancer that occurs in the brain. What I haven't told you yet is that Sara is Dr. Sara, Chair of Kinesiology and Sport Science in the Bitonte College of Health & Human Services at YSU, and so she had access and understanding to knowledge about such things that the rest of us couldn't possibly grasp. With that kind of diagnosis, Sara knew that hope was all they had.

Though his illness coincided with the pandemic and I limited my visitations in those days, I was able to visit Corey several times, and toward the end, I spoke to him about what mattered to him and predictably, his family was his biggest concern and he showed me little things he was working on that he would leave for them after he passed. Corey was not very regular at worship, and not knowing his faith story I asked him what he thought will happen when he passed, and he said unequivocally, "I believe that Jesus is my savior and the only hope I have left. And I hope he takes me to heaven." It was a breathtaking moment for this old pastor, and honestly, that is all I wanted to hear.

And given the inevitability of his prognosis, that is all Sara and her daughters wanted to hear because they had that same hope for themselves – that they will see him again when their times come - because God is good, and God is love. And they have found that *Hope Happens Here*, at Zion, their church home. Zion is where they live out their lives of hope.

I am certain Corey's faith was emboldened by observing Sara and his girls. Let me say here that it matters what we believe and how we live out those beliefs because we are being watched by others even when we are unaware of it.

When someone passes at a good old age as Freda Kochera did at 98 our sadness is tempered by our relief for them that their misery in this life is over. But when someone, like Corey Michaliszyn, dies at 48 with a young wife and two young children, the survivors can be left with feelings of emptiness, perhaps even feelings of hopelessness. It is in those times that the church enters to remind grieving families of the promises of God and the hope that brings.

I have been privileged to enter into the grief and sadness of many a family in my 25 years of ordained ministry. I say privileged because when they are their most wounded and vulnerable, they let me, a relative stranger, into their lives and homes to cry and laugh, and I get to remind them of the promises of God and the hope that brings;

- hope for eternal rest and peace for their deceased loved one,
- hope that they will see them again,
- and hope that they will be able to live again.

In the Gospel Reading for today, Jesus told a parable that teaches that we will have struggles in life, but persistence and never losing hope are disciplines of a life of faith. I often tell grieving families about their loss that we never get over it, but we do have to get on with it. Sara and Riley and Natalie are examples for the rest of us of getting on with it and living out their lives of discipleship through their church. Sara is one of our Assisting Ministers and Riley and Natalie are acolytes.

The natural path in dealing with such loss might be to turn in on oneself and sink into a depression, and we could understand that. But Sara has chosen to prevail against the forces of darkness that threatened to take her and her family down back in January 2021. And she demonstrated parental leadership when she gave herself and her children time to grieve, but then re-entered their lives - changed forever - but still their lives to make of it what they can.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

The Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy in the Second Reading that it is each disciple's responsibility to study scripture to be trained for righteousness

¹⁷so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

So maybe you do that. If you can hear my voice, then you *should be* an active part of this ministry, putting to use whatever time and talent you have been given.

And in his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote:

1 Corinthians 12:7 To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

I believe that to be true. I believe that God has already equipped this congregation with all we need to do the ministry God leads us to do. But it is up to us, its members to get involved to make ministry happen. I hope you believe that is true too, so then, why is it that I see the same, relatively small group of people doing most of the ministry around here?

Scripture promises that all, ALL, have been given gifts and talents for the good of the order. The Apostle Peter wrote,

1 Peter 4:10 Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.

I have to mention the First Reading from Genesis because it is such an interesting story that I think applies to what I have talking about. Jacob was the younger son of a set of twins born to Abraham and Sarah's son, Isaac, and his wife Rebekah. In this story, Jacob wrestled with God throughout the night, and while I find it difficult to imagine God not winning that wrestling match, as morning approached, the match remained a draw. However, not understanding what was happening to him, Jacob demanded that his opponent bless him before he let him go, which eventually God did. My point is that God sometimes, maybe often, challenges us to build our character for something God has planned for us. Standing up to do the noble and godly thing is often not easy, but it is still noble and godly.

In this second week of the 2023 Annual Stewardship Campaign entitled "Hope Happens Here," I want to remind you that there is a place for you to do ministry here at Zion, and honestly, we are not all that we can be without your active participation. Do the noble and godly thing and stand up and find your place.

Prayer

God of mystery, we mere mortals struggle to understand you and the things that happen to us in our lives. And yet, on our best days, we turn that confusion and lack of understanding into our attempts to draw closer to you, for you are our only source of hope. Encourage us with your Spirit, prosper our attempts to feel your loving embrace, and remind us always, that Hope Happens Here. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen