

Yr. C, Proper 24  
October 16, 2022  
Preached by Furman Buchanan  
Christ Episcopal Church  
1536 words

Lessons:

Genesis 32:22-31  
Psalm 121  
2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy 3:14-4:5  
Luke 18:1-8

The Psalmist sings *out* his question: “I lift up my eyes to the hills; from *where* is my help to come?” Three thousand years later, he’s still nudging us to look up and find *our* answer. “My help...*my* help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.”

This was easier up in the piedmont. In Greenville you can’t help but lift your eyes to the hills. I know our city is named for a *Mount Pleasant*, but I have not found it yet. My commute across town is pretty flat the whole way! Regardless of the topography of our landscape, this is *still* the right question for us to ask ourselves: From *where*...from *what*...from *whom* does your help come? It’s the question that’s embedded in all of today’s lessons.

I’m going to just say it like it is—Jacob was a scoundrel. Remember how he cheated his brother, Esau, out of the family inheritance? Jacob faked his brother’s hairy arms before his blind father; with their *mother* serving as his accomplice.

Time passed, but *memories* are pretty long when it comes to things like family inheritances. Jacob feared that his brother, Esau, wanted to kill him—and for good reason.

Today’s Old Testament story picks up as Jacob tries to get himself and his family away from danger. Let’s picture this scene for a moment—Jacob, his two wives, their two maids, and eleven little rascals, crossing a stream in the dark of night with everything they owned. It’s not the proud family portrait any of us would hang over the fireplace! Rather, it was the pathetic family moment; when everything was falling apart and everyone was coming unglued. As usual, *this is the moment*...when God arrives.

There is some very good news tucked into our Old Testament story this morning. And the good news is this: God meets us where we are. Not where we *wish* we were. Not where we *ought* to be. Not where we want other people to *think we are*. Nope, God, in his *mercy*, meets us where we actually are!

If you were reading the lessons from Morning Prayer this week, you know that God came to Jonah after he was thrown off the ship and had hit rock bottom of the sea. As his life was ebbing away, Jonah remembered *his Helper*, the Maker of heaven and earth. We also read this week how God came to St. Paul in the dark of night when the ship on which he was sailing was wrecked and doomed.

Let’s face it—we would like to meet God on the Lido Deck...with warm sunshine on our faces and gentle breezes in our hair. We want to meet God where we can be calm, collected, and in control. Yet, the Bible keeps pointing us to a God who meets people in the bowels of ships *or in the bowels of great big fish* or on the run from danger or in the grip of sickness or in the valley of the shadow of death.

When have *you* met God at rock bottom? Where have you wrestled with God in the dark of night? When have you been persistent in prayer, refusing to give up? Where is the place *you* call ‘Peniel’ because you struggled with God and lived to tell about it?

Jacob was forever changed on that night. The Bible makes it easy for us to recognize when a powerful transformation takes place because not only is a *person* changed, but so is their name. This was the night Jacob became Israel.

The pathetic, persistent, on-the-run-for-his-life-Jacob had the chutzpah to wrestle with God, and he was transformed into Israel. Whenever you think of Israel, in all of its glorious and not-so-glorious history, think of this kind of persistence, think of this kind of struggle that can *only happen* when you are close enough to grab on to God and *not let go!*

Jesus told his disciples a story about their need to be persistent in prayer and not lose heart. You see, there was this judge. He didn't care about God or about *God's Law*. Obviously...because any God-fearing judge would know that the Law requires that widows are taken care of. But this particular judge couldn't care less.

Yet, eventually he becomes motivated to care for the widow. Why?

Because the widow is giving him a beating. That's right—the original Greek of Luke's Gospel is much more blunt than the translation I read earlier. Jesus is using humor to make his point about getting *close enough to God* (like Jacob did) in order to grab on and not let go!

You see, it is not just that the old widow keeps *bothering* the judge...which she could have done at a safe distance from across the courtroom. No, she is up in his face! She has the chutzpah of Jacob!

The next phrase *also* gets 'watered down' in our English translation. The judge says, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out." The literal translation is more like this: "I will give her justice! Otherwise...she will end up giving *me* a black eye!"

There is a marvelous ambiguity here. Is the judge worried about a 'metaphorical black eye' to his reputation or is the judge worried about a literal black eye on his face?<sup>1</sup>

Once again, we see that the point of Jesus' parable is not just to encourage his followers to be *persistent* in prayer, but also for us to get close enough to grab on to God and not let go! Jesus wants us disciples to have the chutzpah of Jacob, who *demand*s a blessing before he'll let go...Jesus wants us to have the fervor of a widow who demands justice before she'll let go.

My grandmother was a widow like that...when she was still in her twenties. Her husband died way too young, and left her with three little boys. There was no social security back then—no safety net. I don't know how she prayed, but I believe she did it with fervor. I can imagine her looking up and asking, "from where is my help to come?"

Some of her family members thought it was simple and obvious. "Carrie Lee, you just need to take those boys to an orphanage." My grandmother was willing to struggle quite a bit more than that. My Grandma Buck had the fervor of the widow in Jesus' parable—striving with God...up in God's face...refusing to give up...refusing to let go...of God *or* of her three little boys.

Her sister, Kate, and Kate's husband, Linwood, and their children welcomed Carrie Lee and her three boys into their home. That's another beautiful story for another day. But this morning, I just want to show *how* her prayers were answered...by the love of God being channeled through real, live, people.

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<sup>1</sup> For a more complete explanation of the translation and relevant exegesis, consult Luke Timothy Johnson, *Sacra Pagina: Luke*, edited by Daniel J. Harrington, (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991) p. 270.

That's how God works—not like a magician with a wand; but as *the Source* of life...and faith...and hope...and love...pouring out through real people like us...all the time.

Nobody in my family knows precisely what or how Grandma Buck prayed when she hit rock bottom as a young widow. But my oldest sister, Becky, remembers how Grandma Buck prayed many years later when she came to live with *our* family. It was before I was born, but Becky remembers how our grandmother would leave the breakfast table and go to the opposite end of the house. She would shut herself up in her room.

*Remember what Jesus said?* “When you pray, don't be a show-off like the hypocrites...go to your room...pray in secret...and our Father in heaven will listen.”

Becky would sneak back there and listen, too. She heard Grandma Buck's thanksgivings. She heard her grandmother's heartfelt petitions. She heard all of her prayers for other people. All the blessings...all the hopes...all the laments, laid out honestly...*and persistently*. Without even knowing it, Grandma Buck was showing her granddaughter how to “pray always and not lose heart.”

Later this morning, I want you to listen carefully when I invite you to pray our Lord's Prayer. “As our Savior Christ has taught us, we *are bold* to say, “*Our Father...*”

Do you hear that? We are praying to the Maker of heaven and earth, and we have the chutzpah to get close enough to call him *our* dad. Just like Jacob, we are claiming a birthright we do not deserve. Like Jacob, we are grabbing on and demanding a blessing, “give us this day our daily bread, *and* forgive us our trespasses.”

Do you hear how bold that sounds? But wait, there's more! “*And* lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” Do you hear that persistence? Do you hear the fervor that Christ taught us?

You've got this. Don't be afraid. Tell the truth...tell it like is—God is big enough to handle it. Get up close. Grab on. Don't let go.

Whether your heart is brimful of gratitude or completely broken into pieces, you can always look up and ask yourself this question: “from *where* is my help to come?”

Dear people, “our help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.”

Amen.