

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Lena, IL - 16 October 2022**  
**Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Year C - Lectionary 29**

**1st Reading: *Genesis 32:22-31***

**Psalm: 121**

**2nd Reading: *II Timothy 3:14—4:5***

**Gospel: *Luke 18:1-8***

**Sermon** - *Vicar Thomas J. Mosbø*

In the name of the Father, ✠ and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There was a very popular TV show a while back, and you can still see reruns of it just about every day, called *Friends*. I suspect that some of you are familiar with it. It was quite clever and funny, but one of the best things about *Friends* was its theme song. It was called “I’ll Be There for You”, and it was sung by a group called the Rembrandts, which, of course, makes it special for me even though these particular Rembrandts had nothing to do with my hometown.

But anyway, one of the recurring lines in the song goes:

It's like you're always stuck in second gear,  
When it hasn't been your day, your week,  
Your month, or even your year.

And I suspect that we’ve all felt that way from time to time - We’re having “one of those days” and it’s just not my day today, or this week, or this month, or this year.

Jacob, in our story from Genesis this morning, had been having one of those days every day for the past 20 years. If you recall the story, Jacob was the grandson of Abraham and he had a twin brother named Esau, but the two were complete opposites. Jacob was a bit of a scoundrel, and with his mother Rebekah’s help, he had tricked his father Isaac into giving him the blessing that was supposed to go to his elder brother Esau. Esau wasn’t too pleased with this, and swore that he would get even and kill Jacob. So Rebekah sent Jacob away to her brother Laban’s house. But as it turns out, Laban was even more of a scoundrel than Jacob, and for 20 years Laban had tried to trick and swindle Jacob out of what he had earned by working for Laban, all the spotted and speckled sheep, not to mention his daughter Rachel whom Jacob wanted to marry.

But God had made it so that all the sheep born in Laban's flock were spotted and speckled, so Jacob did end up with the best of the sheep - oh, and by the way, there is a specific breed of sheep in England known as Jacobian that are all spotted and speckled, but that's another story.

Well, now Jacob had had enough and he was heading back with his sheep and his wives and his children to the land of Canaan where his brother Esau lived, and to say the least, he was really scared. It may have been 20 years ago that Esau had sworn to kill him, but we all know that family grudges can be kept up for generations - 20 years was nothing. So Jacob was getting ready to cross the river and meet his brother, when something very unusual happened. And this is a very important story, because this is how the name "Israel" is first introduced in the Bible, and we are told what this name means.

But to begin this story, the author of Genesis only tells us that "Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak." Well, I don't know about you, but if I was waiting anxiously for the next day when I had to face something ominous, I would hardly expect some strange man to appear and start wrestling with me all night! But that's what happens to Jacob this night, and as the story continues, we discover that this stranger is none other than God himself. And even though this wrestling match seems to end in a draw, Jacob won't let this stranger go until he is blessed by him. And so this strange God gives Jacob a new name: Israel, which means the one who wrestles with God. Jacob becomes Israel, and his twelve sons become the ancestors of the twelve tribes of Israel. And yes, when Jacob meets Esau the next day, the two brothers are reconciled. It was finally Jacob's day.

And we might be tempted to think that from that day on Jacob was free from trouble, but if you remember how the story continues, we find that Jacob is once again tricked, this time by his ten oldest sons, into thinking that his beloved son Joseph had been killed by wild animals. And this deception went on for 13 more years before Jacob learned that Joseph was alive and had become Pharaoh's right-hand-man in Egypt. Then, and only then, was Jacob able to live out the rest of his life in peace and prosperity.

Now, when we turn to the parable in today's Gospel, we discover that it also hadn't been the poor judge's day, or week, or perhaps month. He had been pestered continuously by a widow demanding justice. And likewise, it hadn't been the widow's day, or week, or month, since she continued to not receive justice. But finally the judge relents, gives the widow her due, and they both have peace.

And this is one of the few times that a Gospel writer tells us exactly what the parable means. Luke begins by telling us that “Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart”. This is also one of those “how much more” parables. If this disreputable judge relents in order to keep the poor widow from bothering him, then *how much more* will God listen to us when we “pray always and do not lose heart”.

Last week, we heard about how we ought to thank God for his blessings when he gives healing from leprosy or cancer. So today we hear that we ought to continually plead with God when we are in need. Indeed, we are to wrestle with God, just as Jacob (Israel) did, and just as the widow pleaded with the judge in today’s parable.

God *will* answer us. The answer may not always be what we expect, but it will always be the *right* answer. Even Jesus wrestled with God in the Garden of Gethsemane, that his cup of suffering might be taken away from him. And the answer was that Jesus did have to drink the cup of suffering on the cross, but God did send angels to strengthen Jesus through his trial. And so I am reminded of another TV show, a much older one: Father knows best! So let us not stop wrestling with God, pleading with him, but let us also pray as Jesus did: “Not my will, but yours be done”, and this is, of course, what we do pray whenever we pray the Lord’s Prayer.

And let us remember that when we pray, God is with us and hears us. It may seem that he wrestles back, and gives us hard answers sometimes, but he does send angels to strengthen us. If I may be so bold, he has promised to be our friend. That theme song by the Rembrandt’s, the theme song for *Friends*, could be Jesus telling us to pray always and not to lose heart:

It's like you're always stuck in second gear,  
When it hasn't been your day, your week,  
Your month, or even your year.

But I'll be there for you, when the rain starts to pour  
I'll be there for you, like I've been there before.

Or, in the words of Joseph Scriven:

Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere?  
We should never be discouraged - take it to the Lord in prayer.  
Can we find a friend so faithful who will all our sorrows share?  
Jesus knows our every weakness - take it to the Lord in prayer.

Amen!