Blessing the Future

Genesis 48:1-2, 8-16; 49:1-2, 28-33

sermon digest September 13, 2009 carolyn dipboye

We were less than gentle with him last week. No different from centuries of thoughtful believers who have looked on him as the example of what not to do, we summed up the less than illustrious life of Jacob with our eyes wide open. This one who has carried through history the reputation of "Supplanter" or "Trickster" is not one whom either scripture or history has treated gently and perhaps that is for the best. Perhaps it is for that very reason we, like the people of Israel who have gone before us, can identify with him. This one, known through the ages, as the one who was first blessed with the name "Israel," one who wrestles with God, symbolizes something that, if we are honest, speaks volumes about the nature of faith not just for the Israelite people, but for us. Despite all of the trivialized assurances that faith is a simple matter of "only" believing, Jacob's story like the story of Israel and our own story, reminds us that faith is forever caught up in a struggle with unfaith and hope and expectation with a struggle with dashing disappointment. If we are honest with ourselves and each other, faith is not just a one time decision. Although there are moments in our lives when faith takes critical and decisive steps, we find ourselves deciding for faith not once, not twice but repeatedly along our life journeys.

Just as twins often served the purpose in ancient cultures of representing the divided self, Jacob represents the ongoing struggle, the ongoing wrestling match with life and with God within each of us. A twin, who commenced his life of combat in the womb, Jacob lived his life estranged from his birth family and saw that same estrangement visited upon the family which he sired. Contrary to what we would expect of heroes of the faith, in the words of Karen Armstrong, "destruction, not benediction, emanated" from his very being. Until, that is, he reached his deathbed, and then to our surprise, "Jacob rose to the occasion and died a better man than he had lived" [*In the Beginning*, p. 115]. Confronted with death, this man, who had known and inflicted pain throughout his entire life, turned to impart blessing on the future; and so he ends up in Hebrews' hall of fame with nothing more than a summary statement: "By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, 'bowing in worship over the top of his staff,' or, as the King James Version puts it, "leaning upon the top of his staff" [Hebrews 11:21]. Some years ago, someone, reflecting on the words in Hebrews, crafted a sermon on Jacob under the title "The Forward Lean;" and truly, as you read the words in Genesis 48 and in Hebrews 11, you can almost see in your mind's eye the determined struggle of an elderly person leaning forward over a cane or walker, resolutely making their way ahead, making their way into the future.

After a lifetime of struggle, Jacob comes to the end of life intent upon the future. Given the failures and disappointments the story of Genesis ascribes to his life, he could well have ended life in bitterness and regret. And yet he rises to the moment. Could it be that this man, whose life seems to exemplify what we don't want to be or want our children to be, comes to the end of life as a model to be emulated? Perhaps it was the memory of his brother Esau's plaintiff cry so many years ago, "Have you only one blessing, father? Bless me, me also, father!" [Gen. 27:38]. Or perhaps it was the death of his beloved Rachel and an ongoing grief that made him, in the words of Walter Brueggemann, "expect something new" [*Genesis,* 360]. Whatever the case may have been, Jacob knew enough to see that the fulfillment of God's promises had not been achieved in his lifetime, and he turned his attention to blessing his sons and grandsons and calling upon them to live their lives in such a way that God's promises to their ancestors Abraham, Issac and Jacob were not just a distant memory but a beckoning hope. And so one by one, he went down the line. One by one, he pronounced upon each offspring, Genesis says, "a suitable blessing" [49:28].

If we are honest (and when we come to church, we are not always prone to be), we will admit that there are those circumstances in our own lives that make us ready to toss hope and aspirations aside. Maybe it is disappointment with some failure we ourselves have experienced in living up to valued principles and aspirations. Maybe it is disappointment in seeing our most conscientious and best intended efforts meet with failure. Maybe it is the word that goes around that *sometimes* has ample evidence backing it up that charity and good will do not accomplish their intended purpose. *Sometimes* foreign aid falls into the hands of the ogres rather than the hands of the poor and oppressed for whom it is meant. *Sometimes* people on welfare game the system. *Sometimes* government programs are poorly managed and end up benefitting the few rather than the many toward whom they are directed. *Sometimes* people we love and respect betray our love. *Sometimes* families fall apart and the economy nose dives, taking with it our best laid plans for a secure old age. *Sometimes* we face health issues we had never factored into our anticipated futures.

What then?

Highly respected pastor, author and teacher Eugene Peterson shares an experience from his days as a young seminarian. He had discovered in his studies a theologian that became the epitome of all that he had hoped to be. His role model had

thought through everything, was conversant with all the ins and outs of the 'present evil age,' and was able to re-say the Christian faith in ways that were both profoundly true and immediately understandable–and in a German accent no less! [*The Wisdom of Each Other,* 47].

But then, Peterson learned the rest of the story. His esteemed teacher was also a compulsive philanderer. "I stormed into the study of my pastor, striking a tragic pose," Peterson recalls, "and said, "I'm totally disillusioned!" The pastor responded with insight and understanding. Slapping his hand on his desk, he replied, "Good! Who wants to go around stuck with a bunch of illusions!"

If we want a measure of healthy faith, perhaps this is it. Fidelity to our principles in great moments of testing is critical, but we often fail to understand just when those great moments occur. We picture ourselves on trial like the great Martin Luther and when confronted with the choice between recantation and death stubbornly announcing, "Here I stand, so help me God." Most of us, however, probably do not think in terms of what we are going to do with our disappointments and disillusionments. Each of us may be able to look back in life when we took the courageous stand of Martin Luther, but we can all look back in life and remember countless times when we faced disappointment either in ourselves or in our highest aspirations. What do people of faith do with those times? It's possible that of all the witness we bear to faith, no witness is any more critical than what we do in the face of suffering and disappointment. Can faith withstand the test without succumbing into cynicism on the one side or a sickening Pollyanna-like attitude on the other that denies the reality and pretends not to hurt?

Sometime at your leisure, read the "suitable" blessings Jacob pronounces in chapter 49 upon his sons and grandsons. Far from a Pollyanna pretense of a rosy future, they speak of the sons' past failures and anticipated conflicts. The God of promise is the God who is not

defeated by the threat of opposition or disappointment. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is the God whose promises are secure and strengthening in spite of and in the midst of conflict. The future that God blesses and into which God calls us holds hope only insofar as we consistently and determinedly walk toward that hope.

Tragedies in life, either our own or those of others, can turn us into cynical skeptics or strengthen our resolve. We can understand those who look upon the holocausts and genocides of our world and lose faith. We can understand disappointment in government programs that go astray. We can understand the hurt of a marital partner who has known such abuse or betrayal that they dare not trust again. But can we also understand that healing only comes as we begin to hope and trust again?

In his *Man's Search for Meaning,* Viktor Frankel tells the story of prisoners finally released from the long, indescribable ordeal of the Nazi death camps. For some, Frankel observes, the only thing that had changed was the identity of the oppressed and the oppressor. One friend, a man who, Frankel insists, was not a bad man, raised his right hand on the day of liberation with the oath, "May this hand be cut off if I don't stain it with blood on the day when I get home!" Another derided Frankel's concern to walk around someone's field of green crops on the day of liberation lest they destroy them. "And hasn't enough been taken from us? My wife and child have been gassed–not to mention everything else–and you would forbid me to tread on a few stalks of oats!" [p. 144]. Frankel, on the other hand, having gone through the same prison camp and the same losses, recalls his own experience in walking alone for miles and miles through the flowering meadows. Hearing the joyous songs of the larks, he stopped, looked around and fell to his knees. "At that moment there was very little I knew of myself or of the world–I had but one sentence in mind–always the same: 'I called to Lord from my narrow prison and He answered me in the freedom of space'" [142].

And so it was with Jacob. In the words of Walter Bueggemann, on who had been so deeply involved in conflict all his life can die appropriately, for "all his conflicts have been in the presence of the promise-keeper" [369]. His was indeed a troubled faith, but it was also a robust faith. If we are willing to listen, we can learn something from the old man about both living and dying.

Having lived long enough, we have all experienced disappointments, disillusionments and even betrayals, sometimes at the hands of Christ's own church. And that can be all that we see. But leaning forward, seeking to peer into God's future, we can again lay claim to hope. Slowly but surely putting one foot in front of the other, we put our lives into the service of a future still beckoning us to hope. Some of us befriend a child in our Oak Ridge schools and sit down for thirty minutes a week to read. Some of us take up the new challenge to become a bi-monthly visitor in order to help keep someone with a failing memory safe in our community. Some of us summon the strength to listen and give support through the CONTACT Helpline to someone who has access to absolutely no mental health resources in this world. Some of us serve on the Habitat for Humanity Board or drive the Habitat Home Store's truck or sort the store's donated merchandise or operate its cash register to make sure that people have access to decent, affordable housing. Some of us volunteer with Girls Inc., and some of us sort clothes for the East Tennessee Abuse Shelter. All of this is done in a stubborn determination to bless the future.

And all of us, despite the disappointments we have experienced in the past, can acknowledge and live our lives and exercise our citizenship in recognition of what ACCION International speaks of in our "As you go" paragraph this morning. As critically important as our individual acts of blessing are–and they *are*–they alone are not enough. We must work together to put in place systems of support that will extend far beyond the places we can go and the people we can individually touch. Having been blessed with meaningful work and adequate food and shelter, hope leads us to find practical ways of extending those blessings to others around the world. Having been blessed with quality medical care, hope compels us to do everything in our power to extend that care, as differing as our interpretations about what is needed may be, to those who lack access to it.

Living with and toward the God of promise means just this: Our whole lives get caught up in the fabric of hope. Our whole lives take on meaning and purpose beyond any we have ever known before. "You who would find life," Jesus said, "must give it.