



My Beginning of Hope

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
6 August 2023

Ascension Lutheran Church
Rev. Christian W. Marien

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ.
Amen.

Once upon a time there was a monastery deep in the forest. . .it was full of monks. And the monks were full of joy. . .and their joy was contagious. So, people traveled from far and wide to visit. One day a young man asked the Abbot, "Why do people come to visit the monastery?" "Most people come looking for answers," the Abbot said. . . "The big questions of life!!!" "How do I get the most out of life???" "Why was I created???" "How can my life have meaning??" As the young man left the monastery, the Abbot wondered what big questions of life he was wrestling with. As time passed. . .life at the monastery changed. It was gradual at first. A few of the monks became cranky, other monks became jealous of a couple of the monks who were more popular with the visitors. The monks began to argue about little things that in the big picture of things had no consequence. Yet the sign that something was wrong was the poison of gossip that slowly sickened the entire monastery. Their prayer became rote and superficial, and the monks slowly closed their hearts to God and to each other. Visitors noticed that little by little life at the monastery was deteriorating. They perceived that the monks were losing their joy. They noticed the monks were not as kind to each other and overtime the monks even grew impatient with the visitors. Seasons passed and fewer visitors came to the monastery. . .until one day, people stopped coming all together. It was in the dead of winter. . .it was dark and cold. . .when profound sadness gripped the Abbot's heart. For hundreds of years people had come to the monastery longing for a glimpse of God and the monastery had thrived. What could the Abbot do?

On the first day of spring, the Abbot announced that he was leaving to make a journey. He was going to visit a wise old hermit. . . a holy man who lived alone with God. . .way up in the mountains. When the Abbot arrived at the hermit's cave. . .the Abbot said, "I've got something to ask you," "I know," said the Hermit. . . "but that can wait. . .I want to show you something first." The two men walked peacefully through the trees and after about 15 minutes a beautiful lake was before them. It was breathtaking. They sat and prayed in silence for over an hour. Finally, the Abbot told the Hermit what had happened at the monastery. "What wisdom do you have for us?" "How can we rejuvenate the monastery?" "How can we best serve the people who come to visit?" The hermit said, "There is only one answer!!!" Go back and tell the brothers, "The Messiah is among you. . .

"What can that possibly mean," the Abbot mumbled to himself. But as he walked slowly down the mountain. . . back to the monastery the full meaning of the hermit's words took root in his soul. When he got back to the monastery, he told the monks what the Hermit had said, "The Messiah is among you. . ." And as the monks prayed and reflected on the hermit's wisdom, they slowly got it. And



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they started treating each other differently. They started being kind to each other. They took an interest in the lives of their fellow monks. . .there was a spirit of cooperation. . .they praised and encouraged each other. . .They forgave each other. . . And there was joy!!! Visitors slowly returned. . .The monastery began to thrive again!!!

When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” Jesus said to them, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” They replied, “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.” And he said, “Bring them here to me.” It would be easier to see the Messiah in action. The Son of God offering a miracle for all to see or rather, eat. Would the crowd have known that the fish and bread came from only five loaves and two fish-the simple lunch of a young boy? I would guess not. So, then we have to ask the question, who exactly was the miracle for? The more than 5000 guests at the impromptu dinner by the Sea of Galilee or the disciples who raise the concern of hungry stomachs and not enough food to serve. I think, the disciples, are the ones who receive the power of the miracle – the promise of God’s abundance. I wonder did the disciples pass out bread and wine over and over again, all the while thinking to themselves, “the Messiah is among us, the Messiah is among us.” It is not impossible to believe – the presence of Jesus in the person sitting to the left or the right of you, in front of you or behind you. I wonder did you take the time to make sure your hair looked alight from the back this morning? I mean if Jesus is staring at the back for your head and all.

We saw miraculous feedings more than once this past week – not once, but twice through the reach of our ministry at Ascension. We are one of the few churches left in the area who provide a full meal reception for families grieving the loss of someone they love. It is a source of pride for this community of faith and we are often reminded of this gift of ministry to a family when, during the reception, people come up to one of your pastors or stop in the kitchen to share their admiration and gratitude for the reception offered with love. Last Friday was no different. As we gave thanks to God for Connor’s life, the food was laid out and East Hall was full. There is always food left over by the time the pastors arrive. But this past Friday, well the sandwiches may have been gone, but there was still enough food or at least dessert for the pastors to share in the feast. A miracle, perhaps not, but still a reminder of God’s abundance.

Earlier in the week, I was offered the chance to visit a member and share communion in his new retirement home. The visit was meaningful. The member is settling in. We talked. We prayed. And then I began...in the night in which he was betrayed, our Lord Jesus took bread. Communion was shared. As I was preparing to leave, the wellness director asked if I might share communion with



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another resident who had been ill and missed the chance to receive communion from her priest. I said yes, but made sure that the director informed the woman that I was not catholic but Lutheran. The director left and returned with confirmation of my welcome. We said goodbye to our member and headed upstairs. I offered communion to a gracious woman sitting in her bathrobe who could not have been happier to receive bread and wine from this uncollared Lutheran pastor. Once again, I set up bread and wine. In the night in which he was betrayed, our Lord Jesus...We finished praying and I made my way out into the hallway. As we made our way back to the elevator, the director said, "you know, I have to work on Sunday and will not get communion." And as he was talking, I had to remember in my head, "do I have any wafers left in my travel communion kit?" And then the director asked if I would give him communion back in his office. Of course. SO back in his office I set up my last wafer and the last of my wine and began again...in the night in which he was betrayed, our Lord Jesus... Somehow with our Lord Jesus, there is always enough. A reminder to me, once again, in every space I enter, "the Messiah is among you."

Then why is it that we have such difficulty in believing that there is, will be, always enough? Why do we live this life entering into one space or another without remembering, without expecting, without acting as if the Messiah is among us? Which brings us home today. From the book of Genesis, Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When 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. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So, he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have wrestled with God and with humans and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. I could preach a whole sermon on wrestling with God. Probably a whole year of sermons. But today, only a glimpse. Jacob wrestles with God – Jacob will not let go. God displaces Jacob's hip. Gives him a new name and blesses him. If only wrestling with God was so neatly timed to a single night without sleep. We wrestle with God off and on throughout our lives. In faith, I wrestle with God more than I should. In difficult nights of sweat soaked shirts...why do parents sometimes have to bury their children? Why allow cancer to exist? In less challenging moments...What is the joy of kale? What happened to my hair? And in deeply personal moments, for what, if any, purpose do you allow my pancreas to misfire? And again, good God, wrestle with me through the anxiety of preparing for surgery and more hugs and more prayers than any one person deserves. It is not that I do not trust in God's care, it is simply that I would rather God tend more substantial challenges in the world. And then again, well, for this one moment in my



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life – well this surgery, in my life – as in anybody’s life - is pretty substantial. Are you surprised that your pastor wrestles with God more often than not? Well, my friends, I wrestle with God because I have hope in the promise God has made to me and to each of us. In the night in which he was betrayed our Lord Jesus took bread. This is my beginning of hope – every time I say those words, every time I hear those words – I am reminded - the Messiah is among us.

Yes, I still believe the Messiah is among us - my faith asks me to find the face of the Messiah in every person I meet. Yes, I still believe in miracles – even as I may be skeptical as to the abundance God always provides. Yes, I still wrestle with God – how else will I find a path forward in my relationship with God, if I do not seek to grow in my faith through every question, every challenge, every moment of suffering that pushes me to ask God why? I may not always get the answer I want or expect if there is an answer to be found at all. But I will always return to my beginning of hope. In the night in which he was betrayed, our Lord Jesus took bread. And that, my friends, will be enough. Thanks be to God. Amen.