

Family Tree with Blight— Luke 11:1-4; Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Genesis 32:22-31

Saint Marks UMC, Charleston, WV –
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The author of the Letter to the Hebrews embarks on some very dangerous territory, when he lays the foundation for this “run[ning] with endurance the race that is set before us.”

Looking back at the family tree can be a dangerous thing. I have never been bitten by the genealogy bug that has bitten some folks I know.

Jimmy Carter: We’ve uncovered some embarrassing ancestors in the not-too-distant past. Some horse thieves, and some people killed on Saturday nights. One of my relatives, unfortunately, was even in the newspaper business.

Mark Twain: Why waste your time and money looking up your family tree? Just go into politics and your opponents will do it for you.

The examples included in today’s reading from Hebrews are illustrative:

In the magnificent passing of the Red Sea where the huge waves split to make a way for God's chosen people, the victorious Israelites were fleeing slaves, frightened, wanting to return to slavery in Egypt right before the passing.

Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, the four Israelite judges, would none have been whom we would want our daughter to marry. **Gideon** was a farmer from the weakest clan in Manasseh and the least in his family. When called by the LORD to deliver Israelites from the Midianites' raiding, he challenged God and asked n but twice, for a sign.

Barak, was so scared when the prophetess Deborah told him that the LORD called him to fight against Canaanites' oppression, that he asked Deborah, a woman, to accompany him in war. (In today's culture, we would appreciate Barak's getting in touch with his feminine side. Such was not the case in the culture of the hearers of the Letter to the Hebrews.)

Samson, may have brought the house down, but he was a swindler and could not follow God's instructions, particularly when tempted by a woman.

Jephthah, the illegitimate son of a prostitute, outcast by his father's family and the elders of the town, made a living by leading a band of outlaws. He defeated the Ammonites and rose up to the judge seat of Israel. Then he sacrificed his only child—his daughter, because of a faithless vow he made to the LORD before going to war.

And then there is good ol' **David**, a man after God's own heart, the greatest and most beloved King in the history of Israel, who was a lustful adulterer, and a cold, calculating murderer, who didn't do a very good job of raising his own children.

These folks are beginning to look like the animals (clean and unclean, doves and ravens, crocodiles and termites) that God instructed Noah to put on the ark. And the GOD SHUT THEM ALL INSIDE. (Genesis 7:12-19)

But this genealogist was not alone in the Bible. The **Gospel of Matthew** also begins with a genealogy. which includes different prostitutes and other people of scurrilous characters that would never pass a modern day background check.

AHA! Herein lies a very important lesson that we, unfortunately, seem to miss too often: Christianity is not first and foremost about a morality code.

It's NOT the purity. It's the acceptance of all the good, the bad, and the ugly, put together. Faith is living in the Kingdom of God, subject to the Kingdom of God, and trusting that God's gameplan is (in Jesus' words) "to draw ALL people to [God]" (John 12:32.)

That's why **Jesus** told the parable which taught that the **weeds and the wheat** will grow together and we should not attempt to pull out the weeds. (Matthew 13:24-30)

One of those VERY IMPORTANT foundations of our family tree – indeed one of the three patriarchs, upon whom the faith of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is based – is the character we encounter in the Genesis scripture: **JACOB** (who we learn in today's reading is renamed **ISRAEL** by God.)

In today's passage we see Jacob involved in the **TIME OF PRAYER** that is so very important for us to examine, before we leave this **WORSHIP SERIES** on **PRAYER**. It's

the kind of prayer that happens, at some point, in every life – very often in the night time, as happened here.

It's called **WRESTLING PRAYER**.

It's when **life seems to be caving in all around, and fear is almost paralyzing.**

If you've not had this wrestling prayer, pay attention anyway: YOU WILL have it at some point in your life.

Jacob had outright swindled his brother Esau, taking his birthright blessing, his inheritance. He'd traded swindles with his father-in-law, from whom he is running away, and is now headed back into the territory of his brother Esau, whom he has every reason in the world to believe is harboring a generations long grudge.

Life seems to be caving in all around him, and the fear is almost paralyzing.

And then Jacob wrestles with God.

Jacob won't quit; he won't give up. But neither does it work out like he plans.

THESE ARE THE LESSONS OF FAITH LIVED OUT IN PRAYER:

(1) DON'T QUIT.

(2) UNDERSTAND THAT GOD DOESN'T WORK ACCORDING TO OUR SCHEDULES AND DESIRES, BUT ACCORDING TO WHAT GOD SEES BEST.

- Jacob wrestles and asks for a name; he gets a blessing.
- Jacob wrestles and asks for a blessing; he gets a name.
- And he walks away with a limp.
- But he walks away, a blessed man.

This is how prayer works. This is how faith sustains us.

We have got to be very careful about how we read the word **'therefore'** at the beginning of Hebrews, chapter 12. You see, *if* we read these words about running a race *separately from what has gone before*, we are in danger of missing the whole point.

Unless we understand that the people of the Bible were very often not “good people,” we will miss the real lesson of the Scripture passage. But, when taken in the context of the lives of these very imperfect saints who have gone on before us, then we learn that there is not one of us who cannot run the race of faith. **We are not meant to be “perfectionists” in the race of faith, but simply to run it.**

We are all saintly sinners and sinning saints. FAITH is about accepting what God did through Jesus, not about us trying to appease an angry and set apart God.

Scott Wagner was 33 years old when he started to run. Scott had Down’s syndrome, and when the trainer began working with him and several others, Scott could not run more than about 100 yards. The others from the care facility where Scott lived all dropped out, one by one. But Scott kept going. Three times a week, he ran with his trainer. After nine months of training and very hard work, Scott ran a 10 K race, completing in 83 minutes, the last runner to come in over the line. After that, he ran the New York City marathon, the first person with Down’s Syndrome ever to finish a marathon. Then

another, and another, and another before he died, at age 39. Scott never won a race. He knew that he did not have to win, only finish.

From Scott Wagner, we learn that **IN GOD'S KINGDOM** there is no such thing as winning or losing. There is no such thing as success or failure. It's all about sticking with it – *just finish the race and trust Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter, to do all that we need.*

THIS is the good news of the Gospel. Jesus loves us – just as we are. We do not have to WIN. Jesus has already won, for us.

There are going to be times in our life when we encounter God at the River Jabbok.

It's **the prayer**, *not of the green pastures beside still waters*, but **the wrestling match of fear.**

(1) DON'T QUIT.

(2) UNDERSTAND THAT GOD DOESN'T WORK ACCORDING TO OUR SCHEDULES AND DESIRES, BUT ACCORDING TO WHAT GOD SEES BEST.

And may your faith begin, and end, with the assurance that through it all, GOD LOVES YOU. **God has claimed you as God's beloved child, precious & beautiful to behold!**

The biblical revelation is not one of ATTAINMENT, but of RECOGNITION of what already exists. It's about AWAKENING TO REALIZATION, not accomplishing it.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.