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 Texts: Genesis 32:22-31
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The Wrestling Place: On the Edge of Hope

*Everyday we are learning
 How to live with essence, not ease.
 How to move with haste, never hate.
 How to live this pain that is beyond us
 Behind us
 Just like a skill or any art,
 We cannot possess hope without practicing it.
 It is the most fundamental craft we demand of ourselves.*
 -Amanda Gorman, *Call Us What We Carry*

The week before Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu's funeral, Table Mountain in Capetown, South Africa was bathed in purple light each night. The whole landscape and night sky was illuminated like purple stars in honor of him.

I remembered standing on Table Mountain many years ago with my father. It was the new millennium and apartheid had been slowly dismantled for about a decade by then. It was on a life changing trip that included a couple of days in Cape Town. We climbed up the rugged terrain of sandstone rock leading up Table Mountain and looked across the waters of Table Bay to see Robbins Island in the distance, where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for the 18 of his 27 years during the apartheid era.

For the past couple of weeks, I've been re-reading some of South Africa's history and especially, Desmond Tutu's writings, interviews and speeches. He has left us with so much wisdom. And so much humor. He brings this season of epiphany to life.

It saddens me that we have lost another Magi of the human spirit, whose strong and unwavering voice for the voiceless has informed/modeled for us the power of a resilient faith and a courageous conscience that can withstand even the most oppressive of regimes.

A fearless peacemaker of deep moral courage, Tutu never seemed to relent in the face of racial injustice and the endless struggle for human rights in SA. Tutu never seemed to turn away from a compassionate response nor did he turn a blind eye to the reality of oppression no matter how long the journey. He used his powerful platform with strength and humility, aligning with others in the wrestling place seeking freedom for what he called "the rainbow people of God".

In 1984 as you know, he accepted the Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of his compatriots still embroiled in apartheid. Watching the speech, I remember how remarkable it was that when Tutu approached the podium to receive his Nobel Peace Prize, before he began his formal address, he invited his family to join him on the stage. They sang a traditional African song, as a blessing to the listening world...Tutu stood there surrounded by his wife and children and sang right in the face of so much horror and oppression, celebrating this world recognition even as apartheid would continue to rage in his home country for 7 more years. In total, the apartheid system was remained in place from 1948 until the early 1990's.

In story after story that I read, Tutu was known for showing up to a protest just in time and putting himself right in the middle of the crowd. His body, his voice, his spirit often could soften a maddening crowd and even, on occasion save a life as he did one day when he stopped the senseless beating of a young black man. Tutu inserted himself right between the protestors and police or perpetrators and victims, intervening just in time. Tutu traveled internationally imploring leaders to impose sanctions and other pressures on the apartheid regime which, as our church knows well, was finally successful.

As many of you remember, FCCOL was a vocal supporter of the anti-apartheid movement and our church leaders, Revs. Carleen Gerber, David Good and others stood in solidarity with the people of South Africa, advocating for justice and sanctions, even when it wasn't popular here. They built a partnership, starting in 1988, that continues to be an ongoing gift to our church (as we've done more recently in support of the Palestinian people living under Occupation today). FCCOL's friendship with the people of South Africa is a star in the night sky.

In an interview in the late 1990's while Nelson Mandela was still President, Tutu described the toll his leadership on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission took on him physically and emotionally. When asked how he could stand to listen to the unimaginable horrors shared by victims day after day, Tutu spoke about needing to remember what he called the power of conditioning and the understanding that "there but for the grace of God go I." (p 253) This Nobel Laureate emphasized that "This does not mean we condone what they, the SA government and the white community in SA did or allowed to happen as perpetrators of human rights violations. But we will be a little more compassionate in our judgment as we become a little more conscious of how we too could succumb as easily as they."¹

I ponder Tutu's wisdom as we stand at the threshold of another year together, and look ahead down the road to what may be in 2022. It hasn't been lost on me that this week, we celebrated Epiphany, and at the same time, we also marked the 1 year anniversary of the Insurrection at the US capitol. How is it we wrestle with both, these landscapes of heaven and hell?

In the past year, we've witnessed ongoing racial strife in this country, the rise of white supremacy culture, a rollback of voting rights and continued threats to our democracy. And all of this takes place amidst the surge of Omicron.

We are grappling with the reality of the many personal and communal challenges—and the many hopes—we hold for the New Year. How can we hold all this together with the generosity and playfulness of spirit that Tutu evoked?

Writes the poet, Amanda Gorman, in her new book, "Lost as we are, there is no better compass than compassion." More wisdom for the journey.

Our scriptural text from the book of Genesis, offers us a story about the unexpected blessings that can come when we keep in the struggle. When wrestling can lead to wholeness. One of the Patriarchs of the Old Testament, Jacob, finds himself alone at the river's edge.

By this time, Jacob, (like his forbears Isaac and Abraham before him), is known for being a trickster, having stolen his twin brother, Esau's, birthright blessing from their father, Issac. Jacob and Esau by this time were brother enemies and by the time we meet Jacob by the river Jabokk, he's quite worried about the rumor he's heard that after 20 years of being separated, Esau was coming for him reportedly with 400 hundred others behind him (Gen 32:6).

As the text says, Jacob sends his family and animals across the river toward home in the land of Canaan and sleeps alone by the river. The next thing we know Jacob finds himself wrestling at the waters with a mysterious figure throughout the night. Jacob's injured in the process. And

¹ Desmond Tutu, No Future Without Forgiveness, P. 253.

when the long night is over, and the sun rises, Jacob receives the blessing he asks for and then is gifted with a new name, “*Israel*”, meaning *one who has prevailed with others and with God*. In turn, Jacob names the wrestling place, *Peniel*, meaning *I've seen God face to face*. (32:30)

One wonders about the dark night of the soul, that Jacob encountered, that universal and ancient trope of the human condition, that most of us experience at one time or another. It is here in the dark that the healing and sheltering of God’s presence often dwells, even when we may experience it as absence. There is a Presence with Jacob and while he doesn’t walk away unscathed, he is changed for the better.

We can only hope that after his night of turmoil, Jacob will now inhabit his life as a “*wounded healer*,” (Henri Nouwen), not as the walking wounded, hellbent on hurting others. The hope is that he will learn from his injury and use his experience to heal others, not to wound them further. As the Genesis saga continues, we learn that Jacob got up the next morning, went out to meet his brother and they were reconciled.

The transformative power of a new name is one we see over and over in scripture. Jacob receives the blessing of a new name as his forebears did on their journeys with God. It is a new way of being in the world. Of receiving one’s God-given identity of belovedness inherent in every human being. We affirm this belovedness every time we baptise a child here and welcome a new family to our church for we are as Tutu called us all, “God- carriers.”

I would suggest that this time we’re living through is a long night of the soul for our country. And we are wrestling with what it means to keep in relationship with each other, how to build unity, inclusion and justice for all in the face of threats to our democracy. In the Wrestling place, as Jacob experienced, the long struggle can leave us wounded and scarred. Yet also, the possibility for wholeness remains.

Hope and wisdom can be found at dawn down by the river’s edge.

If you haven't seen it, I'd highly recommend the documentary, *Mission Joy: Finding Happiness* in TROUBLED Times. It features Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu and his friend, fellow octogenarian, His Holiness, the Dalai Lama. I guarantee you’ll laugh out loud at these two world leaders, giggling at jokes together and marveling at what they’ve endured both in their personal lives and in their dedication to bringing justice and fighting authoritarianism in their communities. It’s their irrepressible joy that is contagious.²

In a love letter to his people, whom he called the Rainbow People of God, Tutu wrote:

“We are made for goodness. We are made for love. We are made for friendliness. We are made for togetherness. We are made for all of the beautiful things that you and I know. We are made to tell the world that there are no outsiders. All are welcome: black, white, red, yellow, rich, poor, educated, not educated, male, female, gay, straight, all, all, all. We all belong to this family, this human family, God's family.”

² [MISSION: JOY • Official Trailer • Documentary About the Dalai Lama & Desmond Tutu's Fri...](#)