

## Wrestling with Angels

Genesis 32: 24-28

*Grace and peace to you from our Creator God,  
from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,  
and from the Holy Spirit that enlivens and sustains us. Amen.*

It is wonderful to be together in person with members of our Board of Regents – the first time in 20 months! And I thought it would be fitting to reflect a bit on our commitment to a Lutheran higher education.

So what do you think of when you hear about our Lutheran colleges and universities? I'm sure there are many alumni of our colleges in the congregation today. I'm a proud Luther College grad and now have the honor to serve as Augsburg's 10th president.

I read this text from Genesis and immediately thought of Augsburg's world class wrestling program - Jacob might have been an NCAA champ. And as you might know, our chief rival for NCAA championships is the team from our sister school, Wartburg College. Who would have imagined two Lutheran colleges vying for wrestling titles!

Or maybe you've had an experience like me when our kids, Thomas and Maya, were maybe seven and four years old. We were at Target after church one Sunday and the kids were a couple of aisles away, and all of a sudden I hear them singing at the top of their lungs, "Jesus Loves Me," but instead of rushing over to quiet them down I thought how wonderful that I was raising future members of the Luther or Augsburg or St. Olaf choirs!

Or maybe your memories of our Lutheran colleges are friends for a lifetime, or that faculty member who changed your life with a class or a word of wise advice, or the daily chapel services that drew the community together.

Whatever your memories - and they all are still important to our lives on campus today - I want to suggest that at the heart of our mission as a university grounded in Lutheran faith and values is our deep and abiding commitment to walking alongside our students as they wrestle with angels - wrestling just like Jacob did millennia ago to secure a blessing, to find a way in the world, to discern a calling, to live faithfully as a child of God.

This thing called faith is so central to our lives, our tradition, and our role in the world, and yet too often we find it extremely difficult to engage each other in conversations about what we believe and why. I believe deeply that our need to talk about faith and its role in our private and public lives is perhaps more relevant than ever before because the world needs people of faith. The evidence is so clear that we are a fallen people – in pain, separated from our better natures, fragmented from each other, at war within and without – surely we all know the reality of what the Apostle Paul called "creation's groaning." And we could leave it just there – as many do – with no evidence for optimism, no sense of what it all means, no horizon that inspires us to go on. Yet we are called to faith and hope. Acknowledging creation's groaning while also

believing that the Divine is active in our midst, we find hope in the *glimpses* of God's reign in our history, in our daily lives. Faith is what helps us live in the paradox that Martin Luther called *simul justus et peccator* – people living in the tension of being saved yet still sinful, in the tension of creation's groaning and the mysterious and redemptive work of God in our lives. Wrestling with angels, even.

In the context of this elegant tension, I've been thinking about faith a good bit over the past few months as we try to imagine the role that faith plays in the Augsburg University community and I'd like to offer a brief glimpse of some of my thinking and see if it makes sense to you as we all seek to grasp what it means to be faithful people in the world. How are we called to wrestle with angels in our lives of faith in the world?

Story of Thomas' adoption: Imagine this situation – five families gathered in an orphanage conference room in Soc Trang, Vietnam, brief speeches, food is served, and all of a sudden five children are carried out from the back room. There ensues this remarkable cacophony of screaming and crying and picture-taking – and then we are off, loaded into vans and on our way back to our lives, changed forever by what happened in that orphanage.

This scene, it seems to me, is a glimpse of what happens to all of us when faith breaks into our lives: a ceremony, cacophony, and our lives are changed forever – it is this wondrous moment of transformation, of being claimed and named, of becoming part of a new family, of receiving the greatest gift we could ever imagine to receive.

It is this story that helps me to understand that faith truly is a gift – not to be coveted or expected, but to be received – we are chosen by God to be God's child, to become a part of God's family, to belong as a child of God. Faith disrupts our lives, surprises us, transforms what we expect to happen, changes us forever – and there is nothing we can do but receive the gift and then live as gifted people.

Story of Betsy, an Augsburg student: Betsy is like many of our students who come to the college not sure exactly what she believes – and yet she jumps into the life of the college, a good student, a good citizen, and more and more an active participant in our Campus Kitchens program. Betsy begins to understand through her work with our neighbors how much she values the opportunity to be of service, perhaps initially because it feels good, but more and more because she begins to understand what she learns in relationship with neighbor. She is disappointed when she is asked simply to deliver meals – she wants fellowship and community.

Surely Betsy shows us what it means to think about faith as a call, not a finished product, but a story unfolding where faith is not a certain fact, but an evolving narrative of a life that comes to understand what it means to live as a gifted person of faith.

My teacher, Martin Marty, says that the distinctive mark of faithful people is “acts of mercy” – Luther uses the word “neighbor” more often than any other word in his voluminous works.

Faith as call teaches us that there is not necessarily one destination point – one place where we can call it a day. Faith as call reminds us of the seeking and searching that accompanies a life of faith – faith is loving the neighbor, doing acts of mercy – faith is an unfolding story to our lives that may not be what we expected.

Story of my mother, Elsie My mom died 19 years ago this past summer and during her final couple of weeks, she was surrounded by the vigil of friends and family in the hospice care center where she was lodged. My mother, who was a most remarkable woman, had been battling cancer for several years, and, now having made some difficult decisions about her treatment alternatives, was in a time of peaceful and faithful waiting for the disease to run its course. Her large family—I am the oldest of six children, all married with children of their own—made frequent visits to see mom/grandma, valuing the time together and with her.

Our visits struck me as instructive for all of us as we “keep vigil” with and for mom. I wonder what we might all learn from those times when we band together with family, friends, co-workers, fellow citizens to pay attention, to wait for, to mark out the time in preparation for some impending moment.

Here, then, is faith as promise, the ways in which we suspend our own notions of time and progress and success to wait patiently and prayerfully for God’s will to be done. This is faith reaching to a deeper place in our lives, asking us to remember all the ways in which our lives are shaped by the people we care about; to console each other, to be faithful partners in the work of grieving loss and celebrating lives well lived; to learn how healing is more often about broken hearts and spirits than about broken bodies; to be patient, to wait for things beyond our control to show us the way to a new place; to wonder at the awesome power of life and death, and of our grand and mysterious God; and to hope for the things to come.

And when my mom passed into our God’s embrace, we experienced what the hymnwriter John Ylvisaker has called “just one last surprise,” God’s promise of abundant and eternal life.

Faith as gift, call and promise – faith as a life unfolding. We join together to proclaim “Lord, I believe” – I believe in your gift, your call, your promise – even as we admit, “help my unbelief” – my struggles to receive the gift, to discern and live the call, to wait for the promise. This is faith living in the world, full of tensions and full of grace! This is our call to wrestle with angels! Thanks be to God. Amen.