

Message for September 18, 2022

Omagh's 184th Anniversary

Genesis 32:22-29

Matthew 28:16-20

The name Shoikoi Yokoi probably isn't familiar to us but he spent twenty-eight years in prison, a prison not made of walls but rather of his own mind. He fought in the Japanese army during World War Two on the island of Guam. When it became obvious that the battle for the island was lost, he fled and hid in the jungle to avoid being captured. He was so scared that he refused to come out. He lived in a cave and only ventured out at night to hunt for frogs, rats and to collect mangos to eat. He lived like that for almost twenty-eight years until one day in the early 1970's he was discovered by a party of hunters who convinced him that it was safe to leave his jungle home.

When I read about him, I couldn't help but compare him to the principal character of today's first scripture lesson. Like Yokoi, Jacob too spent years in a prison of his own mind. Jacob too tried to hide but like Yokoi, the day came when, however reluctantly, he had to confront his future.

Years before the event described in today's first lesson Jacob had, with his mother's help, defrauded his older brother Esau of his rightful inheritance. Naturally this infuriated Esau and so Jacob had to literally run for his life. Jacob spent twenty years in exile and he did very well for himself. By the world's standards he was a resounding success but he had no peace. More than anything else, he wanted to go home but who was to say that even after all of these years Esau still didn't bear a grudge?

One day God spoke to Jacob and told him that he could now go home. As he approached home, he sent a messenger ahead to let his brother know that he was coming. In no time at all the messenger returned but he had a rather frightening message; his brother Esau was coming to meet him along with four hundred armed men! At this point Jacob panicked. Frantically he sent more messengers ahead to greet his brother, all of whom were bearing expensive gifts. Jacob also divided his caravan into two groups, reasoning that if one were

attacked then perhaps the other one might escape. Last but not least, Jacob also turned to God praying for deliverance.

It was the night before his fateful encounter with his brother and Jacob wanted to be alone, but it was not to be. A stranger showed up who, of all things, challenged Jacob to a wrestling match. The two wrestled all night long with neither one gaining the advantage. As daybreak approached, the stranger succeeded in spraining Jacob's thigh but even then Jacob didn't give up. He grimly hung on saying: "I will not let you go unless you bless me." Finally the stranger gave Jacob what he asked for but he also gave him something else too; a new name, Israel. And what was the meaning of this new name?

"He who strives with God". Now it is obvious why Jacob was given this name because he had striven or contended with God his entire life, and that night he had physically wrestled with an angel. Striving and contending with God was the story of Jacob's life but the name Israel of course didn't just become Jacob's new name; it was also used to identify his descendants and the country that they established. And isn't it both ironic and fascinating that the name of God's chosen people means "one who strives, who contends, who argues with God?" There is however a lot of merit to this name.

When one reads the Old Testament, it sometimes seems as if God's people were always striving or contending with him. Indeed it often seems as if there was a perpetual argument going on between them over who would be boss. But while God's people struggled in this negative way, they also contended and struggled in a more positive way as well. This is to say, not everything came easily for them just because they were God's chosen people. Yes, they were blessed by God but, like Jacob before them, they had to struggle to make their blessing a reality. When they entered the Promised Land for example, they had to fight for it. The Promised Land was also said to be a land flowing with milk and honey, but they had to work hard and persevere to make it such. And this, the necessity of having to struggle to make God's blessing a reality, is something that perhaps we ought to remember on this anniversary Sunday.

Imagine for a moment what the land around us was like two hundred years ago. There was nothing but huge trees and the forest teemed with wildlife. Then the first settlers arrived who were Irish Protestants for the most part. They came willingly but they missed the old country and that is reflected by the names

that they gave to their little communities strung out along what became Britannia Road; Boyne, Omagh and Drumquin. It was incredibly hard work to make the blessing of this new land a reality and there is a reminder of this in our own cemetery.

It was mid-April of 1851 and life was pretty good for Andrew and Hannah Suiter. To be sure they had lost a daughter six years earlier but they were still blessed with seven other children ranging in age from three months to nineteen. They also had a young nephew who lived with them. Then however disaster struck and in the space of one month, six of their children along with their nephew died. Imagine losing that many family members in less than a month! While an extreme example, that tragic episode reminds us of how hard life was for those who went before us but even so, in amidst the struggle to survive, never mind thrive, those settlers didn't give up. They sought to make God's blessings a reality and one of the ways that they did so was by founding this congregation.

As time went by things changed. The countryside became more settled and prosperous. This congregation went from being the church of the pioneers to the church of the countryside. The struggle though to make God's blessings a reality continued, and perhaps the best indication of this was the decision to replace the original wooden sanctuary with the building that we are now in. It was a huge undertaking and an act of courage and faith to make the blessing of this building a reality. And the struggle to make God's blessings a reality still continues.

We are now living in yet another time of transition. For over a hundred years we were the church of the countryside but now the countryside is quite literally disappearing before our very eyes. There are the houses behind us, the sewage pumping station on one side, and the proposed development on the other side. And we all know what is happening in front of us! We here today are living through an era of tremendous change, and this isn't just confined to the physical world around us either.

Until the mid to late 1960's churches thrived in Canada but then a downward spiral began leading to where we are today. While the vast majority of Canadians still identify themselves as Christian, most have little if anything to do with any congregation. In short the church, including this congregation, is

living through a time of transition, and once again the question is how to make God's blessing a reality?

There is no shortage of suggestions and ideas. Some congregations are continuing with the traditional model of ministry with a minister serving one or two congregations. Others have opted for a different approach where one minister serves even more congregations; this is a back to the future approach as in the days of the pioneers and the circuit riders. Some churches have opted for just Sunday supply and providing pastoral care themselves. Yet others share their building with a congregation of a different denomination as we do. Still yet others have even got out of their facilities altogether and are worshipping in homes or storefronts. Some are even converting their buildings into multi-use facilities and occupying one room or floor within the new complex; Hillcrest comes to mind where they will be sharing facilities with the hospice.

The list could go on and on but as different as all of these ideas and approaches may be, they share two things in common. The first is the conviction that no matter how big or small, no matter how strong or weak they may be, they are prepared to struggle in order to make God's blessing a reality. The second is their conviction that God is present and active among them. As Jesus said, he is present whenever two or three are gathered in his name. Christ **is** present in the midst of them or, as he said in today's second scripture passage; "Surely I am with you always, to the end of time."

And so he is; and that is one of the things that we affirm here this morning on this, our 184th anniversary.

Pastoral Prayer

Hear us as we come to you in prayer this Sunday morning which is, according to the calendar, the last of the summer season.

We give you thanks for all of the good of the season now coming to an end: the warmth, the long days, and the sights, sounds and activities of the season. We give you thanks for the season of beauty and bounty that is now dawning.

On this special Sunday, we give you thanks for what it is that we celebrate and affirm here today; this congregation's 184th anniversary. We give you thanks for her years of faithful witness and ministry. We thank you for the many people, many of whom we have known and loved, who sought to serve you well through this church family. We confess that sometimes on the journey it is easier to see where we have been rather than where we are going. We confess too that this is in many ways a challenging time to be your Son's body here on earth. Nevertheless, may we be inspired by those who have gone before us and their willingness to sacrifice and persevere to make your blessings a reality. May we also draw courage from your Son's promise that he is always present wherever and whenever two or more people come together in his name.

We give you thanks for the larger church of which we are a part and pray for her ministry throughout the world. We pray too for the larger world of which we are a part.

We pray for the sake of peace, justice, and righteousness throughout the whole of this world. We continue to remember your suffering children in Ukraine and Pakistan. We pray for those closer to home devastated by the senseless killings in Mississauga and our own community this past week. We pray for the safety and well-being of all who serve in our various police services, and for the other first responders as well.

On this day before her funeral, we give you thanks for the decades of selfless service given by her Majesty the Queen. We pray for the sake of her family and pray for your blessing upon our new head of state, King Charles.

We ask these things in your Son's name. Amen