

Grace and peace be unto you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

When I was a kid in Sunday School, I thought of our ancestors in faith in the scriptures primarily as heroes of the Bible. I lauded them for their strength, their faithfulness, their compassion, their valor.

But over the years, I've begun to see the Biblical witness much more as a study of ordinary people than a study of the greats. And not only a study of ordinary people, but one of ordinary families, which are plagued not only by love and longing, but by envy and shame.

Our story this morning centers again on the family to whom God has made the major promise of the Old Testament. The descendants of Abraham shall have land, offspring, and blessing. Through them, all the peoples of the world will be blessed.

We're only on the second generation after that promise, and at this point, as we consider the grandsons of Abraham, it's hard to see where the blessing will be manifest. Jacob and Esau have an extreme form of sibling rivalry, and the favoritism of their mother for Jacob, the younger child, is doing little to improve the situation.

The first part of our reading chronicles the classic conflict between Jacob and Esau, in which Jacob steals his father's blessing by pretending to have hairy hands and bringing him the game of the field in a stew.

There's a break of most of a chapter in our reading, in which a key point in the story occurs. After Jacob steals the blessing, Esau's anger is kindled against him. His mother fears for Jacob, and convinces his father to send him away to his uncle's house to find a wife of his own kin. In that way, Rebecca protects Jacob, but only by estranging him from his family.

It is at this point, just after Jacob has wronged his family by tricking his father and brother and just after he has been estranged from Esau, who wishes him to die, that the second part of our passage occurs.

Traveling alone, Jacob stops for the night. With only a rock for a pillow, he lays down to sleep. In his sleep, however, he is given a vision from God, a glimpse of God's presence and mercy in the midst of these bleak days of his life. And with the vision, words that reiterate God's mercy and promises.

What strikes me about this story is that it is not in the moment that Jacob is deserving that God chooses to reveal God's self to him. It is rather in the moment of the conflict – the period of the struggle – when Jacob's life is in turmoil and his future is unclear, that God's presence shows up.

Because I work on campus with young adults, when I think of this time in Jacob's life, when he has left home and not yet found himself or come to terms with his family, as a kind of young adulthood, a kind of in-between place when he's not quite a grown up, but obviously no longer a child.

Young adulthood isn't an easy time. I will admit that before I began my work at Lutheran Campus Ministry, I thought back on my own college years as a kind of idyllic time. I remembered great professors and deep friendships. But what had faded with time was the turmoil of not yet knowing who I was and the struggle to find a future.

Now, when I look at the lives of the young people with whom I am blessed to work, I realize the profound blessing of being an adult, still on the journey of faith and life, but in a place much more settled than that of the college years.

But in this story of Jacob's journey, the in-breaking of God's presence reminds me how important the work of people of faith with college-aged students really is. We have the capacity to do what Jacob's dream did for him. We have the opportunity to reveal God's presence and mercy in the midst of the messiness of life.

In our mission statement at Lutheran Campus Ministry, we have four areas on which we center our work: creating an affirming community, deepening faith, engaging minds, and serving neighbors.

I'd like to take just a few moments to talk about our work on campus, and to let you know how your congregation's support is making God's presence known to college students.

The largest program that we have on campus is our "taste of grace" Lunch, which we serve each day that class is in session at UW. Every day, a diverse community of about 100 students gathers at the campus center to share a meal. Some come to this meal because Lutheran Campus Ministry is their spiritual home on campus. Others come because they cannot afford to eat healthy food otherwise. Some come simply because it's convenient, and because they have friends who come.

Each day over lunch, I try to sit down with a group of students who I don't know very well. Last spring, I sat with two young men who I had never met before. I introduced myself. One young man, Blake, told me that he'd been coming to the lunch for a while. He was grateful for the meals and told me that he'd invited his friend who was with him. The second young man, Josh, told me that it was his first time at LCM. Then he corrected himself. He said, "Well, I tried to come once before, but I didn't come inside." I was curious about this, and I asked him what had gotten in the way. He told me that he'd grown up in a Christian family, but that after his first year of college, he'd gone home for the summer and come out to his parents, and told them that he was gay.

For Josh, his parents and their church, had been a source of struggle with his identity. Even after came out to his parents, their pastor had encouraged them to help him see differently, and this had caused many fights. Josh told me, "When I saw that the place we were going to lunch was a church, I bowed out that first time. But today, when I got close, I saw that your sign has a rainbow on it. That gave me the courage to come inside."

For Josh, that a place made up of people of faith would reach out to him and accept him was a surprising in-breaking of God's presence in his life. Although Josh isn't sure what he believes, he's an active member of our community of faith, attending talks and fellowship activities.

For most students at LCM, the lunch is the place where they connect to our community, and what makes it feel like home away from home to them. However, our mission stretches beyond simply caring for and feeding students. We also help accompany them on their journeys of faith while in school.

One of the ways we do this is by engaging topics of social justice within our ministry. Our young people, whether or not they would call themselves Christian, have hearts for many issues that affect our local community and the world. On Tuesdays over lunch, we invite speakers who may or may not be people of faith, but who engage the mind on the difficult issues of our time. This fall, we have a speaker series in the works about care for creation. Bob Lindmeier, a local weatherman and member of an ELCA congregation, will speak on climate change. One of our LCM alums who works as an attorney around issues of clean water will speak about Wisconsin's lakes and riverways. Two students who work with UW's FH King Campus Garden project will talk about the impact of local produce. Not all of these speakers will share their faith, though some will. But all of these speakers will introduce students to how care for creation and our neighbors is linked to who we imagine ourselves to be and the kind of communities we create.

For other students, LCM is a place not only for bodies and minds, but for souls as well. The center of our week, like yours at Advent, is on Sundays, when we gather in the evening for worship and Bible study.

On campus, our worshipping community is small but strong, made up of friendships that deepen and grow. Young people serve as the worship leaders. They read scripture, lead music, serve communion, and offer prayer. My favorite part of our worship on campus is at the time of the prayers of the people. Because we are a small group, we have time for a different kind of community prayer. After the song of the day, we light a candle and place it in a bowl of sand. Then students come up one by one and offer prayers aloud, lighting a candle when they are finished. These prayers of our community touch my heart week after week.

Students pray for their families at home, for themselves in their struggles, and for their friends and neighbors who face the daily struggles of college life: exhaustion, depression, addiction, and unhealthy relationships. Students also pray for people across the globe, in places they are discovering through their studies.

They pray for refugees and victims of war. They pray for those who hunger and thirst. They pray for those who are the victims of unjust labor practices. For me, this time each week, reveals God's kingdom in my heart. As I hear these students pray together, I have hope for our weary and turbulent world.

Finally, our mission on campus is also to inspire students to serve their neighbors. This year, we are working on a new project with Luther Memorial Church about which I am very excited. As a part of Luther Memorial's recent renovation, a new space has been finished in their basement. Luther Memorial is working with a group of students from our ministry to develop a student resource space in their basement that will allow student groups to care for the needs of the campus and our local community.

So far, we have two pilot groups using the space. A group of business students have developed a caring closet that stocks clothing and toiletries for students in need. Another group of students is doing a project called bundle up, in which they collect coats, hats, and mittens from the campus community and distribute them through many different organizations in Madison. The students who are doing these projects are deeply grateful for the space and support that we are offering them. We are equipping them to do the work of God on campus – whether or not they would call it that.

If what Jacob desperately needed in that wilderness between his childhood and adulthood – in that lonely clearing with only a rock for a pillow – was the in-breaking of the kingdom of God, a vision of God's mercy and care – then perhaps that is what our students on campus need as well.

Because of your congregation's faithful support, Lutheran Campus Ministry is able to bring small glimpses to students each and every day. These glimpses of mercy come in cups of coffee and hot meals. They come in quiet prayer and meaningful conversation. They come in expanded hearts for those in need. They come in opportunities to serve neighbors.

I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to walk alongside these young people each and every day. It is a blessing to see the impact that we are making together on campus.

Today, I wish to say thank you to you, the people of Advent, for your ongoing support of Lutheran Campus Ministry. Without the support of congregations like yours, and without the support of alumni and friends in congregations like this one, the work that I am blessed to do would be impossible.

As you make your journeys through life this week, my prayer is that God's mercy might be made manifest to you as well. We are blessed to know a God of compassion who is revealed not only in prayer and dreams, but in word and meal, in the human and the physical as well.

Thank you again for your support. May God bless you this week and always.
Amen.