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and LIFT (Lutherans in Faith Together)  
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**Sermon preached by Bishop Samuel Zeiser  
June 18, 2011**

Jacob led a favored life. Sure, there was that messy thing with his brother, and that contentious wrestling match that threw out his hip. But that was earlier. Now, things were good, way good! See for yourself: *(Genesis 35) God said to him, "Your name is Jacob; no longer shall you be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name." God said to him, "I am God Almighty; be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall spring from you. The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you...and to your offspring after you".* I'd call that "favored." A patriarch commissioned; God's announcement of sovereignty, power, rule, reign – call it what you want; a bountiful future; **God's** people. A fresh start!

You might say that the "be fruitful and multiply thing" was already up and running. Jacob was father to a houseful of children, mostly grown children, twelve of them sons. And land? There was lots of land, most of it grazing land for his herds of sheep. Today's reading, Genesis **37**, depicts the sons, eleven of them, nearly 100 miles from home pasturing "their father's flock near Shechem." If the Shechem pasturing takes that many of the sons, there's bound to be large numbers of sheep. And chances are

that the sons are supervisors. So, there are hirelings to do the dirty work. Lots of land, lots of sheep, lots of hirelings means a pretty secure income for Jacob – a ***favored*** life.

“Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; bring word back to me.” That’s Jacob...addressing Joseph, the second youngest of the sons. Joseph did not accompany his brothers to Shechem. And this brings us to the “soft spot” in Jacob’s otherwise favored life: the son Joseph.

Now, you already know that Jacob loves the boy; loves him maybe a bit too much. In early verses of chapter 37 you discover, “Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children.” The writer attributes this greater love to Jacob’s being in old age when Joseph was born.

Greater love for one child: well, things like this happen sometimes. Joseph was likely very different in demeanor, in appearance, in speech. My guess – he was everything his father wanted to be, ***and*** a vigorous 17 years old. I checked: Martin Luther defends the kid. Yeah – the same Martin Luther who spares no one his vitriol. Listen to what Luther writes in his commentary on Genesis: “Joseph is like a shining morning star in Jacob’s house with whom those stupid and gross peasants [his brothers] could not even stand comparison.” A *favored* child in a favored household!

“Go and see if it is well with your brothers and the flock.” Maybe Jacob realized that Joseph needed a little of the commonplace in his life, needed to be able to function in a world of ordinary people. “Go now,” his father instructs him, “see.”

So, Joseph went to Shechem only to find his brothers not there. They probably had found he was on his way and promptly took off for Dothan, twenty miles further. But Joseph was Joseph: you tell that boy to make spotted paint and he works at it until he comes up with spotted paint. He found them.

“Here comes this dreamer,” the brothers say to one another. It sounds like they’ve got a disparaging name for him, a way to belittle him, something to bind them in their abuse of the brat. He would tell them about his dreams, tell them in a way only a sheltered, earnest, wide-eyed, compliant 17 year-old punk can tell them: “**Listen to this dream...look I’ve had another dream.**” Once he dreamed that they were all gathering stalks of grain, when suddenly his stalk stood upright and theirs gathered ‘round it and bowed to his stalk. (Yeah, that’s a way to build relationships.) There was another dream, which upon disclosure to his family, sent even his father into a tirade. Chapter 37, verse 8: *So [the brothers] hated him even more because of his dreams and his words.*

“Here comes this dreamer.” They don’t know the father urged him to make the journey. As far as they know, he is hunting them down to describe the latest dream he’s had. And his dreams always make them look like pandering idiots. Look at him, he is wearing that coat! Is that embarrassing or what? One way or another, he’s got to go!

“Let us **sell** him.” This is the compromise! Brothers Rueben and Judah have negotiated the situation down from killing Joseph to selling him to strangers on a trade

route between Damascus and Egypt. The coat, the repugnant coat, is dipped in goat's blood for the sake of subterfuge when they face their father.

So, let's do a reality check – *You are Israel...be fruitful and multiply...nations shall come from you...yadah, yadah, yadah.* Jacob's favored life! First, eleven of Jacob's sons have sold the twelfth. Second, Joseph is gone, lucky to get away with his life. And, Jacob will mourn inconsolably for a son who is not really dead. What seemed favored was pierced by the struggle and disappointment that comes with the brokenness that sin produces.

The brokenness has not gone away, even though we know Jacob's story, and other stories like his. Here we are – by baptism into Christ – God's people gathered in assembly as the Northeastern PA Synod – ELCA. In this assembly, we are reminded what it means to be God's people, particularly as Henry Melchior Muhlenberg has given shape to that identity – and yet, God's people pierced by the struggle and disappointment that sin produces.

Muhlenberg's pastoral work was devoted to planting the church so that God's (admittedly German Lutheran) people might gather, be nurtured, and sent in the style they exercised in Europe. Read in his Journals the proposal he set before "the elders, presbyters and other members of the Lutheran Congregations at New Hannover, Providence and Philadelphia" on Christmas Day 1742.

*We testify in God and affirm in Subscription, that we have accepted with a thankful Heart the Rev. Heinrich Melchior Muhlenberg as a lawfull called,*

*ordained, and by our Supplications Sent and represent Minister of the Gospel and the Augsbourg Confession, by the Reverend Frederick Michael Zigenhagen...German Chaplain and Member of the Society for promoting Christian Knowledge. (I, 73)*

A fresh start: a patriarch commissioned, a nation and a company of nations already arriving, a land with promise for their offspring, a bountiful future. God's people, with a fresh start!

Muhlenberg, though, would protest that this was no City on Hill approach to church life in America. The City on a Hill approach surrounds itself with expectations of purity, restriction, favor. Instead Muhlenberg would claim a "people of God" effort at faithfulness in ministry, with all the inherent struggle and disappointment. Recognition of the struggle and disappointment is clear in the lines following the affirmation and subscription of the people.

*While we live in the last Days and in perilous Times, we will turn away from Such a Sort of Preachers, which are Lovers of their own Selves, Covetous Boasters proud, Blasphemers, unholy, having a form of godliness but denying the Power thereof, creeping into Houses and Congregations...not able to teach others, but to steal, to kill and to destroy the Sheep. (I, 74)*

And the people affixed their names. In doing so they, with Henry Melchior Muhlenberg in the Old Testament tradition of the people of God – so clear in the story of Jacob – committed themselves, and you and me to this way of doing church. In this people of God way of doing church, God works through our disappointments and struggles to accomplish God's intention.

We have not merited this. God has acted to claim us, in Christ's death and resurrection through Holy Baptism, so that we bear witness not to our capacities, but to God's faithfulness. We therefore can be a confident people of God, confident in God's faithfulness to guard and preserve us. Joseph, after all, became an instrument of God's providence, ascending to influence and power in Egypt, and paving the way for his broken family and others to overcome the ravages of famine overwhelming the land. As God's people in the Risen Jesus, we too can be confident in the face of struggles born out of exacting decision making or disappointments brought about by a collapsed economy; or whatever the world may present.

God does not withdraw because we falter or flounder. Martin Luther gives expression to this promise as boldly as anyone: *I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel.... Daily in this Christian church the Holy Spirit abundantly forgives all sin – mine and those of all believers).*

This church – whether it be congregation, synod, or churchwide expression – may from time to time find itself in some turmoil, not unlike the turmoil that befell Jacob. But, in the dying and rising of Jesus, **the** Favored One pierced, this church will be given new life – a fresh start – daily as it pursues the destiny to which God has called it. That destiny: to follow God through a history that God has already laid out and will bring to

completion in the Kingdom of God. And so we pray in the words Jesus taught us, “Your kingdom come.”