Pentecost Nine

Genesis 32:22-31

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church 8-2-20

On the evening of November 18, 1995 in Avery Fisher Hall at Lincoln Center in New York City, the great violinist Itzhak Perlman was scheduled to be the soloist. And while the concert goers knew they would be blessed by the beauty of his playing, what actually happened was beyond all expectations… Because what happened, was this…

After walking across the stage with the help of his crutches, after getting settled in his chair and picking up his violin, after nodding his readiness to begin the violin concerto he was to play with the New York Philharmonic that evening, after getting well into that exquisite piece of music, one of the strings on Itzhak Perlman's violin broke, snapping with a forceful and terrible sound that reverberated through-out the room.

A collective gasp rose from the audience. The orchestra stopped. Everyone knew one of two things had to happen…either the string would have to be replaced or someone would have to bring another violin on stage for Itzhak Perlman to play…

But instead, (as the story goes) Itzhak Perlman waited a moment, closed his eyes and then signaled to the conductor to begin again… The orchestra began, and he played from where he had left off, moving up and down the neck of the violin on **three** strings to find the notes he had previously played on **four**…leaving behind the fingerings and bowings and positions he had practiced so may times, and playing into a territory, a space, a possibility totally unknown…

When he finished, there was complete silence in the room. And then everyone in Avery Fisher Hall was on their feet shouting and cheering, doing everything they could to show how much they appreciated what Itzhak Perlman had done…

Itzhak Perlman smiled, wiped the sweat from his brow, raised his bow to the audience, and said – not boastfully, but in a quiet, pensive, reverent tone – "You know, sometimes it is the artist's task to find out how much music you can still make with what you have left… Sometimes it is the artist's task to find out how much music you can still make with what you have left."

I tell this story about the evening Itzhak Perlman had to find out how much music he could still make with what he had left, because I think something similar happened that night to

Jacob at the Ford of the Jabbok when, leaving behind his wives, his herds, all the supports he had come to rely upon, he wrestled (alone) with an adversary until he came into a territory, a space, a possibility totally unknown… and there saw what music he could still make with what he had left…

The thing is (to do a little "riff" on the original story from Genesis)… The thing is, Jacob had been well-schooled in the music he'd learned from his ancestors, ***his grandfather Abram having heard it first…*** *The music… out under that starry sky, when, as the story goes, God opened Abram's ears and heart to hear the music's haunting, devastatingly beautiful, transformative sound…*

God calling Abram that night to take that music into himself for the sake of passing it on to his children, so they might pass it on to their children… and so on and so on, until the whole world would be blessed with the sound of it… until the whole world would hear the music, and practice the music, and become the music for which there is no adequate name except "gasp!" (Which, as my friend Rabbi Darah Lerner says, is the best name there is for God…"gasp!").

So, as the story goes, Abram said "yes" to receiving the music God made out under the starry sky that night, Abram mysteriously finding somewhere out there on the Plains of Haran a violin made of rose-wood and drift-wood on which to play… (I told you this was a "riff" on the old story)…

And then along with his wife Sarah, Abraham passed the notes, the melodies, the finger positions, the bowing techniques and the violin onto their one and only son Isaac, who, when he was of age, along with his wife Rebekah, passed the notes, the melodies, the finger positions and bowing techniques onto their twin sons Esau and Jacob, with the understanding that when it was time, Esau, the oldest of the twins, would receive the blessing of the violin…

Which is where the story really gets interesting, because, through the cunning and trickery of Rebekah, it was Jacob, her favorite of the twins, who received the violin instead; their father Isaac being too blind to see that it was Jacob who knelt before him on the day the blessing was to be bestowed… That violin and the music of blessing it was to carry, now Jacob's through deceit, much to the sorrow of his father Isaac and to the rage of his brother Esau when the truth of the deceit was revealed…

The result of which sent Jacob running to distant family members for fear of his life… where he spent the next fourteen years or so working on his Uncle Laban's farm and practicing the violin… Jacob's hard work and cunning, his confidence and good fortune yielding two wives, many children, legions of servants and herds and herds of blue ribbon goats…

Which was all well and good until the night Jacob heard God speak to him, telling him to return to his home and to his bother Esau… Jacob, scared to death for fear of the revenge Esau might exact upon him, but obedient to God's command, heading back home then with his wives

and children, his servants and possessions, along with his herds of goats, the choicest of which he had decided to give to Esau as a kind of peace offering…

Which brings us to the part of the story chronicled in our first lesson for this morning, as Jacob, on the night before he was scheduled to meet with Esau, sent all of his kids and wives and servants and possessions ahead, including the violin… and then went alone to the Ford of the Jabbok… And there in the darkest part of the night, found himself accosted by an unknown assailant who forced Jacob to play violin duets with him… despite the fact that Jacob hadn't even brought his violin…

So Jacob, having no choice, lifted his left arm ***as if*** *holding the violin, and his right arm* ***as if*** *holding the bow… And then Jacob, reaching deep within himself to that "virgin place" of utter emptiness, waited a moment, closed his eyes, and leaving behind the fingerings and bowings and positions he had practiced so many times, played into a territory, a space, a possibility totally unknown… Reaching for notes that had never before been played that way, except once out under a starry sky when an old man first awoke to its sound… Music with such a haunting, devastatingly beautiful, transformative sound there was no name for it except "Gasp!"*

Jacob played the music. Even in the absence of a violin… Even when the assailant cried, "enough!" Jacob, having relinquished all the supports upon which he had built his life, refused to stop, ***making music that comes only when you have to figure out how much music you can still make with what you have left…***

The devastation and excruciating beauty of that night leaving Jacob limping, bearing a new name, a new identity… Israel… and blessed beyond reckoning with the recognition that it wasn't the violin at all that was necessary for making the music intended for the blessing of the world… But the music itself, ***heard in the wrenching silence of a heart broken open by loss and love…*** *Blessed beyond reckoning with the recognition that even when everything else has been taken from you… even in the utter* ***absence*** *of everything you have come to depend upon, there is still the* ***presence*** *for which there is no other name except, "gasp."*

(Reminding us perhaps of the strange wisdom inherent in the French word "blessure," which can be translated as both "wound" and "blessing.")

The Jacob saga continues in the book of Genesis for seventeen more chapters after our reading for this morning. And I encourage you to read it because it's such an amazing story of grief and loss, animosity and reconciliation… If nothing else, read chapter 33 to see what happens when Jacob, now Israel, limps toward Esau the morning after his encounter with the assailant at the Ford of the Jabbok…

I share the story of both Itzhak Perlman and Jacob with you this morning because I think the question of what music we can still make with what we have left is one of the most important questions we face day to day in this human life… Because the truth is, loss is inevitable…

The truth is, we all know the violin string can break, the cancer can return, the divorce can happen, the addicted child can relapse, the stock market can collapse, the night terrors can haunt, the temptation can overwhelm, the virus can come closer to home, and the center can feel like it will not hold…

But in the midst of all the loss, all the fear and uncertainty, what both Itzhak Perlman and Jacob would tell us is that somewhere in all of it there is still music we can make… not **despite** the loss and grief that assail us, but **because** in the loss and grief there is an **absence** that allows the **presence** of the music to be heard…

The presence of the music Itzhak Perlman heard that night at Lincoln Center when the string broke on his violin… The presence of the music Jacob heard that night when, in the absence of everything upon which he had built his life, he was wrestled into a territory he had never known…

The presence of the music we are invited to ponder in a journal entry written by a priest, who, while a prisoner of war during WWll, shared with his fellow prisoners what the priest called "The communion of empty hands." Writing of the day when a number of prisoners gathered to share the Eucharist, the priest wrote…

We gathered in a circle. Those who wanted to kneel, did. And I said, "We have no bread, no water to use instead of wine, but we will act as though we had. The fact that we have none represents very well the lack of bread in the hunger of so many millions of human beings. The common cup of wine, which we don't have, represents the dream of a united humanity, of a just society, without difference of race or class."

I held out my empty hand to the first person on my right and placed it over his open hand, and the same with the others, saying, "Take, eat, this is my Body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of me." Afterward, all of us raised our empty hands to our mouths, receiving the body of Christ in silence.

Then, in like manner the wine, when all had received what appeared to be nothing, I said, "Take, drink, this is the blood of Christ which was shed to seal the new covenant of God with God's children. Let us give thanks, trusting that Christ is with us here, strengthening us."

Then we gave thanks to God. Those who had been kneeling stood. And we embraced each other, blessed through the communion of the empty hands.

Sometimes it's the artist's task, the musician's task, the human being's task, the Christian's task to find out how much music you can still make with what you have left…

And maybe (just to give a nod to our Gospel text for this morning)… Maybe that's what Jesus was getting at when, in the presence of 5,000 hungry people, Jesus told the disciples to feed them… and then when the disciples objected, saying all they had left in their lunch pails were five loaves and two fishes… Maybe when Jesus told them to bring those few loaves and fishes to him for blessing anyway, Jesus was saying, "Well, let's see how much music we can still make with what we have left…"

Clearly it was helpful to have the power of Jesus there to multiply those loaves and fishes. But I think Jesus was just as present in the "communion of the empty hands" as the prisoners of war heard in the **absence** of bread and wine the **presence** of a music for which there is no name except "gasp".

All of which is to say, on behalf of any of us who may come to worship this morning feeling as if we have little or nothing left in the way of gifts to share, music to make, hope to give… As if to say, "Sometimes it's the task of the artist to find out how much music you can make with what you have left…" And the good news is that even when the string breaks…. Even when the violin has been left behind… even when there is no bread or wine… even when it seems that the center will not hold, there is still the music for which there is no name except "gasp." A music most deeply and profoundly heard in the wrenching silence of a heart broken open by loss or love… If the life and death of Jesus tell us anything it is this…

A music that invites us to listen from that broken place, that empty place, that virgin place… And then in **that** place, to wait a moment, to close our eyes, to leave behind the fingerings and bowings and positions we have practiced so many times, and to dare to play into a territory, a space, a possibility totally unknown…

A reaching for notes that leaves us, like Jacob, both limping and blessed in the presence of the **love** whose name is "gasp."