

“A New Kind of Vision”
September 29, 2019
St. Paul’s UCC Church
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Genesis 32:22-31, 33:1-4, 8-10a

That same night he [Jacob] got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.

Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two maids. He put the maids with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. He himself went on ahead of them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother. But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. Esau said, "What do you mean by all this company that I met?" Jacob answered, "To find favor with my lord." But Esau said, "I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself." Jacob said, "No, please; if I find favor with you, then accept my present from my hand; for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God."

Jacob wrestling with God. Jacob the trickster, Jacob the supplanter, Jacob the struggler: I love this story from Genesis.

Jacob, in addition to being so many other things, is also Abraham and Sarah's grandson. You remember Sarah and Abraham from a couple of weeks ago, right? The supposedly barren couple who suddenly have a baby, Isaac, when they are way past child-bearing years? Well, their son Isaac grows up, marries Rebekah; and Isaac and Rebekah have a son too, Jacob. Well, they actually don't just have Jacob. They have Esau as well: Jacob's twin brother. Esau is the first-born, but Jacob comes out "gripping his brother's heel" as the writer back in Genesis 25 tells us with some flair. "Heel-gripper." That's pretty much what Jacob's name means: "heel-gripper." Supplanter, "over-thrower." Jacob. An apt name, as it turns out.

You see, when the brothers were much younger, years before this story we're reading today, Jacob tricks his brother Esau. He tricks him in a big way, a very big way. I'll spare you the details, but suffice it to say that when their father Isaac is on his deathbed, Jacob fools his dying father into giving him the blessing for the first-born – the blessing that rightfully belongs to Esau. So when Esau comes along a few minutes later to learn that Jacob has stolen his blessing, Esau is, understandably, furious. Right then and there, Esau vows to kill his brother; but Jacob, upon hearing his vow, escapes in the nick of time to their uncle Laban's place, far, far away.

Jacob stays at his uncle's place for fourteen years, marries not one, but two!, wives – Rachel and Leah – and then, because things get a little hairy between him and his uncle, Jacob tells his family (Jacob now has eleven children... my, how time flies!) that it's time to go. They pack up their bags, and start on their way.

There's only one little problem with Jacob's trip: even after all these years, his brother Esau is still out there somewhere, presumably still eager for Jacob's blood. Jacob is caught between a rock and a hard place, so to speak. Things have been less than friendly with Uncle Laban, so he can't go back there. But if he goes home, Esau will surely kill him.

This all brings us to our story for today. Gone is Jacob the trickster, Jacob the heel-gripper, Jacob the supplanter. In his place, we encounter Jacob the struggler: a frightened, remorseful man, probably regretting the decisions he has made, probably sensing his past has finally caught up with him, no doubt believing that his fate is sealed: the end is near. Jacob sends his family on ahead of him. He is alone in the dark.

Remarkable things seem to happen to Jacob in the dark. Years earlier, he dreamed of a ladder with angels scrambling up and down on it. This time, in the thick darkness of the night, Jacob wrestles with a “man” until the day breaks.

Jacob wrestles, Jacob struggles, Jacob strives with this man all night long. The man, eventually realizing that he will not prevail against Jacob, strikes Jacob on his hip socket, and prepares to go. But Jacob holds onto him. He holds on tight. Jacob, apparently obsessed with blessings, won’t let the man go until he blesses him. The man agrees, and blesses him – not with a usurped birthright, not with a dying man’s stolen inheritance – but with a name. “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and you have prevailed.” The heavenly being, the man... God, maybe... is finally able to leave. And Jacob calls the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.”

Well. Immediately after Jacob gets up, whom does he see? Who is coming towards him, over the horizon? It’s none other than the man he despises and fears the most: his twin brother, Esau – Esau, whom he has taken advantage of. Esau, whom he has stolen from. Esau, whom he has feared. Here comes Esau running towards his brother, and Jacob thinks, *gulp, this is it.*

But this is *not* it. Esau doesn’t want to kill Jacob anymore. Quite the contrary, in fact. When Esau reaches his brother, he embraces him, falls on him, kisses him. The two brothers weep. Jacob tries to offer Esau gifts of reconciliation, but Esau won’t even take them. And with tears streaming down his face, Jacob tells his long-estranged twin, “Truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God.”

“Truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God.” That’s what Jacob says to his brother, his twin, the one he tricked, the one he estranged, the one he was afraid of. “Truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God.”

The night before, when Jacob wrestled with the heavenly being, he claimed to have seen *God’s* face. “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.” I have to wonder, though: does Jacob *really* see God on that long, dark, fitful, frightful night? I’m not so sure.

Several times in the Hebrew Bible, God makes it clear that no human being can ever see the face of God and live to tell about it.¹ So... does really Jacob see God? Maybe. Maybe not. But, you know, I don't think that really matters. What matters, I think, is that Jacob's struggle with the Holy One *has prepared him* to see the face of God in the one he tricks and teases, supplants and subverts, hates and fears. *Jacob's struggle with the Holy One has prepared him to see the face of God in his brother Esau.*

Jacob emerges from that long and fitful night a different person. He walks differently; he talks differently; he has a different name: Israel, the one who struggles. Jacob emerges with a blessing, but this time, it's not a stolen or tricked-out blessing. This time, God blesses him with something he didn't even know he needed: a new set of eyes, a new kind of seeing. Jacob emerges from that holy struggle able to see the face of God in the one he hates and fears the most.

I'm not sure any of us will ever see the actual face of God, at least, not on this side of things. In fact, I think it's pretty unlikely. But I can tell you the closest we'll come: *realizing that the face of God is peering out at us from the ones we are the most afraid of, from the ones we can't stand.*

People of St. Paul's Church, whom are you afraid of? Whom can't you stand? Is it someone who belongs to a different political party? Is it someone of a different religion? Is it someone who is addicted to drugs or alcohol? Is it someone who is poor? As much as we might struggle against it, these are the very people God gives us new eyes to see, if only we will open them. These are the very people who bear the face of God, if only we will accept the beautiful and terrible blessing of a new kind of vision.

Thanks be to God.

¹ See, for example, Exodus 33:20.