

## Face to Face

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*Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*  
Rembrandt

Matthew 14:13–21

Feeding the Five Thousand

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” Jesus said to them, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” They replied, “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.” And he said, “Bring them here to me.” Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and blessed and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled, and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Genesis 32:22-31

Jacob Wrestles at Peniel

The same night he 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[s] 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 [*The one who strives with God*], saying, “For I have seen God face to face, yet my life is preserved.” The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

In this text, Jacob is in distress. He has stolen everything that belonged to his brother Esau. His birthright and blessing were now Jacob's. Yet still, Jacob struggled, fearful of his brother's anger. Listen to Genesis chapter 32 verses 22-31, as Jacob, alone, afraid, and vulnerable comes face to face with God.

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Let us pray...

Loving, merciful and gracious God, you remind us through these ancient stories that you are with us. You dwell with your people in our life stories. Let us hear your voice this morning leading us on our sacred journey with you, to Christ and to each other. In Christ's name. Amen.

One must understand that this sacred text of the Torah is foundational to Judaism. These are the origin stories of a faithful people. They give voice to a living community of people with a history of war, exile, and loss. A people who struggled to understand *where is God in the adversity of living?* In that, they blamed themselves.

Jacob had fled home, afraid for his life. His mother had warned him that his twin brother Esau, the oldest, was seeking to take his life for stealing his blessing. If we were to go back to verse nine, we would discover that God had said to Jacob, "Return to your country and to your kindred, and I will do you good." Jacob, afraid and distressed, will finally confront the conflict with his brother. But first, Jacob sent messengers to Esau looking for forgiveness. The messengers let Jacob know...Esau is coming with military might. He is ready for his brother who took so much from him. Jacob prays, "O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O Lord, deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children."

How many of us, distressed, have come face to face with our fears? When have we had to do the inevitable and confront our past, even our past mistakes? How many of us avoid conflict? Avoid the pain of wrongs done to us, using other substances, relationships, or shopping to avoid the pain?

We can't grow or be transformed into whole beings until we confront the stuff of our past, our own hurt, those we have hurt, the hurt and harm we have done to ourselves, and the harm to our neighbor. I was reminded this morning that today is the anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima. It was not just the pain of the people of Japan which was devastating for that country. I remember watching a documentary while serving at Sycamore Congregational Church, a Japanese American congregation, about the bombing. One of those interviewed said, "I don't understand why they did this to us. We are Christian, too." Some of those who were directly involved in dropping that bomb in later years would tell of their remorse. The trauma of that event will live on in the bodies of children and grandchildren of that time. Where was God?

In that struggle with God, Jacob was transformed in more ways than one. He was ready to face his fear, to face God, to face his brother. His brother came with military might to get revenge for the wrong done to him. And Jacob was prepared to defend himself. Esau did not unleash his arsenal of war on his brother. What was it that softened the heart of Esau that he was able to let go? What stopped him from immediately attacking his brother Jacob?

In our text Jacob calls the place he wrestled with the man *Peniel*, for I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved. Jewish commentators remind us from the Moses narratives that one would die if they saw God's face. The power, awe and beauty of God is too great. Yet, we harm one another. After the tussle not only was Jacob transformed spiritually, but physically he was changed. Listen as he limped toward his brother.

Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel (his wives) and the two maids. He put the maids with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph (his son) last of all. He himself went on ahead of them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother.

His brother looked at him differently, as he saw a tangible change. Jacob bowed seven times as he came face to face with his brother Esau even though they both had come prepared to do battle. After having an encounter with God, you are changed. You don't walk the same. You don't talk the same. You don't think the same about yourself or others. You will lay down your weapons of warfare. Your walls of self-protection fall.

Further on in the narrative, Jacob humbled himself before God and his brother, offering him the gifts of forgiveness and reconciliation. He says, "for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God."

We can't separate our relationship with God from the relationship we have with each other. They are connected in a very real and profound way. We are created in the image of God. When we look into the depth of one another's eyes, we have looked upon the majestic beauty of God. God is within each one of us. When we wrestle with one another...we wrestle with God. When we fight with one another, we fight with God. When we hate one another, we hate God. To love one another is to love God. I say this drawing from the well of my own life. A childhood filled with trauma, experiences that no child should have, and even today, the trauma of being a Black woman in America.

In the Gospel narrative, we heard the miracle story of Jesus feeding 5,000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish. Let's be honest, we don't believe the miracle stories. But miracles do happen. So, what are we to do? When I look at you...I see God. I believe that we do as Jacob did. Come face to face with our stuff. Be fully present to others, as we desire to be fully seen AND present to God...this is worship. My preaching professor said many memorable things, but one will stay with me always. "We should *live* out of our worship of God." We offer others our best gifts. There should be no limit to our worship. It doesn't end at 11:00 a.m. There is no scarcity. There really is enough for everyone.

Amen!

### *Benediction*

Friends of God, do not fear. Even in doubt, trust; you have enough, you are enough, and there is plenty for all. Don't give up. Open your hearts and minds to wrestle with God. And may the peace of God, and the joy of God, and the love of God be with you all. Now and forever more. Amen.