

***TO SEE THE FACE OF GOD***  
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University Congregational Church

**Reading: Genesis 32: 22 – 32 (NRSV)**

**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 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, "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. 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. Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle.**

If ever there was a scoundrel in the Bible, it must surely be Jacob.

The problem is, of course, that just about every character in the Bible is a rogue in one way or another. Start with father Abraham. In the twelfth chapter of Genesis God promised Abram, "I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so you will be a blessing." Before the chapter is over Abram and Sarai travel to Egypt where Abram passes his wife off to pharaoh as his sister. Pharaoh took her as a

concubine and immediately his house was plagued. Now let's get this straight. The Master of the Universe, the one true God made a promise to Abram that he would enter a new land, he will become famous the world round, his family will become a great nation, and he will be blessed. If that is the case, why does Abram need to take matters into his own hands, and pass his wife off as a sister so that pharaoh can have his way with her? It does not speak very highly of Abram's trust in God's promise, and speaks ill of his relationship with his wife.

Let us remember Moses who came off of the mountain with the first set of the Ten Commandments. There he and Yahweh found the Hebrews in an orgy of idol worship, bowing down before a golden calf. They had broken the first two commandments before they ever received them. Yahweh was so angry he threatened to "consume" the Hebrews, but Moses convinced the Holy One that he would look foolish in the eyes of the Egyptians. Moses then proceeded down Mt. Sinai. He saw the debauchery and in his anger broke the tablets with the commandments. That was not enough. He ordered the sons of Levy, "Go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp and each of you kill your brother, your friend, and your neighbor." (32: 27). By the end of the day 3,000 of the Hebrews were slaughtered.

And who can forget King David? There was a young man of great promise. He had captured Jerusalem. Not an enemy could prevail against him. Then he saw Bathsheba bathing on the roof of a house. He could not contain his lust and took her for his own. He planned the murder of her husband, Uriah, to justify Bathsheba's pregnancy. In the end, the prophet, Nathan, exposed the whole affair. David and Bathsheba's first born died. The rest of his family was in tatters.

Abraham, Moses, and David were flawed and dangerous men. But there are no greater heroes in the Old Testament. Their weaknesses have been glossed over and they are remembered as the founding fathers of faith with saintly reputations. The New Testament takes great pains to show that Jesus was of the seed of David. So, you have to wonder what is going on here?

To answer that question, I would like to go back to the character of Jacob. His name means, "the supplanter." He was born seconds after his twin brother, Esau. Genesis tells us that during birth Jacob was clutching the heel of Esau. Their entire relationship was one of competition and sibling rivalry. With the help of his mother, Rebekah, Jacob fooled his father Isaac into giving him his blessing and the entire inheritance. In a word, he stole what was rightfully his brother's future. Running for his

life Jacob fled to his mother's family in Paddan-aram. There he fell in love with Rachel but had to marry her older sister first. There was all kinds of monkey business with handmaidens before Rachel bore Joseph. In the meantime Jacob somehow manipulated the genetics of his father-in-law's goats and got the best of the herd. His brothers-in-law saw their father's estate depleted, and Jacob was on the run again.

By this time Jacob has no place to go but home – back to the very brother he had swindled his fortune from. Esau was approaching Jacob's caravan with four hundred soldiers. Hoping for one more deal Jacob sent his entire family and all of his wealth ahead of him. He was left alone and we read of this wrestling match with what appears to be a man. The bout took the entire night. Neither party appears to have had the upper hand. It seemed to be an even match. Then the man struck Jacob on the muscle of the hip socket with such force the hip was dislocated. He commanded Jacob to let him go, but the reprobate held on for dear life. He would only let go if the man would bless him. The blessing is a new name for Jacob, Israel. The word means "one who strives with God." Some think it could mean "one who strive with God and men." Jacob claimed, "I have seen the face of God and yet my life is preserved." He would limp for the rest

of his life and take his place within the trinity of Judaism's fathers,  
"Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."

I know that in many churches this morning, and certainly on many religious television broadcasts, the Christian faith is presented as "the power of positive thinking," or "believe and grow rich," or "showers of blessings." Now let me be the first to affirm that I have met power in my life with God, some of it creative and some of it destructive. I have known great wealth in my faith, as well as poverty. I have been blessed many times over, regardless of whether or not I deserved it, earned it, or fully realized it. Power, wealth, and blessings have seldom been political, monetary, or emotive.

I long ago gave up the liberal idea that human beings are only bundles of potential that need education. Yes, I believe that every human being has potential and that education is essential for the development of mind and soul. I believe in the goodness of humanity and I believe that every human being is flawed. Not one of us is perfect and I can join Paul in saying that I too have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. I do not come to these conclusions as a matter of theory but as a matter of history. Like Jacob, all of human history is the story of strife and struggle. We wrestle with our brothers and sisters, good and evil, hope

and despair, God and humanity. Like Jacob human beings are driven by the need to survive and the ambition for power. We will forge our identity; we will manipulate, lie, and cheat, even our own kin. Like you and me, Jacob is the universal man who wants to better his odds, get ahead of the next guy, and live the good life.

But there is something about Jacob's character that gets brushed aside by his ascent to power and wealth. Underneath all of the scheming and plotting Jacob hoped for one thing that land and wealth would never grant him. Like any boy, Jacob wanted his father's blessing. I don't mean the "thumbs up" or the "atta boy" slap on the back from dad because you made the football team or aced the SATs. I mean that generous well of love that says without qualification, "You are my beloved child in whom I am well pleased. You are the apple of my eye." That is the issue at the beginning of his story. That is the issue at the end of his story. Like any child I have ever known he wanted some sign that his father loved him. His hip was painfully out of joint, he was grimed with sweat and dirt, blood trickled out of his nose, but Jacob would not release this wrestler in the night. "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

I wonder what was going through his mind. Did he think, “I could die tomorrow at the hands of my brother? God know I deserve it. I betrayed him and cheated him out of his future. I deceived my own father and broke the old man’s heart. Before I die, would someone who really knows me bless me? I have worked and sweated, used every trick I know, took chances of great risk. But what I want after all of that is the assurance that I am loved. I want nothing more than to be touched by grace, just as I am.”

And that is precisely when Jacob saw the face of God. You can be sure that he was given God’s blessing. And he got a whole lot more. The lesson of Jacob is that we only see the face of God in the very heart of the human condition. Right there in the mix of work and play, love and loneliness, victory and defeat we can see the countenance of grace. The light of God’s face shines when we are wrestling to keep our families afloat in tough economic times, breathe fresh air into our marriages, get our children through algebra, care for a dying parent, or manage our own declining health. If you ever expect to see God, look for the Holy One in the depths of your greatest challenges.

In 1990, I learned that my wife was having an affair. This was my second marriage and I wanted it to succeed. News of this affair was the

most gut-wrenching experience of my life. I was humiliated. I wondered how I would raise four children who ranged in age from one to sixteen. I worried about how my congregation would respond. I knew I was sunk financially. There were two profound expressions of God's grace during those long months.

The first was the response of my best friend, John Burciaga. John had seen me through my first divorce and was instrumental in recovering my call to ministry. I called John immediately after I had seen an attorney and changed the locks on the house. John was serving a church in Clearwater, Florida and flew to Columbus. He spent three days with me, talking when necessary, keeping silence when that is what I needed most. On his last day in Columbus he took me to one of my favorite bookstores and bought me a fine book and lunch. Throughout it all John taught me that I was not alone. He was my best friend and I needed that friendship more than anything else. I love that man and I would not want him to get the bighead. But I tell you, during those three days, he was the face of God.

The second time I saw God during this nightmare was the Sunday I tried to explain to my congregation my situation without getting into all of the gory details. My attorney filed the divorce papers quickly, which was

posted in the newspaper. I knew that word was out and I needed to say something to my people, whom I had served only about six months. I felt tremendous embarrassment and I am not certain that I was particularly coherent. Somewhere from the back of the church a man by the name of Ken Bane stood up and walked down the center aisle. He approached me and wrapped his arms around me. No sooner had he done so than my parishioners formed a line of love. Some offered words of sympathy and condolence. Most said nothing. One or two stared deeply into my eyes with pools of hope. I saw the many faces of God that morning. I was wounded and limping. I was wondrously blessed.

I sometimes wonder and worry about all the mistakes of my life and ministry. There are things I am ashamed of, words I wish I had thought to say, or a note I wish I had written. But the truth is that even if I were capable of spotless behavior my life would still fall short. Opportunities are missed, often for reasons beyond my control. I wrestle with desire and greed and fear just like everyone else. Sometimes they get the upper hand. All of us limp, some more than others.

But I also remember that this long and convoluted path of my life is what brought me to Mimi and then to Emily. I certainly could not have

planned those two characters. And what blessings they are in my life.

There again I see the face of God and I am living to tell about it.

I do not look for perfection in myself or in others. But I try to keep my eyes peeled for the sacred in every human circumstance. I am especially watchful of those who limp because I know that they may have a story to tell of blessings.

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