

HAVE YOU SEEN GOD'S FACE?

“May I live this day compassionate
of heart, clear in word, gracious in
awareness, courageous in thought,
generous in love.”

-John O'Donohue

Scripture:

Psalm 17:1-8

¹Hear a just cause, O LORD; attend to my cry; give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit. ²From you let my vindication come; let your eyes see the right.

³If you try my heart, if you visit me by night, if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me; my mouth does not transgress. ⁴As for what others do, by the word of your lips I have avoided the ways of the violent. ⁵My steps have held fast to your paths; my feet have not slipped.

⁶I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God; incline your ear to me, hear my words. ⁷Wondrously show your steadfast love, O savior of those who seek refuge from their adversaries at your right hand.

⁸Guard me as the apple of the eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings.

Genesis 32:22-31

²²The 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. ²³He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had.

²⁴Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. ²⁵When 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.

²⁶Then he said, “Let me go, for the day is breaking.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” ²⁷So he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” ²⁸Then the man said, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.” ²⁹Then Jacob asked him, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And there he blessed him.

³⁰So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.” ³¹The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



HAVE YOU SEEN GOD'S FACE?

Sociologists say it's common for people to perceive that God is like the fatherly figures in their lives. If dad is caring, patient and concerned then his children will believe God has those same characteristics, and the opposite holds true when a father is harsh, judgmental or absent.

David Dollahite, a professor of Family Life at Brigham Young University, who studied children's perception of God, said, "Even though children know intellectually that God is fair, loving and kind and patient, it's hard for them to relate to God at a gut level in a deep way if their own father is not that way."

Hearing children describe their understanding of God can be very entertaining. But sadly, if they feel God is harsh and angry, the studies show they are likely to not attend church when they get older.

Here is a clip from a favorite old TV show by Art Linkletter called: *Kids Say the Darndest Things*. The kids he interviews on this show are explaining what they think about God and Adam and Eve. Listen for the answer to his question: "How does God punish Adam and Eve?"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JPQpVetcxIk&list=RDEBMOhM31EyM&index=15>

WHAT IS OUR IMAGE OF GOD?

Last week Ray shared with us his concept of how God connects us to everything and how everything is connected to everything else in the universe. He challenged us to ponder what our own understanding and image of God may be. I especially like the image of the Trinity portrayed in the movie, *The Shack*. All three figures together make up our one God.

(This is my ideal image of God, these three persons all in one.)



For today's passage about Jacob wrestling with a man representing God, the French romantic artist, Eugene Delacroix, portrayed it like this:



Notice people leaving, and the man representing God is like an angel.

A CONTEMPORARY PAINTING

Contemporary artist, Jack Baumgartner from Kansas, portrayed the wrestling match in a very different way.



(Jacob Wrestling with God, Painting © 2011, by Jack Baumgartner)

This artist's portrayal of the wrestling match with God fascinated me so I looked up the symbolism in Baumgartner's painting. He paints a ribbon scrolling from the top left to the bottom right of the curtains. The ribbon symbolizes the presence of the Holy Spirit over them.

When asked to explain his painting, Baumgartner said he was trying to portray Jacob wrestling God for a blessing and a new identity. God reaches out in the painting and grabs Jacob's ankle in remembrance of Jacob grabbing the ankle of Esau, his twin brother, at birth.

Also the stone in the corner of the painting is significant to the artist. Jacob's right knee is bent toward a stone at the bottom right of the painting which is a reminder of the stone Jacob used to make a pillar altar of worship at Bethel in Genesis 28 that we read two weeks ago. This stone is also a reminder of Jacob's stone pillow when he dreamed (many years before) of a ladder connecting heaven and earth. The artist also wants the stone to spiritually connect us to Jesus as the "Cornerstone," as in Paul's words from Philippians 2:10, ". . . So that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow."

Baumgartner hopes his art inspires us to see that "God is wrestling Jacob back into right relationship

with Godself, wrestling him from fear and deceitfulness, by making him humble, but sure of his identity in God, which leads to bending his knee on the stone in beautiful worship.”

JACOB AND THE WRESTLING MATCH

Rev. Talitha Arnold, Pastor of the United Church of Santa Fe, comments about this story of Jacob and the wrestling match. She says, “If there was one thing Jacob was good at, it was grabbing and hanging on. At birth, he grabbed his brother's heel as he was being born. Then he grabbed Esau's birthright and blessing. To get Rachel for his wife, he held on to her father for fourteen years. And one night, when the tables are turned and he is grabbed and pulled into a wrestling match with an angel of God, Jacob (which is Hebrew for "the Grabber or the Striver") hangs on until he gets what he wants -- another blessing.”

The angel gave God's blessing, but probably not as Jacob expected. The angel gave him a limp and then changed his name to Israel ("The "One Who Prevailed with God"). Only then did Jacob finally let go.

Jacob, the striving grabber, the cheater and trickster was deeply loved by God despite all his faults. So God transformed him into a humble limping leader who would go down in history as the founder of Israel.

So how did God do this? How did God wrestle the falseness and huge ego out of Jacob? He did it in three ways.

First: God gave Jacob a sense of being in a close relationship with God during that whole night of wrestling. Having a sense that God is with you helps greatly in one's ability to lead. When Jacob wanted his father's blessing (that belonged to Esau) he turned to his mother, not to God for help. When he wanted Rachel for his wife he went to her father Laban and found a way to bargain with him rather than turning to God for help. Finally, twenty years after he has been on the run from Esau, Jacob has learned how to pray and turn to God in prayer.

Many of us struggle to include God in our lives, too. Don't we? All that we do and say can be lifted up to God in prayer for a blessing.

Second: God ended the wrestling match by giving Jacob a blessing which inspired him to build an altar which he called Peniel. Jacob liked to create physical reminders of God's faithfulness.

If you read onward in Genesis, Jacob builds other altars of stones to commemorate other events involving God's grace.

Our brains need physical reminders. We need calendars to help us remember what day it is. We need signs to guide us on the roads. We need centers of worship in the community, symbols and altars of gratitude to God. Here we worship and praise God to re-energize and re-center our spirits so that we can share God's blessings out in our community.

When we feel positive about our relationship with God we are better able to serve others. The sociological research by Brigham Young University showed that: *"Belief in a loving, forgiving God helps to build bonds of trust with others, while beliefs in a judgmental, wrathful God tend to make people more wary of others."*

And the third way God made Jacob a great leader: God answered Jacob's prayer with a humbling caveat. Even though he would be the great **leader of Israel, he would always have a limp** (which must have been accompanied by a great deal of pain since his hip socket was put out of joint.) God answered Jacob's prayer which can be found in chapter 32).

He prayed, “O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O LORD who said to me, ‘Return to your country and to your kindred, and I will do you good,’ ¹⁰I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan; and now I have become two companies. ¹¹Deliver 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. ¹²Yet you have said, ‘I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted because of their number.’”

Jacob prayed this prayer fervently. He was so afraid his clan was about to be massacred! God answered, first by showing up and wrestling with him. Then he answered his prayer by putting his hip

out. Isn't that an unexpected twist in the story? But it was a necessary twist.

Rather than Jacob meeting Esau face to face with a strong body, he met him with a weak body limping along and clearly in pain.

Esau could see Jacob's weak condition and ran to him in response. Jacob's weakness made him a great servant leader very open to reconciling with his brother.

GOD SHAPED PAUL

This reminded me of God shaping Paul into a great leader. In 2nd Corinthians 12, Paul explains why God did not take away his imperfections that caused him pain. He said that God told him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

And Paul replied, "So I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me." (Good coping mechanism.)

JACOB AND ESAU RECONCILED

After he had reconciled with Esau, Jacob now had the qualities of a great leader. He learned to stop grabbing for attention; he shed his conniving ways and became compassionate, humble, and respectful, with a grateful attitude towards God. According to timelines of the Bible, Jacob was in his seventies when this wrestling match happened. And he lived another seventy years. So maybe there is still hope for our nation's leaders. Maybe there is still hope for each one of us!

When we are humble and compassionate we can see God's face in everyone we meet. Finally, Jacob could see God's face in Esau and Esau could see God's face in Jacob.

Genesis 33:4 says, "Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept."

Wherever you are looking with eyes of love you can see God's face. Amen

Benediction:

Be like Jacob, who finally learned he didn't have to strive to receive God's blessings.

God's love is so vast and abundant, the blessings are just waiting for you to open your eyes, look and be aware that they are all around you.

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and forever more. Amen



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