

Seeing What You Don't Want to See

Today's text starts with the words, "the same night". It's like starting a story halfway through – in this case, the context frames the events that follow. It was a night when messengers who were sent to Jacob's brother, Esau returned to Jacob, saying, "We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him." And the Bible says, "Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed." He had reason to fear his older brother; Jacob had given Esau some compelling reasons to hate him and to wish him dead. He even thought it possible that Esau would want to kill not only Jacob, but his entire family. So he sent his servants to Esau with presents of livestock, a long, slow, parade of beasts that he hoped would both appease his brother and slow his approach. The same night, he took his two wives, his two maids, his eleven children and everything he had, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok River. And the Bible says, "Jacob was left alone" which indicates that he stayed behind on one side of the stream while his family was sent ahead to meet his brother.

What a selfish and irresponsible husband and father! He knew that his brother was coming to meet him, and four hundred men were with his brother. And he wasn't sure about his brother's intention, whether it was murderous or conciliatory. But, in the midst of uncertainty and fear, he put himself in the very last position, which is the safest place, to ensure his own security. He was left alone by choice. But the safest place ironically became a place of struggle; a man wrestled with Jacob until daybreak.

We don't know who the man was, and what really happened at the river during the night between Jacob and the man. But Jacob clearly knew that he had experienced God. He said, "I have seen God face to face." And that experience changed everything; Jacob was blessed, his name was changed from Jacob to Israel, from the one who takes by the heel to the one who strives with God, and the way Jacob looks at Esau was changed from a younger brother's terror to

God's embracing acceptance; Jacob says after his encounter with Esau, "truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God."

So what exactly happened at the river that night? Where did the man come from? Why did they wrestle with each other? Why did the man strike Jacob on the hip after he saw that he could not prevail against him? I wish there was a clip of this encounter on YouTube, so I could watch it for myself. But unfortunately, there were no cameras. In fact nobody was there, except Jacob. His family was on the opposite side of the river and it was the middle of night, so they could not see Jacob wrestling. It had been a long journey, so his family might have all been asleep, with no one left wakeful and wondering what those strange thumps and grunting noises might be across the water. Jacob was truly left alone at Jabbok River.

Imagine being at a river at night by yourself. Imagine what it feels like to be left alone, outside in the middle of the night. Jacob may have thought that the far side of the river would make him safe from his brother; he had not reckoned on having to face God. People knew that the water-side was a place for the supernatural; in ancient times, seas and rivers were places to fear. Ancient people believed that spirits or demons guarded particular places such as streams. So when travellers endeavoured to pass on their way, the spirits or demons, who were particularly powerful at night, might attack the travellers. But that's not the case in Jacob's story. What Jacob feared most was not a river demon, but an encounter with Esau.

Jacob left his home after he stole his older brother's blessing from his dying father. He fled from Esau. He worked for his uncle Laban for twenty years to earn the right to have his own family. Now he has a big family, but still finds no home in his uncle's house, not to mention the unfair treatment he receives from his uncle. So he flees from his uncle, family and livestock in tow. He is on the way home, but there is still a challenge which he cannot avoid or flee anymore. He can't escape from consequences any longer; he can't go back to his uncle nor can he go home joyfully. He must confront his fear, and the knowledge of his own selfish deeds. Before he faces his brother, he must face himself. Before he

reconciles with his brother, he must reconcile with himself; he has to accept that his deception of his father and his brother was not a triumph of cunning, but a betrayal of his closest kin. He has to see what he doesn't want to see. Maybe that's the hardest thing for him to do; it was probably as hard as wrestling in the dark.

I used to watch Korean wrestling. The beauty of Korean wrestling is not about skills or technique, but about persistence. A true winner is the one who doesn't give up. In today's story, the winner is Jacob not because his life was successful or because he beat the other fighter, but because he did not give up; he did not give up wrestling with the past. This story is telling us that no one could move forward creatively into the future without having made peace with the past. Jacob, who received a blessing from his father, did not live a blessed life until he reconciled with his brother. And, as we see in today's story, it is only by confronting himself that he could reconcile with his brother.

Some people say, "forget the past", "forget about him or her", "forget about the place", "don't even think about it and just forget it." But the Bible says "remember your past", "be reconciled with him", "be reconciled with her", "be reconciled with the past"; only then can we live a truly blessed life.

Today's text finishes saying, "The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel - which means the face of God - limping because of his hip." Jacob was wounded, because he did not give up. But because he did not give up, he saw God face to face. My friends in Christ, You may have wounds already, and you may be wounded again, but please remember that we can see God's face only when we are willing to see ourselves as we truly are – with all our faults, all our betrayals, all our fears, all our secret shame – and all of our hopes, all of our loves, trusting that, whatever lies along our path, God will be there as well.