

A STORY-SHAPED GOD: READING GENESIS

Pursuit: Jacob and Esau

Genesis 33:1-11

January 26, 2025

It's brothers, again.

Esau. Technically the older, by mere seconds, but these things matter in families. Rugged. Sturdy. He preferred to be outside hunting. Prone to impulsive action, especially when hungry.

Jacob. Skilled in deception since the day he was born clinging to his brother's heel. He convinces his famished elder brother Esau to sell his birthright for a bowl of stew. Later, by impersonating Esau, Jacob fools their elderly father Isaac into giving him (Jacob) the blessing intended solely for the firstborn son. In other words, this story is filled with family drama in the extreme. And so, their mother Rebekah warns her favorite son (I don't even have time to explain *that* drama) that Esau now plans to console himself by killing his brother. But that was all a long time ago.

Now, after twenty years on the run, Jacob is headed back home, where he knows his brother is surely waiting. Jacob strategically sends scouts ahead who return with some news. *Jacob, we found your brother, Esau. There's bad news, and there's worse news. Bad news: Esau is already in pursuit, on his way to meet you. Worse news: he is not alone. Four hundred men walk with him.*

Jacob rightly assumes the worst, and driven by fear, he moves quickly. Another act of strategic deception, he divides the people, flocks, herds, and camels who are with him. And he describes the reason. He says, "If Esau comes to one half of my company and destroys it, then the other half will be left to escape."

And that's the context for our two readings this morning. Jacob, fearing for his life, prepares to meet his brother on the road, but first he pauses to pray. It's a remarkable prayer. A request. A plea for forgiveness. A prayer of repentance. An appeal for help. Jacob cries out to God, "I am not worthy of your steadfast love. Deliver me from the hand of my brother. Remember your promise spoken to my ancestors."

Then, somewhere deep in the wilderness, Jacob is confronted. By whom? Not his brother. Not yet. Some sources suggest it was an angel, but the Hebrew text only says, "a man." They struggle til dawn. Marilynne Robinson describes the struggle as "a wonderful image of lonely anguish, utter bewilderment, and profound determination."

It's determination that enables Jacob to endure injury and somehow hold on to his adversary. Before letting go, as day breaks, Jacob asks for what he has always most desired, what he has never fully received. Blessing. Not power or prestige. Not influence or land. Not even protection from his brother. Jacob asks for blessing.

His demand is granted, but in an unexpected way. Jacob is given a holy vision, a new name, a fresh start, and an aching hip to ensure that he will never forget this night. So long as Jacob walks the earth, into his old age, he will remember the wrestling that has just occurred.

And now, Jacob, limping his way into a new day, prepares to meet his brother. The circumstances of their encounter have changed not at all, but something significant has shifted. Here's how I know. Prior to the wrestling match, he planned to send the possessions and people ahead of him. *See how it works out for them, and I'll follow behind.* It is an act of shameful self-preservation. Now, Jacob himself will go first. Whatever may come, he will face it alone. He is prepared for the worst.

Having dramatically set the stage in the wilderness, our narrator in Genesis suddenly, without warning, shifts the scene. All eyes on Jacob, **but Esau ran to meet him. Esau embraced him. Esau fell on his neck. Esau kissed him, and they both weep.**

It turns out that Esau's pursuit was not marked by bitterness or vengeance, but by an astonishing grace. What follows is a moment of extraordinary reconciliation between brothers that also echoes

Jacob's experience the night before at the Jabbok. In the midnight struggle and in the daybreak embrace, Jacob sees the face of God. It is the face of God that draws these two stories together. The face of God, who has pursued him from the very beginning. The presence of God who will not let him go.

And so, Esau offers his little brother the incredible gift of forgiveness. But, why? The text doesn't tell us. Not directly.

Some options present themselves. Maybe the old adage is simply true—time heals all wounds. It has been a long time, and Esau, for his part, has done quite well for himself in the intervening years. He may not have his birthright. He may not have his father's blessing of the firstborn. But he has acquired wealth, land, a family. As he explains to his brother, he already has everything he needs.

Maybe that's the reason. The passage of time. The comfort he has acquired. But for some reason, I can't let go of a more simple explanation, the one truth that has never changed from the very beginning. They are brothers. Twins. They belong to the same family. This act of grace may seem unexpected in the moment, but through another lens it is perhaps inevitable. Their emotional embrace speaks volumes for me. They wept.

What might their embrace, what might this story of forgiveness and reconciliation, what might Esau's act, teach us? How could this ancient story guide our intentions and our actions?

Two brothers. Esau. Esau pursues Jacob with a mission of mercy. No wonder Jacob sees in his brother's face the very face of God. Esau's response reflects divine compassion joined with human love. And this is our calling, Church.

And here, I want to be clear, because I believe our sacred texts are clear. People of faith must take care not to forget the heart of our God-given mission: divine compassion and human love. Yes, we find these virtues woven into the stories of Genesis, and as followers of Jesus Christ, we find them fully embodied in the Gospel accounts of his life and ministry that are our wisdom and our guide. This is and must always be the standard for our discipleship. The role of the faithful is to reflect the life of Christ, to do as he did and as he commanded us to do: to extend—not withhold—grace, to offer empathy, to honor the humanity of those we love, those we struggle to love, the strangers in our midst,

the vulnerable and the powerless, all God's beloved children. Jacob sees in Esau's face the face of God because Esau's act is God-like.

Whenever we find ourselves using our faith as justification for exclusion or hatred, we must honestly search our own hearts and ask what is really driving us. Communities of Christian faith have the high duty of seeing with the eyes of Jesus and acting out of fidelity to his word and his way. This vocation is to be valued above every competing claim for our allegiance or devotion. When we are not tethered to this core calling, we will find ourselves drifting toward demonizing lies and drawn to alluring idols of power. Esau resembles the face of God because he remembers who he is and who his brother is. Our call is nothing less. Remember who you are. Remember who your siblings are.

So, what of Jacob? It's his journey that continues in the Book of Genesis. He's on his way back to Canaan where there will be twelve sons. More on them next week. But Jacob. He is fundamentally transformed by this encounter. Here's the moment that changes Jacob perhaps above all. He tries to account for his past sin with possessions and property. He gathers gifts to give to Esau so that he can be made right. Esau refuses them. This forgiveness will come with no strings attached. No quid pro quo.

Marilynne Robinson describes it exactly the way it happens, writing, "His debt cannot be repaid, but it can be forgiven. This is the economics of grace." In Esau's act of grace, Jacob receives the forgiveness of God, and that's the moment that changes the man. It is then that the tears fall from Jacob's face.

I've been thinking about how all of our experiences of forgiveness contain within them this possibility, this potential. To forgive is divine. To be forgiven is to receive a holy gift.

The Reformer John Calvin suggested that every human encounter is also a divine encounter. Consider that for a moment, that every human encounter is also a divine encounter. This means that for Jacob, the wrestling match is no different from the reunion. In both, the face of God is visible to him. Every human encounter is a divine encounter. And Calvin says that in every human-divine encounter, there is a question being asked of us, and that question is this: what does God desire of this encounter? What is God asking me to do in this moment?

Some of you know that my favorite volunteer activity these days is coaching, along with Sara, our son Samuel's fifth grade basketball team. We have had the privilege of coaching many of these same boys for several seasons now, and I find that adds to our enjoyment but also the depth of our emotion. A couple of weeks ago, the game was close. Two points separated the teams for most of the contest. It was back and forth, back and forth, through the third quarter and into the fourth. As the clock wound down, the intensity on the floor ramped up, and it was matched by the intensity in the stands.

Less than a minute remained when our point guard stole the ball on the sideline—a heroic act! The opposing player, out of frustration or perhaps desperation, shoved our guard to the ground. Hard. Our player lay on the court. He may be our toughest kid on the team, but he began to cry. To be honest, some of what came next is a blur to me. It was Sara who rushed over to check on him. Slowly, tenderly, he got up and made his way back to the bench. Meanwhile, there were some words exchanged by parents in the bleachers.

And so, it was the kids who led the way. It turns out our guy was not the only one in tears. The player on the other team walked over to his bench wiping them from his eyes. I watched what happened next in total awe. As soon as the game ended, the opposing player found a player on our team he knew from school. He asked him to point out the kid he had fouled, and then he walked over. Our point guard looked at him. Both still teary eyed. He reached out and patted him on the shoulder. *All good, man. All good.* The wonder of it was it took place without any coaching. There was no adult enforcement. As I watched them walk away from each other, I could see the transformation that act of grace had offered. We all saw it. Could their innate inclination to give and accept grace point the way forward for us?

Here's what I know, though I struggle to put it into words. These small moments of reconciliation, these simple words of forgiveness, this moment on a basketball court in an elementary school gym in Indiana, are made from the same material as the forgiveness we know in Christ, as the forgiveness we are freed to offer to each other. You see, the gift of grace is to make us gracious. If we are not gracious, we have missed the point. In Esau's pursuit, Jacob saw the face of God.

And, behind it all, the God who has followed this broken man from birth continues the pursuit. They met face to face in a struggle for blessing that will forever join them. Here's how the writer Frederick Buechner imagined it: "The darkness has faded just enough so that for the first time Jacob can dimly see his opponent's face. And what he sees is something more terrible than the face of death—the face of love."

It's the most powerful force in all of creation. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. And so, with courage and resolve for the journey ahead, let us look into the face of love and take heart. You do not struggle alone. Amen.