

Grace Abounds
Genesis 33:1-11
September 3, 2023
Pastor Sarah Wiles

This morning is our last story for the summer from Genesis. We've followed one family through three generations—three tumultuous, faithful and flawed generations. As I step back and think about the sweep of these stories, the thing that strikes me most is the abundant grace. Too often as Christians we talk about a “god of the Old Testament” and a “god of the New Testament,” as if they're two different gods. Not only is that antisemitic—mischaracterizing the Jewish scriptures and presenting Jesus as if he wasn't formed by those very scriptures and their portrait of God, but it also blinds us to a whole lot of stories of the graciousness of God all along.

Again and again in these stories from the very beginning, God desires to bless the whole world and chooses to work through deeply flawed people to make that happen. These ancestors had the same failures we still have: They were liars and manipulators, they had dubious sexual ethics, and exploitative economic practices. But God was gracious over and over again, never abandoning them, never giving up on them, always meeting their missteps with mercy.

This morning's story demonstrates a human response to that graciousness. Jacob and Esau are twin brothers. When they were young, Jacob stole Esau's birthright blessing and inheritance. They have been estranged ever since. But today they meet again for the first time in decades.

Genesis 33:1-11

¹ Jacob looked up and saw Esau approaching with four hundred men. Jacob divided the children among Leah, Rachel, and the two women servants. ² He put the servants and their children first, Leah and her children after them, and Rachel and Joseph last. ³ He himself went in front of them and bowed to the ground seven times as he was approaching his brother. ⁴ But Esau ran to meet him, threw his arms around his neck, kissed him, and they wept. ⁵ Esau looked up and saw the women and children and said, “Who are these with you?”

Jacob said, “The children that God generously gave your servant.” ⁶ The women servants and their children came forward and bowed down. ⁷ Then Leah and her servants also came forward and bowed, and afterward Joseph and Rachel came forward and bowed.

⁸ Esau said, “What's the meaning of this entire group of animals that I met?”

Jacob said, “To ask for my master's kindness.”

⁹ Esau said, “I already have plenty, my brother. Keep what's yours.”

¹⁰ Jacob said, “No, please, do me the kindness of accepting my gift. Seeing your face is like seeing God’s face, since you’ve accepted me so warmly. ¹¹ Take this present that I’ve brought because God has been generous to me, and I have everything I need.” So, Jacob persuaded him, and he took it.

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Just before this, Jacob spent his night wrestling with something or someone—a stranger, an angel, himself, God—we don’t know. But in the encounter receives a blessing. And he is named. And he is injured. When the sun comes up, he’s limping.

Then, after that wrestling, he is truly ready to face his brother.

The encounter is risky. In spite of Jacob’s theft so long ago, Esau has become the head of a mighty household and army. If he wants vengeance, he could have it on Jacob and his entire family.

So, Jacob approaches first, alone, limping. And as he approaches, he bows once, twice, seven times—on that sore hip.

And Esau, who came with an army, sees his brother, and runs to him, falls to his knees, and wraps him in a hug. It’s like the prodigal son.

“Seeing your face is like seeing the face of God,” says Jacob.

That means a lot coming from Jacob who has already encountered the Divine in two dramatic experiences: his vision of the ladder to the heavens and his wild night of wrestling. But here, at last, he experiences himself truly wrapped in God’s embrace in the arms of his brother.

It’s an incredible image of forgiveness and reconciliation. These two brothers had every reason to go to their grave estranged. Esau had plenty of reason to stay mad. He’s clearly the party on the moral high ground here.

But if I were Jacob, I would have spent years mentally complaining that it wasn’t my fault, that mom made me do it, and that it was dad’s fault, too, for hating me, and Esau’s fault for being so likable.

But in the end Jacob was alone wrestling all night. And in the morning, he had to decide on his own that he was ready to lay it down. That was his choice. He took responsibility. And, Esau also had to decide to begin again. And when at last they see each other, it’s like seeing the face of God.

This is how forgiveness is. It’s lifesaving, and it’s hard; it blesses us and leaves us limping. It usually takes a long time and many miles. It might involve sweaty, sobbing hugs. And it means seeing the face of God in our enemy.

I'd wager most of us have someone we're not at peace with. Maybe because of something we've done, or something they've done, or just because we live in a fallen world, and we don't always get along. Can you imagine seeing that person and seeing the face of God in their face?

I want to nuance this because the call for forgiveness has been misused to keep people in abusive relationships or deny people the right to demand repair of harm done. Sometimes forgiveness should not involve restarting a relationship. Sometimes it is an internal letting go or a handing over to God what we cannot do for ourselves. Remember: God always desires healing and wholeness.

Sometimes, though, forgiveness and reconciliation in person is possible. Think again of someone you're not at peace with. Can you imagine bowing, kneeling, knees creaking, joints popping, old pains surfacing, to make peace with them? Can you imagine seeing them and seeing the face of God?

Miraculous might not be the wrong word for that. If Jacob and Esau's reconciliation was miraculous, it was a miracle that was decades in the making.

This is how God's work often is, maybe usually is. It's slow. We tend to prefer the speedy miracles. They're flashier. Saint Augustine pointed out that we take for granted the slow miracle by which water becomes wine in the irrigation of a vineyard.

Forgiveness is like water turning to wine. Maybe, very occasionally, Jesus makes it happen in a flash. But usually, it takes some time. For Jacob and Esau, it took a lifetime. But slow doesn't mean impossible. God can and will do new things in our lives, set us free from how it's always been, make a way out of no way. And always, grace abounds.

! Sarah W. Wiles, 2023