

## Peniel, Face of God

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At the end of our weekly Lectio Divina (online, on Tuesdays, let me know if you want to join us) we do Compline, the evening prayer from the Book of Prayers. Towards the very end, we recite together the words attributed to old Simeon in Luke chapter 2, and when we say "for I have seen the Saviour", more often than not, I smile thinking yes, tonight, I have seen a glimpse of the Saviour.

Where have you seen God this week? In some encounters? in joys? In struggles?

Just a few weeks ago, we heard from here the story of Jacob running away from his brother Esau that he had mistreated. Jacob had an encouraging vision at night, while sleeping with his head resting on a stone that he later set up as a place to remember God's providence. Remember how Kristin told us about the importance of remembering and she suggested we set up our stones to remember when and how we have been blessed...so that we could share our blessings with others. Well, today's story is about this very same Jacob who still, now after twenty years, has not seen his brother Esau. Jacob spent all these years far away North, in Haran, Mesopotamia, got married twice, was blessed with children and animals and became a rich man. In today's lesson, Jacob is on his way South, back home, because God had told him to do so.

Jacob is very fearful of the encounter with his brother Esau who had gotten terribly angry at him – for a good reason. At this point of the story, Jacob has already sent gifts to his brother in order to soften the encounter, and this night he has accompanied his wives and children and flocks, all of his possessions, to the other side of the river Jabok. They are all safely on the other side, and, still at night, Jacob goes back to the Northern side one more time. He is all alone by the river, it is dark, and suddenly there is somebody wrestling with him. They fight and wrestle all night, and, in the stranger's desperation to get away before daybreak, he strikes Jacob on the hip. He begs Jacob to let him go because the day is breaking. Perhaps Jacob only now realizes that the one he is wrestling with is not just an ordinary man... This man is something extraordinary, maybe an angel, somebody from the realm of the divine.

Jacob doesn't want to let him go before he gets a blessing from him. To begin the blessing, the divine asks his name. Jacob's name *Ya 'aqov* is in itself a bad resumé of his life history: this is the number two "heel" guy, the younger of the twins who was holding to his elder brother's heel (*'aqev* in hebrew) as he was born. *Ya 'aqov* is also the one who "deceives" (*'aqav* in hebrew) his brother, not once, but twice. He gets their father's special blessing reserved to the first-born by treachery, and the true first-born Esau seeks revenge. Now back to the wrestling scene at the river Jabbok. The first part of the blessing that Jacob receives from the stranger is a name change, something that in the Bible is often done by God as a sign of transformation: "You shall no longer be called Jacob, (basically: you are a new man now,) you are Israel, for you have fought with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Jacob asks his name but he doesn't reveal it. It is typical in the ancient tradition for the Divine not to reveal their name. Now, the Divine one blesses Jacob/Israel. There is much in this story that we don't fully understand, even the meaning of the name Israel is disputed – is it "God wrestles" or "fighting God" or yet something else – the name remains enigmatic but it certainly has something to do with God. What is clear in this story is that for Jacob, this nightly encounter is an encounter with God. He calls the place Peniel, "Face of God", because, as he says: "I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." It can be indeed very frightening to see God. According to ancient tradition, a human being should not survive after seeing God face to face. Yet, here he is, he has seen God and he is alive. Limping, but alive, and blessed.

As the sun rises, this limping and blessed man crosses the border river of the land that will later be called after him "Israel". His fears are not all wiped away, but he has seen God face to face and knows that the divine blessing is with him, and so he prevails. He limps forward to reconciliation.

Where has God seen you this week? Maybe wrestling with something? And gratefully enjoying God's good gifts?

For sure, God has seen you. How might God look at you? Certainly with love. I believe God looks at her own creation with pride, with compassion, with confidence and faith. A good way for me to remember this is to imagine myself as a baby in Mother's arms. God looks at us with love and asks us: "What is troubling you?" Each time we pray our Father, we can be sure we are in a safe place. In the safety of God's loving embrace, we can process also difficult issues.

I participated this week on an online mini-conference on Becoming the Beloved Community NOW, by telling the TRUTH, seeking JUSTICE and promoting HEALING. These three two-hour webinars TRUTH, JUSTICE and HEALING, are available on the Facebook page of the Episcopal Church.

I was born and grew up in Angola, Africa, did most of my schooling in Finland and then went back to Angola from where I moved here. I have been part of a minority for most of my life, and as a kind of a cultural hybrid I've often felt like an outsider. Now I can call this place home among other homes, thanks to you all who have welcomed and accepted me as I am.

I have only slowly started to realize how prevalent social – or maybe I should say racial - injustice is in this country...For a long time, I have been stuck in the terminology: I understand there is no such thing as multiple human races! A friend told me she and her siblings had been classified in different races although they shared the same parents. There **is** only one human race.

However, racial or ethnicity-based injustice is a real problem in our community. I cannot keep hiding behind terminology. I am starting to realize that I am part of this problem, and I should be part of the solution to it, as well. What to do? Is my question. I have felt like I am not really in a place or equipped to do anything beyond participating in prayer vigils and marches...yet, with this short online training and the example of others and clear invitations from my family and friends to do something, I think I must join this growing beloved community, whether it is by participating in our church's Sacred Ground training or the local Building Bridges activities or maybe start by seeking to connect with people near me on a deeper level, getting to know better our diverse cultures and experiences and becoming a closer-knit community, beautiful in its diversity.

In our gospel lesson, Jesus looks at his friends and disciples with confidence when he says "No, people don't need to go away to find food; you guys give them something to eat." Friends, Jesus has good news for us: "You can do it! You should do it!" Of course, looking at what we have, I mean, this is hardly enough for our own group here...let alone enough to tackle any larger issues or share with the world out there! Yet, Jesus is like "Oh yeah, you can do it! Just bring what you have. Let's give thanks to God for what we have here. And then, go, share. Cross that scary river. Go beyond the boundaries of your fear. Go knowing that you alone, just by yourself, cannot do it, but together, and with God and the divine blessing, oh, yes, you got it! Wrestle with truth, take seriously the needs of the community, seek for the divine inspiration and guidance, and rest in the assurance that God lets her face shine upon you, God looks at you with compassion and sends you on your way transformed, maybe limping, but blessed."