

Genesis 33:1-10 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Jacob and Esau Meet

33 Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two maids. **2** He put the maids with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. **3** He himself went on ahead of them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother.

4 But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. **5** When Esau looked up and saw the women and children, he said, “Who are these with you?” Jacob said, “The children whom God has graciously given your servant.” **6** Then the maids drew near, they and their children, and bowed down; **7** Leah likewise and her children drew near and bowed down; and finally Joseph and Rachel drew near, and they bowed down. **8** Esau said, “What do you mean by all this company that I met?” Jacob answered, “To find favor with my lord.” **9** But Esau said, “I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself.” **10** Jacob said, “No, please; if I find favor with you, then accept my present from my hand; for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God—since you have received me with such favor.

2 Corinthians 5:16-21 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

16 From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view;^[a] even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view,^[b] we know him no longer in that way. **17** So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! **18** All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; **19** that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself,^[c] not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. **20** So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. **21** For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Come Home to Family

One Christmas years ago, my husband Ed and I decided we would go home for Christmas to spend time with our family. We lived in Warren, Arkansas. Our family lived in Harrison, Arkansas. Warren is way down in southeast Arkansas. Harrison is way up in northwest Arkansas. Now, a drive across the state is not necessarily a big deal -- unless you have a one year old and a three year old. But we naively loaded up the boys in our car and off we went. We learned a lot along that long and winding road across the state. We learned you can never have too many wet wipes. We learned that if you open your front and back passenger doors at the same time, it makes a privacy shield for a little boy who needs a bathroom break at the side of the road in the middle of nowhere. **And**, this road trip inspired us to purchase a new thing called a Caravan soon thereafter.

But this adventure was memorable for other reasons, too. My parents had divorced, and I had a new step mother and step siblings. And so we were trying to navigate what it meant to have two places to go for Christmas. We were trying to figure out how this new kind of family would work. I love my family deeply. But honestly, during this period we were grappling with a whole new family dynamic -- it was a whole new way of relating to each other. And it was just a lot to deal with. Coming home to family is not always easy.

I think Jacob would agree that sometimes coming home to family is not easy. In today's text from Genesis 33, we come in pretty much at the end of the story of Jacob and Esau's relationship. I would encourage you to go back and read the whole story starting with Genesis 25. But let me quickly summarize the back story -- it's important to know how we get to this point in today's Old Testament scripture. Jacob and Esau are the twin sons of Isaac and Rebekah. While she is pregnant, the Lord tells Rebekah that the struggle she feels going on in her womb indicates that two nations are within her womb. And the Lord says that the two nations and also the two men will be divided and struggle against one another. Jacob is to be the forefather of the nation of Israel, and Esau will be the ancestor of the Edomites, who became Israel's hostile neighbors. The struggle between the two brothers began in the womb with them fighting each other, then continues when they are born as Jacob clutches Esau's heel. Esau, however, is the firstborn, giving him the rights of inheritance from their father. But as you may know, Jacob connives and tricks Esau out of his rightful blessing and his birthright as the first born son. Understandably, Esau is beyond mad. He threatens to kill his brother, and Jacob escapes and starts his life afresh. He marries Rachel, he has children, he acquires wealth -- servants and livestock. And then after **20** years, God spoke to Jacob in a dream telling him to go back home. God said, "leave this land at once and return to the land of your birth." (Gen 31:13). But naturally, Jacob was afraid to go back. Although God commands reconciliation between the brothers, it's a dangerous proposition because Esau may still want to kill Jacob. And so Jacob prepares a gift for his brother as a peace offering -- he sends ahead a huge herd of his livestock to break the ice and hopefully soften Esau's heart. But Jacob is still terrified. And Jacob wrestles with God through the night before seeing the face of God and being strengthened to meet his brother.

And then, in today's text Jacob arrives back home. And there are three things that happen that are just stunning. Jacob has been so transformed by his encounter with God, that he humbles himself and puts himself at the mercy of his brother. Verse three says that Jacob: **3** [W]ent on ahead of [the others], bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother.

Bowing to the ground.....seven times --- admitting he was wrong, expressing humility to his brother. And I have to think that God had prepared the way for Jacob and had softened Esau's heart because what happens next is nothing short of miraculous it seems to me:

4 Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.

And then, Jacob speaks these words to his brother: "for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God."

Jacob admits he is wrong.

Esau rejoices at the reunion.

Jacob compares seeing his brother's face to seeing the face of God.

What a wonderful homecoming story! But, put yourself in Jacob's shoes ----- coming home to family isn't always easy. Jacob has had to admit that he was wrong -- he has had to humble himself. Esau has very good reasons to seek revenge against his brother. He has the power to do his brother harm. And yet, he chooses peace instead; he chooses to reconcile with his brother. He seeks to respond with love and to mend the relationship.

And putting ourselves in either set of shoes, I think Jacob's coming home couldn't have been easy for either one of the brothers. But --- I also think the homecoming must have been healing, freeing and filled with joy for both the brothers and all the family. As gut wrenching as it can be, I think reconciliation of relationships must be exactly how God wants his children to react when we hurt each other.

Both of the texts today invite us to consider how we might be called to a ministry of reconciliation. Reconciliation is the restoring of relationships, the healing of brokenness, the act of bringing peace -- the end of estrangement. And this ministry of reconciliation is two-fold -- it is both a reconciliation of our relationships person to person and the reconciliation of our relationship with God. Before we can truly come home for Christmas, there may be a measure of healing that needs to take place in our lives and in our relationships. The questions become: "what separates us from the people in our lives?? And, "what separates us from our God?" And then -- how might it be possible to mend those relationships?

Now I want to say right up front that I think this is a really sticky topic to talk about and to deal with. I am not here to put you on a guilt trip. I am not here to say you ought to reconcile with a person who has harmed you or whom you have harmed asap so that you can have a Merry Christmas. In fact, I am not here to suggest that you put yourself back into a relationship that is harmful to you in any way. And I am not here to be a psychologist. Instead, today I want to challenge you to draw near to God --- to look God in the face -- to be honest with yourself and your maker about the fractured relationships you have with people (because we all do), and to seek out what God would have you do and how God would have you respond. I invite you to ask God to reveal the brokenness that exists and to bravely ask how God might want to heal the brokenness in your life and in your relationships.

In my experience, reconciliation takes work, and it can be excruciating. Jacob is a fine example of the pain of the process. I think Jacob's experience of wrestling with God before he went home is a helpful metaphor for our own experience of reconciliation. In Genesis 33 chapter 32 Jacob spends the night before he bows down before his brother just wrestling and wrestling with God. Jacob gets up close and personal with God like you have to do in wrestling. And for our own experiences of coming home to our family, I imagine this wrestling as a time of being brutally honest with ourselves --- about seeing our own flaws and admitting that we have failed to do God's will. I think the process of getting face to face with God, involves self-examination. When we are closest to the holiness of God, we begin to see all the times where we have failed to love God and our neighbor. If I am really brave enough to come face to face with God, I imagine I could see who God is and who God wants me to be. And at the end of this night of wrestling Jacob says, "I have seen God face to face." And it changes everything for his relationship with his brother. It surely changes everything in his relationship with God.

But I wonder, if God had also been speaking to Esau during this period of estrangement from his brother. I wonder if God had prepared the way for this relationship to be repaired. Esau expressed kindness and love to Jacob way beyond what he deserved -- it even reminds us of

the story of the prodigal son when Esau runs to Jacob, embraces him, and falls on his neck and kisses him.

So you see this work of reconciliation has two sides, doesn't it? We are both Jacob **and** Esau. We are both the one who has hurt another person, **and** we are the one who has been harmed. And I have to think that the more we wrestle with God, the more we come face to face with God, the more transformed we become. The more we practice seeing God's face, the more we learn about who God is, the more we begin to see others through the very eyes of God. And so maybe that is why Jacob is able to say to his rival Esau: "For truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God."

Maybe when we draw near to God through prayer and worship and soaking ourselves in scripture, we can begin to see the people in God's family the way same way God does. Maybe we can even begin to show God's grace to people who have hurt us. Maybe we can practice showing grace to those difficult people in our lives. Maybe we can be graceful toward people who are of different faiths or different races or different nationalities or maybe even different political parties. Maybe we can begin to see that God has a really really big family and that we have a ministry of reconciliation with **all** those faces we see every day. I have to think that when we humble ourselves before God - when we bow down before God and admit that we are not worthy --- we will be reconciled with God and God's family.

It sounds almost too good to be true. It sounds almost like an impossible task, doesn't it? It is possible ----- but only with the power of the one whose birth we await this Advent. With Christ we are able to become new creations -- and when that happens, we are sent out to be Christ's ambassadors-- because as people following after Jesus, we are given new eyes to see people as we didn't before, and we are commanded to love with Christ's love.

I have a friend who went through a divorce through no fault of her own. She was very hurt and wounded by what had happened in the marriage. But through her relationship with God, she began to feel convicted that she needed to be at peace in the situation. She began to try to pray for her ex-husband. At first she couldn't even say his name before God. But day by day in the process of seeking God's will and being honest with God about her wounds, she was finally able to at least say his name in prayer. And then she began to be able to pray for him. And over time and wrestling with God she was able to pray that God would bless him -- and to mean it. She truly wanted the best for him and prayed to God for it.

God can heal our wounds.

God can transform all things. But the process is a two way street -- it takes our being open to working with God.

God is even working to transform my family, too. Although that Christmas in Harrison when our boys were young was really difficult, we survived it. We tried again to have a family Christmas the next year and the next year. And over the course of years an amazing thing has happened. We began to have **one** Christmas gathering -- all together. My mom began to come to my dad and step-mom's house. With the power of God, reconciliation has taken place. Forgiveness has been granted. Hearts have been healed. Hurt has been set aside. Peace abides in our family.

Reconciliation is a process. We cannot simply snap our fingers and rebuild relationships that have been fractured, can we? For Jacob it took 20 years before he heard the Lord say, "Go home." And even then for Jacob, before he got to the point of bowing down in front of his

brother, he had a period of wrestling with God. So while the healing process takes time, I pray that you **will not wait** 20 years to begin. Begin today. Begin now. There is no time to waste.

You know, this is not a very jolly topic. We have an idealized image of what Christmas is and what coming home to our family might look like. I'm pretty sure snow and a sleigh and chocolate are involved in our image of the perfect Christmas. But you know what, that first Christmas was really different than how we envision Christmas, wasn't it? Mary and Joseph were far from being the perfect family. They were far from home. They couldn't even find a real room. They must have been terrified. And yet, God was doing something new through the birth of Jesus- not just in their lives but in our lives today --- in the whole world. And so maybe coming home to your family might mean seeking the face of God, the presence of Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit in new ways, in deeper ways, in unexpected ways..... so that you might see others and love them in the same unconditional way our God of grace loves all of his family.

Let us pray.

God of grace and mercy, you are holy, holy, holy! We draw near to you. We seek your face. We pray for healing of the brokenness and separation we experience in our relationship with you and with your people. Transform us, renew us and inspire us to love others as you love us. In your holy name we pray. Amen.