

A SERMON FROM ST STEPHEN'S

# HIDE NOT THY FACE

A sermon preached the 16th of October 2016, the 22nd Sunday after Pentecost, at St Stephen's Episcopal Church, Belvedere, CA, by the Rev'd Phillip Channing Ellsworth, Jr., Rector. Based on Genesis 32: 20 – 31.

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When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."

— Genesis 32: 25 – 31

And the voice I read it in was strange to my ears. There was given to me a certainty that this, at last, was my real voice. There was silence in the dark assembly long enough for me to have to read my book out yet again. At last, the judge spoke.

"Are you answered," he said.

"Yes," said I.

The complaint was the answer. To have heard myself making it was to be answered. Lightly men talk of saying what they mean. Often when he was teaching me to write in Greek the Fox would say, 'Child, to say the very thing you really mean, the whole of it, nothing more or less or other than what you really mean; that's the whole art and joy of words.' A glib saying. When the time comes to you at which you will be forced at last to utter the speech which has lain at the center of your soul for years which you have, all that time, idiot-like, been saying over and over, you'll not talk about the joy of words. I saw well why the gods do not speak to us openly, nor let us answer. Till that word can be dug out of us, why should they hear the babble that we think we mean? How can they meet us face to face till we have faces?"

— Orual, in CS Lewis's, *Till We Have Faces*

**B**eneath your face are layers of yourself, and the deepest layers are themselves hidden from you. You reveal yourself by your face, or hide behind it. We assemble our faces to make ourselves presentable, as I did mine this morning (and cut myself shaving) or you did yours by makeup. "God has given you one face, and you make yourself another," Hamlet says to Ophelia.

Jacob, in this scene, is face upon face. We read in the 20th verse, "For Jacob thought, 'I may appease Esau with the gift that goes before me, and afterwards I shall look on his face; perhaps he will accept me.' 'Appease' literally is 'cover over his face'. 'Before me' can be rendered 'to my face'. 'Perhaps he will accept me' is literally 'perhaps he will lift up my face'.

Jacob's mysterious assailant asks to be let go "before the darkness leaves." That's to protect Jacob. When God revealed himself to Moses, you'll remember he said, "You cannot see my face; for no one may see me and live."

You and I are Jacob. He's estranged from Esau. He's cunning, well placed, irrepressibly ambitious, and gripped by anxiety over what his brother's going to do

to him. The tensions and contradictions within us are telling, for our deepest struggles are never merely with those close to us but with God. When we're struggling with family in unreconciled relationships we're wrestling with the Most High even if we don't know it.

**J**acob has set his face to meet the brother he's cheated out of his birthright, the one from whom he'd stolen the blessing. When he last heard report of what Esau was up to, he heard it from their mother: *Esau's planning to kill you*. He's been living in Mesopotamia in self-imposed exile ever since. It's been twenty years.

But now God's assured him, "I will be with you," and he's set his face for home. He sends an embassy to see if Esau's still in ill humor. They go to Esau saying, "Your brother Jacob is coming home," and Esau gathers together 400 men to come out to meet him. When word of that reaches Jacob, he wonders what it will be like to die and how he's had it coming.

Jacob just reminded himself of God's promise to take care of him. "Lord, I am not worthy of the least of thy

mercies.” He threw himself on God, on his knees.

But when he gets up, he devises a separate peace. He defaults to his characteristic sin. He tries to deceive Esau, splitting his army into two camps so that if Esau chances upon one he’ll assume it’s everyone, kill them, and that’ll be the end of it. If he’s lucky, Jacob will be in the other camp and escape.

**H**e tries appeasement, to placate his brother. That’s plan B. He sends ahead 200 female goats, 20 male goats, 200 ewes, 20 rams, 30 female camels with young, 40 cows, 10 bulls, 20 female donkeys, and 10 male donkeys. Poor Esau will have to dodge all these innocent animals to get to what he hopes will be reconciliation and a reunion with his long-lost brother. But Jacob doesn’t know that. Imprisoned in own his guilt and intrigue, he fears revenge.

It’s not just the livestock. He gathers his wives and children in the middle of the night, crosses the Jab-bok, and leaves them on the far shore in their flapping pajamas, a kind of white flag of surrender should the ungulates and asses not turn the trick. He slept alone that night. *Were I to offer my wife and children to somebody, Victoria would make sure I slept alone that night!*

Jacob’s alone. Suddenly someone pounces on him. Who is it? At first he had to figure ‘it is Esau my nightmare’, the twin he struggled with in his mother’s womb. When he recognizes it is the angel of the Lord, Jacob treats him the way he treated Esau. “Bless me now or I won’t let you go,” he says. The bugger can’t help himself.

If you’re Jacob, realizing who this was, imagine the dread. It’s like Saul on the road to Damascus thinking he’s doing God a favor by killing Christians only to realize the one he victimized was none other than the Lord of glory! “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Suddenly the scales would be removed from your eyes, and you’d realize what a perilous situation you were in, and

how narrowly you escaped.

You and I are Jacob. Why is Jacob allowed to prevail? Why doesn’t the angel of the Lord give Jacob what he deserves? What would become of us if he did? That’s the point of putting Jacob’s hip out of socket. The Angel of the Lord’s no weakling. He’s just the same One who’d promised Abraham ‘whoever blesses you I’ll bless.’ He’s already sworn love for this descendent of Abraham and Sarah. If God is for us, who can be against us?

**S**eventy days from now, the choir will be processing into this nave leading us in singing *O Come, All Ye Faithful*. The angel wrestling Jacob should ring bells in your Christmas minds. The Most High suffers himself to appear lowly and weak. It has always been so, from the morning God appears naïve in the garden asking, “Where are you?”, to the moment Jesus is born in a cattle shed in Bethlehem, to the way he dies — deserted by his friends, mocked by his enemies, strung up on a cross between two thieves.

Where do we see the face of God? In mortal weakness, in magnificent, glorious defeat when in the dark of Golgotha we pin him to the wood and don’t let him go.

Therefore, let us borrow the prayer of the Psalmist, “Thou hast said, ‘Seek ye my face.’ My heart says to thee, ‘Thy face, Lord, do I seek. Hide not thy face from me.” [27: 8 – 9] Let us gaze on the Lord of Hosts in the Blessed Sacrament. And let us grasp in our hands and take in our throats the body and blood of Christ. “For God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” [2 Cor. 4: 6] “No one has ever seen God, but the only begotten, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.” [John 1: 18]

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*St Stephen’s Church welcomes you to worship with us at 3 Bayview Avenue, Belvedere, CA,  
Sunday mornings at 8 or 10 o’clock. For more information about our life and mission  
please email us at [office@ststephenschurch.org](mailto:office@ststephenschurch.org), call us at 415-435-4501,  
or visit us at [www.ststephenschurch.org](http://www.ststephenschurch.org).*