

Genesis 32:22-31 O.T. 29 (NRSV)

²²The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. ²⁴Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. ²⁵When 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. ²⁶Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." ²⁷So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." ²⁸Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." ²⁹Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. ³⁰So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." ³¹The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.

Genesis 32:22-31 O.T. Page 29
“Face-to-Face with God”

Please bow with me in prayer. Almighty God, we enter into your presence to worship you praise your holy name. Give us all ears to hear your Word of life today. In Jesus’ precious Name we pray, **Amen.**

Introduction: **Do you ever** have a hard time remembering a person’s name? I know I do. But while many of us might have a hard time remembering a person’s name, most of us can usually remember a person’s face. We know we know them; we recognize their face, we just can’t come up with the name. We human beings have an amazing ability to recognize faces.

At the University of Aberdeen in Scotland, there’re a couple of psychologists who run the Face Research Lab. The lab studies the way human beings “read” faces. In the course of their work these psychologists have stumbled on a surprising finding. The more average the face, the more attractive most people find that face to be. You see, these psychologists have developed a method of mathematically averaging faces. **The face on the left** is an “average female face,” derived by combining the faces of 43 women. **The face on the right** is an “average male face” based on averaging the faces of 47 men. **And the face in the middle** is the “average person’s face,” based on averaging the 43 women’s and 47 men’s faces together. Most people find the face of this average person very attractive. (If you agree nod your head.) Now we know that God created all human beings after God’s own image, both male and female. Hum, does that mean **that this face** of an average person might actually come closest to looking like the face of God? Well maybe, but it’s not nearly bright enough. Let’s try something. **Ahh, there we go**, that looks more like the face of God in the prophet’s Ezekiel’s vision. Now there’s a beautiful face that can still instill fear in the hearts of people.

PAUSE

Move I.

Most people would be afraid to come face-to-face with God. They wouldn't be afraid because **God has red demon like eyes, or a crooked witch style nose, or bolts** sticking out of his neck like Frankenstein. No, rather they would be afraid because of **the blinding countenance** of God's face. God's beauty, God's purity, and God's holiness are just too much for fallen human eyes to behold. To come face-to-face with God would be downright terrifying. That's the description we read over and over again in the Old Testament stories. To look into God's face takes your breath away and you'd shrivel up and die.

Theologians use a special word to describe an event where a human being has a close encounter with God. Anytime a human being enters God's presence and catches even the slightest glimpse of God's glory, theologians call that event a **"theophany."** Our trusty *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* defines "theophany" as **"an appearance of God that is perceptible to human sight."** Old Testament **examples of theophanies** would be Moses' encounter with God in the burning bush, or Moses' encounters with God on the top of Mount Sinai, **or Elijah's** glimpse of God in the "still small voice" in the cave, **or Ezekiel's** and **Daniel's** great visions of God sitting on the throne in heaven. But everyone knows theophanies can be dangerous. We all remember God's cautionary words to Moses when Moses asked to see God's glory. **In Exodus 33:19-20 (NRSV)** the LORD says, **"I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, 'The LORD'; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But,' he said, 'you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live."** That's how dangerous it can be to come face-to-face with God. To look into God's face is to die. **All Moses got to see** was God's back as God passed by while Moses was hiding in the cleft of the rock (Exodus 33:22).

But four generations earlier, Moses' great-great-grandfather, Jacob, had a theophany that defies our understanding. In our Bible lesson today in Genesis 32, we read an accounting of Jacob's death-defying theophany. The story only describes the person Jacob is wrestling with as "*a man*." Yet after the wrestling match ends, Jacob names the place "**Peniel**," explaining **in Genesis 32:30b (NRSV), "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."** **That's what the Hebrew word *Peniel* means, "the face of God."** Jacob actually came face-to-face with God, and though he bore the scares of his struggle, he lived to tell about his dangerous encounter. And because of this struggle, **God changed Jacob's name to *Israel***, which means, "**he strives or struggles with God.**"

From the day of his birth when Jacob grabbed on to his twin brother's Esau's heel trying to be born first. **To the day** he tricked his father Isaac into giving him his older brother's birthright, **to this night** by the Jabbok river when Jacob came face-to-face with God and lived, Jacob was always struggling to secure his place in history. Life is a struggle. You can't live without taking risk. **So, as Jacob strove with God, God strove with Jacob** making him into a great nation, which would bring the Messiah into the world. Yet, most people aren't as courageous, or maybe I should say fool hearty, as Jacob. **Yes, most people would be afraid to come face-to-face with God**

End I.

Move II. But God wants you to seek his face. God wants you to take the risk and seek a face-to-face encounter with your divine creator. Yes, God cautions that you're in mortal danger, but if you truly trust God, you'll take the risk and count on God to spare your life. **Just as God used** his hand to shield Moses' face **and God came** under cover of darkness to wrestle with Jacob, God will protect and preserve the lives of those who love God as they seek God's face. **This is one of the great paradoxes** of the Bible. **A paradox is** "a true statement that happens to be contradictory." On one hand, God says no one can see his face and live, and on the other hand, God challenges his children deliberately to seek his face. **God wants us** lowly humans to come into his holy sanctuary and gaze upon the beauty of God's countenance. God wants to have face-to-face encounters with us.

A bit ago I read the verse on one side on the paradox from Exodus 33 where God cautions Moses not to look at his face. **Now let me read** the verse on the other side of the Paradox where God actually instructs the Israelites to seek his face. In 2 Chronicles 7:14 (NRSV) the LORD says, "**if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.**" Jacob lived through his face-to-face encounter with God because Jacob was one of God's chosen people. Jacob was a person who was called by God's name. You're also a person who's called by God's name. **At your baptism**, you were welcomed into Christ's church and God claimed you as one of his beloved children. **Like the psalmist in Psalm 27:8 (NRSV)** your hearts cry out "**Seek his face!**" And in obedience to God, you respond saying, "**Your face LORD, do I seek.**" Don't just sit there; tell God what you're going to do. Say it with me: "**Your face LORD, do I seek.**" It's worth the risk. God promises to forgive your sins and heal your land!

When I think of seeking God's face, **I remember a line** from a nationally televised address President Reagan made on January 28, 1986. He was supposed to deliver his state-of-the-union address that night, **but the space shuttle Challenger** exploded on lift-off earlier that day killing its entire seven-member crew. President Reagan concluded his address with these words:

The crew of the space shuttle Challenger honored us by the manner in which they lived their lives. We will never forget them, nor the last time we saw them, this morning, as they prepared for their journey and waved good-bye and **“slipped the surly bonds of earth” to “touch the face of God.”**¹

That parting line was a quote from a sonnet titled **“High Flight”** by a Royal Canadian Air Force pilot, John Gillespie Magee, Jr.,² who died in a training accident during World War II at just 19 years of age. Reagan's quote was actually a composite of the first and last lines of Magee's sonnet.

Oh, I have slipped the surly bonds of earth,
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
...
and, while with silent, lifting mind I've trod
the high un-trespassed sanctity of space,
put out my hand and touched the face of God.

You don't have to die to put out your hand and touch the face of God. **Like Jacob, Moses, and Elijah** of old, you can seek God's face in the here and now. Sure, there's a risk you'll die. **But God really does want you to seek his face.**
End II.

¹ <http://www.reaganlibrary.com/reagan/speeches/challenger.asp>

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Gillespie_Magee,_Jr.

Move III. So, seek God's face and God will bless you. Not only does God preserve and protect those who seek his face that are called by his name, God also blesses them. God forgives their sins and heals their land. God incorporates them into God's mighty plans for the universe. **When Jacob took** the risk and went face-to-face and toe-to-toe with God in a wrestling match, God blessed Jacob before he departed at daybreak. **Our Bible lesson** today in Genesis 32 doesn't tell us exactly what God's blessing was, but if we look at the passage in the larger context, we can see the blessing. We need to back up for a moment. **From the day of their birth**, there was always a rivalry between Jacob and his older twin brother, Esau. Esau was born first, but as the story goes, **Jacob was actually grabbing** the foot of his brother trying to pull back so Jacob could be born first. The two twins could not have been more different. **Esau was a big** hairy guy who was a rugged outdoorsmen. He was a man's man and he made his father, Isaac, proud. **Jacob on the other hand**, was a wiry, fair-completed, stay-at-home type mamma's boy. Jacob was his mother Rebekah's favorite.

But Esau was the oldest, so he was destined to be the family heir. So, Jacob and Rebekah came up with a scheme to cheat Esau out of his birthright. **One day** when Esau had been out hunting and came home hungry as a bear, Jacob conned Esau into trading away his birthright for a messily bowl of stew. **Next Rebekah disguised** Jacob as his larger, more-hairy brother and they tricked his nearly blind father, Isaac, into giving Esau's blessing to Jacob thinking he was Esau. Needless to say, **Jacob had to hightail** it out of town after those shenanigans.

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Now, it's been 20 years since Jacob has seen his brother Esau when the story picks up in our scripture lesson today. **Jacob has sent** his family and possession ahead along with presents for Esau hoping to butter him up. But Jacob is still apprehensive about meeting his brothers when he ends up on the far shore of the Jabbok River all alone when **he wrestles with “a man,”** and holds out for a divine blessing.

After being bless and departing with a limp, Jacob travels into the Promised Land where, much to his surprise, **Esau greets him warmly.** That was God's blessing, God had softened Esau's heart toward his younger brother. Esau was willing to let bygones be bygones. Now, **God directed his plan** to give Abraham descendants as numerous as the star in the sky through Abraham's grandson Jacob.

Perhaps you have a checkered past like Jacob, **or perhaps** you have some complaint against God like Moses, **or maybe** like Elijah, some enemy is pursuing you. Whatever the circumstances of your life, you need to take the risk, and seek God's face. That's the only way you're ever going to find your place in God's plans. **So, go ahead, seek God's face and God will bless you too.**

End III.

Conclusion: Perhaps the face of an average person does come closest to looking like God's face. But you can be sure God's face can still instill fear in the hearts of people. **Yes, most people would be afraid to come face-to-face with God.**

God's beauty, God's purity, and God's holiness are just too much for fallen human eyes to behold. **But God really does want you to seek his face.** God wants you to take the risk and to seek a face-to-face encounter with your divine creator. **So, seek God's face and God will bless you.** "*Coming Face to Face with God*" is the only way to find your place in God's plans. **Oh, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD, and to dwell in his temple forevermore (Psalm 27:4). Amen!**

Closing Prayer: Let's pray. Oh, God we have seen your face and you have spared our lives. Help each of us to find our place in your holy plans. **Amen!**

Communion: "*The Great Thanksgiving*" On Screen and See Insert

10:30 Closing Hymn: "*Nothing Between*" Hymnal No. 373

Verses 1, 2, and 4

Sending Forth: Through the bread and the cup Christ has drawn us into God's presence. We've caught a glimpse of God's face and we've basked in God's glory. Go forth, seeking God's face and gazing upon the beauty of the LORD, today and forever. **And all of God's people said...Amen!**