

“Encounter with God”
Genesis 32:22-31
July 31, 2011
Rev. Jeong Park
Fair Oaks United Methodist Church

Our sanctuary is located on a hill. There are some good things and bad things about being on a hill: The good thing is that people can clearly see our church building from a distance either from the parking lot or Fair Oaks blvd. Nothing can hide this church! The only bad thing is that you have to walk uphill from the parking lot. The seminary that I studied in in Berkeley was also located on a hill. People called it ‘Holy Hill.’ Obviously, there were many priests, pastors and seminarians studying together on the hill. That was why people started calling it ‘Holy Hill’. Every time, I walk up here, our hill reminds me of the ‘Holy Hill’ of my seminary. The word of ‘Holy’ means ‘differentiates from ordinary.’ Church should be a different place, unlike other secular places. Church is God’s dwelling place where people come and experience the presence of God through worship. What does it mean to encounter with God?

Early Methodists checked in with one another by sharing a couple questions: Are you still experiencing the personal love of God in your daily lives? Where have you experienced the grace of God and the personal love of God lately? Although we believe in God, we may not always feel the close and personal presence of God. In March of 1735, John Wesley decided to travel to Georgia hoping to preach the gospel here in United States. As Wesley traveled by boat to Georgia, fierce storms that threatened to sink the ship interrupted the journey several times. Wesley was terrified. He was afraid to die, and he did not know what would happen to him if he did. Wesley recorded part of his experience. During one point when the storm was particularly severe, he noticed a stark contrast between the behavior of the English Christians and that of a group of German Christians, both of whom were on the ship. After the storm, he wrote in his journal: “A terrible screaming began among the English. The Germans calmly sang on. I asked one of them afterwards, “Were you not afraid?” He answered, “I thank God, no.” I asked: “But were your women and children afraid?” He replied mildly, “No; our women and children are not afraid to die.” Wesley questioned whether he was really a Christian! Through this travel, he experienced God’s presence and peace by the example of the German Christians.

Let us revisit the story between Jacob and Esau again. After Jacob cheated

his father's blessing by pretending to be his brother, Esau, he had to run off to avoid his brother. He had lived in uncle's house for over twenty years and had settled down. While he was working under his uncle, Laban, for twenty years, he married a beautiful woman, Rachel, his uncle's daughter. As we know, he had a precious son whose name is Joseph. The Bible reminds us that Jacob had to spend 14 years working under his uncle like a slave, and he had to work another six years shepherding sheep until Jacob established his home and family in a new place. How about his twin brother Esau? Esau hated Jacob because Jacob cheated his blessing. He experienced a betrayal from his family, and his anger didn't go away for long years. The feeling of betrayal was a fatal blow to him. Esau's anger increased and he planned to kill him whenever he saw Jacob again.

Today's Scripture reading describes Jacob's personal encounter with God the night before he met his twin brother Esau. After he sent his family and all his belongings to his brother's side, Jacob had to wrestle with God for a blessing. The Scripture says: "Jacob was left alone: a man wrestled with him until the 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." What made Jacob desperate to wrestle with God? In his personal encounter with God, he wanted God's presence in him and courage to meet his brother Esau face to face. No one knows what will happen to them. Jacob didn't let him go until he guaranteed He would be with him in this anxious and fearful moment in his life and at the same time, God's forgiving love was with his twin brother, in Esau's heart as well.

Forgiveness is one of the hardest things we can practice as a human being. It is hard to handle once we have experienced betrayal and hurt from our relationships. Anger is hard to let go just with our own strength and patience. In the New Testament, at Matthew 18:21-22, Peter asks Jesus saying, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" ²²Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." The British writer, C.S Lewis pointed out that seventy-seven times may not be for seventy-seven different kinds of sins against you, but it can be the one sin which keeps occurring to you seventy-seven times. In his personal journal, he wrote: "Last week, while at prayer, I suddenly discovered—or felt as if I did—that I had really forgiven someone I have been trying to forgive for over thirty years. Trying, and praying that I might." Most of issues that clients bring to counseling sessions have something to do with events in the past. It is hard to let go of the past as a human being.

I had an opportunity to work as a hospital chaplain for a year at UCSF

research hospital in San Francisco. I still remember a sentence that I saw in the chaplain's office on my first day. The words were in a framed picture. It says, "Life is fragile, handle with a prayer." Life is so precious, but it is also true that life is not long. We still experience many different aspects of life in a short time. What is the most important thing in life? I asked myself what things I should do in this short time and fragile of life. My supervisor taught me five things that we should before we end our life on earth: "I forgive you. You forgive me. Thank you. I love You. Good bye." It is too difficult to forgive if our souls are deeply wounded. But without letting go of the past, it will still remain 'unfinished business' and will keep bothering both Jacob & Esau. They had to forgive and be forgiven and reconcile with each other. Jacob knew that he couldn't do this alone. God should help him and bless him this miracle of forgiveness. While he was wrestling with God, the day had broken.

In our Scripture, the reading says: "Esau brought four hundred people to wait for Jacob." They weren't waiting for 'Jacob's welcome back party.' When Jacob was ready to cross the river Jordan, he thought his brother might kill him because of his fiery anger in his heart. Jacob was 'greatly afraid and distressed' the night before. Why was he trying to put himself in danger for now?? Esau was ready to kill him once he crosses over the river. Jacob wanted to complete his 'unfinished business' and 'be free from the past' in his life. That's why he decided to meet his brother. When I worked at the hospital, I was deeply impressed by an 8 year old boy who died of Leukemia. He talked to his parents and told them that he wanted to give away his pencil case to one of his friends who quarreled with him. He wanted to pass his own computer to his brother who always argued and fought with him. At his last moment, he wanted to be ready through sharing and forgiving acts. Even children know what is important in life. Jacob wanted to reconcile with his brother and return back to his family and home in the end.

So what happened? He encountered God, and God gave him courage and forgiveness on that night. The Bible says, "Jacob has overcome God. God gave him a new name, Israel." Cheater Jacob became a name of Israel. After daybreak, Jacob bowed himself to the ground seven times. God touched Esau's heart and opened his heart to forgive his brother. The two brothers finally reconciled with each other twenty years later. The story ends with a scene at next chapter: "Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him and they wept." They finally reconciled in the long years end.

How about your life? Is it like Jacob's situation? We have a fear of death, and anxiety from unpredictable difficulties that will trouble us. We have a fear of getting lost in the darkness, and we are afraid of death if we are left out in danger. On one hand, life is full of joy and new experiences, but on the other

hand, it is filled with overwhelming burdens, stresses and difficulties that we think we can handle for ourselves. We desperately look for light and salvation. Then we should wrestle with God like Jacob and ask for God's courage, guidance and direction in this risk taking journey. May God bless you with courage and strength for your life. Whoever comes in this place, they can experience God's personal touch of their hearts and souls, so that they can receive God's forgiving love, amazing grace and find hope for their lives even in the midst of struggles in life. God comes to us as hope, strength and our refuge: "May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you. May the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace." (Numbers 6:24)