

Being the Face of God
Genesis 33

People often ask David and me how we go about choosing the bible passage that we're going to preach on, on any given Sunday. In a lot of churches, the scripture for the day is given to you, kind of like a preachers' homework assignment, but you know us, we're kind of loosey-goosey about rules and assignments, so here we pick our own. And so folks ask – what makes you pick a certain story for a certain day? And what we say is that it's because we feel moved to, because something is on our hearts to preach, because we feel a particular scripture speaking to us and we want to share it.

All that's true. But now I have to confess that I picked today's scripture story for a kind of silly reason: trying to be cute, trying to be appropriate for today - - today, Superbowl Sunday. Today's scripture features two brothers, brothers who pretty much had it in for each other – I hope you see where I'm going with this.

Yes, that's right, Jim and John Harbaugh inspired me to today's scripture choice. In just a few hours' time, John Harbaugh, coach of the Baltimore Ravens, will be glaring across the field in New Orleans at his brother Jim, coach of the San Francisco Forty-Niners, and they have both freely admitted that in that moment they will *not* be feeling waves of brotherly love for each other. Watching their press conference a couple days ago, all I could think was: Jacob and Esau, that's what we've got here -- Jacob and Esau.

And so today's scripture lesson. Jacob and Esau. Two brothers who have spent a lifetime in anger and bitter resentment, which I'm not at all suggesting is how John and Jim Harbaugh have spent their lives. But for Jacob and Esau, there was good reason for bitterness. Decades before today's scripture story takes place, Jacob had tricked their dad into giving him all the inheritance and all the blessings of his ancestors, things that were supposed to go to his twin Esau. Once Esau found out, Jacob was pretty much toast – he'd had to run for his life, with Esau right behind him hollering “if I ever see you again, you're a dead man, bro.” So Jacob had escaped, far far away, built a life for himself with his father's money, got himself a wife – okay, a couple wives, and a big family.

But now, older and grayer, he'd begun to long for home. And he decided to go back. And Esau hears that Jacob's heading back and he goes out to meet him. And it should be ugly. This part of the story should be ugly. Jim and John Harbaugh are going to have an tough few hours tonight – but Jacob and Esau

had had a lifetime of rage and resentment. So this, this meeting, oughta be pretty bad. And instead what you get is surely one of the most incredible stories of reconciliation *ever* told. As the two men approach each other, Jacob doesn't know what else to do but to drop to his knees before his brother. And Esau, whose entire life has been altered by his brother's betrayal, runs to Jacob, and throws his arms around him. It's the hug heard round the world – an embrace of love beyond all expectation. And when they finally unwrap their arms from each other, Jacob says this: as powerful a line as there is in the Bible: “Esau,” he says, “*Ah, Esau* – to see your face is like seeing the face of God.” To see your face is like seeing the face of God.

I'd like to think that's what Jim and John Harbaugh will say to each other after the game today, but I'm guessing it may take a little while to get to that point, at least for one of them.

To see your face, Esau, is like seeing the face of God.

If that line has a familiar ring to it, I'm guessing it might be because you've heard it *sung* lately.

If you, like a great many others, have taken yourself to see *Les Misérables* in the theater ... or if you, like a great many others, saw it on stage any time in the past decade, you remember its climactic final song, with all the central characters, past and present, singing to each other of love and mercy and forgiveness, and the dying Jean Valjean, reaching his hand out to his adopted daughter Cosette and singing these words: *Remember The truth that once was spoken To love another person Is to see the face of God.*

We saw *Les Mis* as a family on Christmas Day, the day it opened, and when Hugh Jackman sang that line, even Andres the college freshman was furtively wiping his eyes, and David was a complete mess. *To love another person Is to see the face of God.*

And of course, the reason that line is so powerful in the movie is the same reason Jacob's words to Esau are so powerful ... because those lines come, both of them, after a lifetime of hurt, a lifetime in which love and reconciliation seem impossible to find and yet, in the end, *are* found. The theme we've chosen for Lent, the season just around the corner now, is Forgiveness, and we could do far worse in Lent than reflect on *Les Misérables*. Its message is forgiveness, the overcoming of bitterness. Jean Valjean, terribly wronged early

in life, learns in the course of a lifetime what it is to receive mercy and to give it, to receive love and to give it. The unearned grace of a kindly priest begins the healing of Valjean's heart; the suffering of a young woman moves him to depths of compassion; and the love of a little girl who grows up as his daughter teaches him love. From start to finish, *Les Misérables* is the story of what it means to be reconciled with one another and with our God.

There's no musical score to the moment when Esau welcomes Jacob, but there could be. Jacob doesn't sing his words to his brother, but he could. To see your face, Esau, is like seeing the face of God. To see your face is like seeing the face of God. Esau doesn't get a lot of airtime in the Bible, Jacob's the one everyone remembers.

But if there's anyone in the Bible we ought to try to be like, it's Esau. To be the one who loves without reason, forgives extravagantly, throws wide his arms when anyone would have expected him to turn his back. Esau's whom we're supposed to be. Esau – the one in whom Jacob sees the face of God. We are called to be the face of God. We are called to live in such a way that others see the face of God in us.

No easy task. As hard as it is to be Jacob, down on his knees in humility, asking earnestly for forgiveness, as hard as that is to do, to be Esau is surely tougher. To forgive with abandon? To let go of all resentment, all rightfully-earned righteous indignation? Not easy. But it's the only way to look like God to someone else, the only way to be the face of God to another.

I came across a pretty amazing website this week, can't believe I'd never seen it before. It's called, simply, The Forgiveness Project. And it's stories, it's a collection of stories -- real voices, real people -- from all over the world – stories of people who have chosen to be Esau, who have chosen forgiveness over resentment, retaliation, revenge.

And on it I found a story of a woman I'm embarrassed to say I'd forgotten, someone to whom something strange and awful had happened right around here. Do you remember, years ago, that bizarre story of a woman driving down Sunrise Highway in Ronkonkoma, New York, when some kid dropped, of all things, a frozen turkey from an overpass onto her car, onto Victoria Ruvolo's windshield. It broke every bone in her face. She had ten hours of surgery; she was left with four titanium plates in her face, and a wire mesh to hold her left eye in place, forever.

They caught the boy who did it, a kid named Ryan, 18 years old, and the District attorney came to Victoria with good news. They had enough evidence, he said, to put Ryan away for 25 years.

But I didn't want that, Victoria explains, telling her story on this website. I had lost two brothers when I was younger. I didn't want to take another young person's life.

I told his lawyer I wanted amnesty for him, or at least a smaller sentence. And on the day we went to court, I saw him walk in wearing a suit three times too big for him, his head hanging low. and my heart went out to him. When the case was over, when they gave him just the six months, he walked over to where I was sitting and he stood in front of me. And all he was doing was crying. And this motherly instinct just came over me, and all I could do was to take him and cuddle him like a child, and tell him, "just do something good with your life now, just do something good."

And don't you think, don't you think Victoria Ruvolo was the face of God to Ryan right then? "Some people couldn't understand why I'd done this," she said, "but I know I did the right thing."

She did. She was Esau. She was the face of God to another. She was who we're supposed to be for one another: the face of God.

Each one of us has now, or will have, people in our lives who look to us to be the face of God to them – each one of us has probably missed as many chances at that as we've taken, but each of us will have more, more chances, more moments in which we can be Esau, God's own presence, God's own face to another.

In just a moment we will gather around the table of the One who came among us to remind us how to *do* that – how to be God's presence, how to show the face of God to one another. In the blessing of bread, broken for us, may we remember the meaning of mercy; in the blessing of a cup, poured out for us, may we remember what it is to forgive.

Let us be Esau,
 let us be Christlike,
 let us be the face of God.
 Amen.