

**“Surprised by Grace”**  
**Genesis 33:1-12**

*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. <sup>2</sup> He put the maids with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph last of all. <sup>3</sup> He himself went on ahead of them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother.*

*<sup>4</sup> But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. <sup>5</sup> 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.” <sup>6</sup> Then the maids drew near, they and their children, and bowed down; <sup>7</sup> Leah likewise and her children drew near and bowed down; and finally Joseph and Rachel drew near, and they bowed down. <sup>8</sup> Esau said, “What do you mean by all this company that I met?” Jacob answered, “To find favor with my lord.” <sup>9</sup> But Esau said, “I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself.” <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> Please accept my gift that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have everything I want.” So he urged him, and he took it.*

*<sup>12</sup> Then Esau said, “Let us journey on our way, and I will go alongside you.”*

This is the Word of the Lord.  
**Thanks be to God.**

Big and scary. That is our first impression of Esau. He's a hunter. He's outside all the time. He doesn't think before he acts. He's strong. And he is very, very hairy, so much so that Jacob has to put fur on himself to pretend to be him.

In the first couple chapters that we meet Esau, he gets angry twice at his twin brother Jacob. The second time, he's so angry that he plans to kill Jacob as soon as their father Isaac passes away.

From the start, Esau appears to be the enemy, the villain, the one Jacob and all of us should run away from. If this was a cartoon, he would be the character the hero would have to save the day from. He's like Brutus to Popeye or Bowser to Mario. He's the one-dimensional strong bad guy. He's the enemy. Or so we think.

After he threatens to kill Jacob, Jacob gets word of this and runs away. He leaves home for twenty years. Twenty long years away from everything and everyone he knew before. And after those twenty years, he finally hears God calling him back home. He's excited by this. He wants to go back and raise his family where he grew up. He wants a land of his own. He wants to see the places and the people he once knew and loved.

But he also knows that Esau, his brother, is still in that land. And not only is Esau this big hairy scary guy, Jacob also knows that he's the one who first hurt Esau. He stole Esau's blessing. He tricked their father. He pretended to be him. It's not Esau who was in the wrong. It was him Jacob. And he left home, before he could do anything at all to make it up, to make it right..

So as Jacob approaches his home, he gets ready to face this big, hairy, scary guy we all expect to still be his enemy. He divides his family up in the night so that if there is an attack at least some can escape. He brings gifts and money and livestock to pay off his brother's anger. And he bows his head to the ground seven times, hoping that this act of humility will somehow stop Esau's anger and violence.

But as he approaches something incredible happens. Esau -- the brother we think of as the villain, as the big bad guy, as the scary hairy, slightly older brother with an axe to grind -- this esau does something completely unexpected. Esau runs up this brother, hugs him, kisses him, and cries. He welcomes him not with violence or bloodshed, or anger, or even demands of repayment. Like the father of the prodigal son, Esau welcomes him with love and celebration.

God doesn't work just in the people we expect. God's light and joy shines through the most unexpected of human vessels. Even the people we might be most afraid of. Even those different from us. Even those we might be told to avoid and stay away from, because their group is bad. It is in our most feared enemies and our most unlikely friends that we see God's amazing grace most clearly.

Before I went to seminary, I served for a year in Northern Ireland as a Young Adult Volunteer I worked with a church there that was active in bridging the gap between Protestants and Catholics in Belfast. One big reason for this may be their own history. In 2001, a nearby Catholic church was attacked by a Protestant, Loyalist paramilitary group. In retaliation one night, this church, White House Presbyterian, was burned to the ground. By the time members showed up the next morning, the entire sanctuary was ash.

In the wider community, immediately fingers began to point. And they pointed most clearly at a family that lived across the street from the church. They were Catholic, and one of their family members was rumored to have connections with a Catholic, Republican paramilitary. Everyone started blaming that family, saying it was their fault. They were even attacked one night, and barely kept the young man most blamed from being taken from his home.

I'm sure as these rumors and news spread that Whitehouse Presbyterian Church members were torn. On one hand, this family may have had some connection to their church being burned down. But on the other hand, this was a neighbor. This was a family living in their community. And no one should be attacked and taken from their home. No one should be treated the way this family was.

So the Rev. Liz Hughes, pastor of Whitehosue Presbyterian, visited them the next day. She sat down with them in the living room, heard their story and prayed with the family. She said the church was here for them. And then she had to go back to refocusing on how to rebuild the sanctuary and church community. And the huge tasks ahead of her and the church.

But a couple days later, something pretty unexpected happened. This family across the street – who were not wealthy, who were facing their own fears and attacks – this family walked across the street to wards the church. They came carrying a huge jar from home. Inside, the jar was filled with coins and money they had been saving up for a rainy day. And they were facing their own rainy days right now. But instead of keeping it, or use it on themselves in this hard time

(which would have been very understandable), They brought it to the church. And they said, we hope this can help you rebuild.

It was this family that showed Whitehouse Presbyterian Church the full power of grace. This family that the world would have said is the church's enemy. This family who weren't Presbyterian or even Protestant. This family on the other side of centuries of pain and division. This family facing their own fears and pain and anger. It was this family who reminded them that God's love and grace and redeeming power is alive in this world.

And often, through the people we least expect.