

For I have Seen your Face

And Jacob said unto Joseph, "Now I can die, for I have seen your face, and know you are alive".
[Ge. 46:30]

The Biblical quote above describes a meeting 3½ millenia ago between a father and son who had been separated nearly a lifetime. This last weekend I, too, met my eldest son for the first time. Perhaps it wasn't as dramatic as that reunion of old, but for me, and hopefully for him, it was a day I had dreamed of much of my life. Our story is fairly ordinary: a boy adopted at birth meets his birth father almost 57 years later, but to me the meeting was anything but ordinary – it was a milestone in an ongoing miracle.

The miracle's origin is familiar – young lovers with too much passion and too little experience. When the inevitable happened, wiser heads overruled our naive plan to marry. I never saw the mother again. When our baby was born, I was told I had a son and the approximate birthdate; I provided some personal data for the adoption records; and that was the end of my involvement. Three years later I met and married the Love of my life, with whom I have spent 56 wonderful years in a love story that is still unfolding. By God's grace Chris and I have raised a family of 5 biological and 6 adopted children, fostering many more along the way. We have learned great truths raising our diverse family, but one stands out: God puts people in families for a reason. I heard nothing about my son for another 55 years, but God was working miracles in his life too.

As I found out recently, he had been adopted at two months by a pastor and his wife, into a family that would also include adopted, biological, and foster children. He grew up in the care of loving parents in a supportive church family, played baseball, attended a nearby grade school and high school, held various jobs, and earned a business degree at the state university. Upon graduation, he began a career as a banker, married, became a father and raised two great sons. Despite the disappointment of a painful divorce, by his middle 50's he could look back on a rich and rewarding life any man should be content with, especially since he had reunited with a high-school friend, with whom he was rapidly falling in love.

During all these years, we had both been curious about the other. He had "always" known he was adopted – wise parents don't keep important secrets – and secure in their love he had no need to fantasize about lost birth parents. But he was curious to know his origins, where he came from, and to perhaps flesh out the sparse information provided to his parents. My feelings were more complex. As our family grew larger and older, I began to wonder about my son's safety and happiness. Our experiences with our own adoptive children taught us that not all adoptions are successful, leaving children with identity and attachment issues. When I calculated that he was 18 and might be looking for me I filled out the state adoption registry paperwork so that he could find me if he was looking, and continued to hope. By faith, I knew there would be a Heavenly reunion one day, but I longed to know that he was well and happy.

Our adventures living in the reality of God's kingdom have given us untold reasons to expect miracles, but I am still unprepared when they happen. For Christmas 2017, our daughter Jeni's children gave her an Ancestry DNA kit, which she submitted. A few months later Ancestry.com forwarded her a note from Jim N. He too had gotten a DNA kit for Christmas from his sons, and Jeni was listed as a close family match, probably a sibling. When he told her his birthplace, she was pretty sure he was the half-brother I had told our children about. After exchanging a few emails with him Jeni called me. "Are you sitting down?" she asked. Then she told us about finding Jim, and that he was safe, and maybe, just maybe, we would get to meet each other someday. I was so grateful all I could do was weep with joy.

In our experience (and also in popular literature), meeting birth parents can be tricky for adopted children. None of our own adopted children had had a really positive experience, so I was careful to let Jim set the pace and progress. Over the last three years we got to know each other through email, phone calls, and Facebook posts by his (now) fiancée, Cindy. I was able to rejoice when Jim and Cindy got married, and learned a little about his two sons, Sam and Jack. A few months ago he suggested that it was time to get together. We put a date on the calendar. Jim and Cindy kindly

invited us to stay with them and Chris and I scheduled a road trip. I began to imagine what it would be like to finally meet him but I was poorly prepared for what God was going to do.

We arrived on a Friday evening with tornado warning sirens howling, stepped out of the car – and there he was. Overwhelmed, all I could do was shake his hand, and scurry for the cellar until the sirens abated. We sat and talked like civilized men while Cindy and Chris compared life notes, but all the while my heart was bubbling with joy, the essence of which was: "I have seen his face, and he is alive!". We talked for hours, delighting in Jim and Cindy and their beautiful home and extravagant hospitality. We went to bed still marvelling at the miracle of it all to find that Cindy had even decorated our pillows with chocolate mints.

Jim had spent some time planning Saturday, and after breakfast we began the "Jim N" tour. The first place we visited was his boyhood home – in this case, the parsonage of the church his father had served all of Jim's youth. As we circled the parking lot, it hit me that this neat house and grounds were where Jim had been living safe and loved all those years when I wondered about him. Here, in front of me, was "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen". We moved on to the schools Jim attended, the fields where his mom and dad had watched him play, and I thanked God, again, for putting him in their family and loving him. We saw parks and recreation areas he was proud to tell me his dad had helped to develop, and I hoped that someday he can be proud of me as well. We visited one of the major scenic attractions in the country and found we both enjoy history and engineering, We had lunch and discovered neither one of us likes sweet chili. Getting to know Cindy in person was an extra treat. The day was a continuous miracle.

We returned home in the late afternoon so Jim could start dinner. He loves to cook and is good at it. Shortly before dinner, two young men showed up. I had seen pictures of them so I knew the elder was Sam and the younger Jack. Our meeting was cordial and seemingly low-key, but I was startled to realize how much already I loved them, these two grown men, sons of my son, emerging from the periphery of my life. Throughout the evening, I wished I could somehow tell them what they mean to me. The best I could do, as Sam was preparing to leave, was to work up the courage to ask him, "Is it OK if I love you?" as if I could help it. Sam smiled and said "Of course". My tears came later.

Before dinner, Jim received a phone call from his dad, Carl, who was, sadly, hospitalized and calling from his hospital room. He asked to speak to me, and after we introduced ourselves, this gracious and Godly man said, "I just wanted to tell you how grateful I am to you for being Jim's first Dad." Once more, I had nothing to say. Carl and Marilyn had made a faith decision almost 57 years ago to give Jim their love, their home, their family, and their care for the rest of his life when I could not. All I did was briefly love his birth mother long ago, and through the years since, hold an unknown son in my heart with prayer. But Carl thanked me. Jim's mom, Marilyn, left her husband at the hospital to have dinner with us. She wanted to know about my family and marvelled with Chris about how God had led both Jim's adoptive and biological families on such similar paths. Jim's cooking lived up to all expectations, and the evening was truly a taste of Heaven.

Sunday morning we attended church with Jim and Cindy where we met his brother Kit and his beautiful family. I watched the two interacting, much as my younger brother and I do, and once again was startled by my emotions. I found myself praying, "Lord God, am I even allowed to love these people as well?", and heard God's blessing before I finished the question. As we entered the sanctuary, the worship leader was singing "The First Noel", and I knew I was in the right place. We left later that afternoon for the long drive home, wondering what was yet to come.

In the ensuing weeks, it is clear to me that we – Jim and I – have been in God's care all along. By both nature and nurture Jim has lived in lovingkindness, and it has flowed through him to his family, his church, and his community – and is, perhaps, in no small part responsible for his business success. My story is the same – a life lived with love, in God's care. I will still hope for and expect miracles, but this has come to pass: At long last, I have seen my son's face, and know that he is alive.

- Christmas, 2021