Sermon for the Week for Nation's Reconciliation Commemorating 70 years of the Korea War

Rev. Ryuk, Soon Jong
Moderator of Presbyterian Church of the ROK, PROK

Let Us Seek Peace with All Our Strength!

Genesis 32: 24-32

This year marks the 70th anniversary of the Korean War. The war, which began on June 25, 1950, was halted by the Armistice Agreement on July 27, 1953, but the three-year war extracted a heavy toll from the Korean Peninsula. Our daily life collapsed, and our life's foundation was reduced to rubble. Families were separated without knowing if the others had survived or not. Two million South Korean soldiers and civilians, 3.3 million North Korean soldiers and civilians, 360,000 Chinese, and 140,000 U.S. soldiers were killed or injured in the three-year war. They are all precious lives with families and loved ones. Even as the war snatched away precious lives, also all those still living had to live in discomfort for the rest of their lives. More than 10 million people had to leave their families and hometowns and live shedding tears in longing and loneliness.

In his book, 'The Origins of the Korean War,' Bruce Cummings wrote about the horrors of the Korean War. "In 1953, [by the time of the ceasefire] the Korean Peninsula was burned to ashes. From Busan in the South to Sinuiju in the North, Koreans were busy collecting the rest of their lives, burying the dead and mourning the lost. In the capital city of Seoul, empty buildings stood like skeletons beside the roads, which were strewn with concrete and debris. In the north, most modern buildings were devastated. Cities such as Pyongyang had been reduced to bricks and ashes. Villages were empty and huge dams could no longer store water.

[re-translated from Korean translation]" This confirms that the three-year Korean War destroyed almost everything in the South and the North. After the Korean War, the only things left on the Korean Peninsula were the collapsed homes, collapsed industrial facilities, and mutual hatred.

In Pyongyang in 2008, the National Council of Churches in Korea (NCCK-South Korea) and the Korean Christian Federation (KCF – North Korea) held a joint worship service at Bongsu Church. About 100 Christians from the South arrived at Pyongyang Sunan Airport in the North riding on a chartered plane from Seoul. An employee guiding the Southern Christians from Sunan Airport to downtown Pyongyang on the bus made this comment: "The U.S. bombed Pyongyang during the Korean War. At the time, Pyongyang had a population of 400,000 and U.S. bombers dropped more than 400,000 tons of bombs indiscriminately." Even now, the mindset of North Koreans regarding, 'America=Christianity=Enemy' has been thoroughly passed down. This is because they saw in front of their eyes their loved ones torn to death by bombs that were dropped, one ton for each person. All wars are terrible. Many lives are sacrificed, and they make enemies of each other. For whom on earth is a war? There is no such thing as a just war in all of history. There cannot be a war "with a human face." There can never be a humane war nor a romantic war. You have to choose between killing or dying, and if you want to live, you have to kill someone else. Therefore, war is structurally evil, and it is an injustice in which Christianity, which considers love to be the highest value, could never participate.

There is a memorial to Korean War veterans in the National Cemetery in Washington, D.C. Every time any Korean sees this, there is a deep echo in their heart. This is because hundreds of thousands of young U.S. Americans came to a far-off country and collapsed and died in the midst of a war where cannon shells poured like rain, enduring the harsh cold and the hot sun. We are thankful and also sorry for their sacrifice. Also, as seen in the Nogun-ri incident, war can kill innocent civilians, whether by mistake or intent. The contradictions and pain of all this history are more like a force majeure derived from the massive structure of war than from the personal problems of people. Therefore, there should never be war. We should do our best to prevent war and achieve peace. How is that possible? Today we want to look at the text in light of this question.

Jacob, who appears in Genesis, lived an exceptionally turbulent life. He fulfilled his desires through great abilities, he betrayed his faith, and he did not hesitate to use deception in the process. It is like seeing the self-portraits of modern people today. He, whose goal was to succeed, finally faces an absolute crisis in his life that he cannot solve. He met God in the face of the crisis and experienced a dramatic life transition. This character, Jacob, has many implications for us today in that he has lived a new life through a conversion of faith while reflecting the image of modern people.

Jacob was a very wise and clever man. On the other hand, it was a rough and honest but tactless way to live, competing the way he did fighting for supremacy in life. It was assumed that the genealogy of faith that came down through Abraham and Isaac would be connected to Esau, the eldest son. But in the end, Jacob carried on the line of faith. The Jacob story of Genesis is an explanation for this irony. Jacob achieved a great success by deceiving his brother and leaving his family and hometown to live in his uncle's house for 20 years. He helped produce 11 sons from four wives and raised wealth to the point of envy, even the envy of his uncle. Jacob may have had great success with his resourcefulness and efforts, but his relationship with Laban deteriorated and he had no choice except to return to his hometown, and that road was never smooth. This was because in his hometown he had a brother Esau, who was sharpening his sword for revenge. His brother had 400 trained soldiers. This was a desperately dangerous crisis.

In life we sometimes meet difficulties like this dilemma. We may face a desperate crisis where everything we've achieved can go down the drain. Even though the details may vary, everyone encounters a similar situation in their lives. So as Jacob’s story is passed down through the generations, it still maintains its strength and significance today. The important part is the conclusion of this story. Jacob wonderfully overcame this crisis and became the main character of the happy ending. Through reconciliation with his brother, he maintained his whole family's life, protected the assets he had accumulated over his entire life, and became the actual founder of Israel's history as the founder of the 12th tribe. What is the key to this amazing life reversal?

The turning point of Jacob's victory was at the ford of the Jabbok River. After sending his family to his hometown first, Jacob was then left alone by the Jabbok

River. As night passed, he had to meet his long-lost brother again. He did not know what would happen upon meeting his brother. His brother's anger could tear his life apart. He could not predict whether the meeting with his brother Esau would lead to a reconciliation or a war. On that night of desperation, Jacob wrestled with the angel all night at the ford of the Jabbok. 'Jabbok' is derived from the Hebrew verb 'Baqaq'(בקק) which means, 'make a murmur' or 'empty a glass.' It is a place where a final battle decides your fate and at the same time a sacred place to empty yourself. His wrestling opponent here was not an angel, but actually God. Perhaps Jacob thought the man with whom he had been wrestling was an assassin sent by his brother. It was a fight that Jacob could not lose. This was because everything in his life that he had accomplished through 20 years of hard work was at stake. Therefore, Jacob did not give up the wrestling match even until the end. Everything was at risk and he hung on desperately.

Jacob received the new name 'Israel' from this wrestling match. The meaning of this name is often interpreted as, "he won against God," but an interpretation more suited to the context of the text could be that Isra-el's ‘El’ (God) means "God wins" and "God rules." At the end of the wrestling match, Jacob broke his thigh joint because he kept hanging on to the angel. At that moment he had so little power, he is blessed by God. His life as ruled by God had begun. He named the place where he received the blessing, ‘Peniel‘. The meaning of 'Peniel' is, “the face of God.” Jacob saw the face of God through the act of wrestling that day, risking his life. He met God.

And the next day, a miracle happens at the scene where the brothers meet for the first time in 20 years. His brother Esau ran over and to embrace Jacob, and the brothers kissed each other. Meeting his brother Jacob said, “Truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God, so please, brother, be happy with me also.” Jacob, who saw the face of God at the ford of the Jabbok, saw the face of God in his brother's face. Jacob changed and his heart melted through the decisive battle at the ford of the Jabbok, and his brother’s heart also melted. When Jacob met his brother after meeting God, it was not his brother as of old. In the end, the God Jacob met at the Jabbok ford was the God of peace. Jacob met the God of peace through a bout of life-threatening wrestling, and the God of peace created a grand event of brotherhood.

What shall we learn from today's word? Jacob, at the Jabbok ford, at the turning of his life, clung on desperately to maintain everything he had achieved. For us today, what must we desperately cling to and protect? It is peace and a world without war. We cannot return to the tragic situation of war as 70 years ago. We cannot repeat the Cold War situation when we lived in extreme confrontation. We cannot waste the years we have lived seeking to achieve peace. For us, war is simply destruction. What we have achieved over the last 70 years is like a miracle. However, if war breaks out again as our weapon systems have become more advanced so that we cannot even compare them to 70 years ago, the sacrifice will be unimaginable. There must never be war on the Korean Peninsula. To prevent this war, we must first cling to God. We must cling desperately to God, asking God to give us peace and to rule over us. It will not happen automatically, preventing war and making peace. Peace is not free. For peace, we must pay the price of prayer. Peace is ultimately in God's hands.

We must also meet the God of Peace through that clinging and praying. Just as Jacob broke his hip joint while wrestling with God, we must meet God; and our desires must crumble, and the hatred within us must vanish. We should have a 'Peniel Experience' meeting God so that we can see the image of God in the image of our [sisters and] brothers and embrace each other with love. Then we can move on to a future of peace.

We mark the 70th anniversary of the Korean War, the fiercest war of the 20th century. The Korean War is a very tragic war because it is a war of fratricidal conflict and a war of the world's Cold War system. So the road to peace is also rough. Yet now we must heal the wounds of war and move on to the future of peace. For this, those involved in South and North Korea need prayers from Christians around the world. This is because prayer has history-making power. This year, the NCCK is campaigning with church leaders around the world to pray for peace on the Korean Peninsula. We firmly believe that the owner of history is God and we are walking on the path of prayer. We pray to God, the manager of history, to make peace. Just as Jacob wrestled at the Jabbok ford with everything at stake, we pray with Jacob's heart just as he refused to give up even with the pain of breaking his thigh joint. We hope that we may meet the God of peace through prayer, and through the heart of God, that a history of the South and the North embracing each other be realized. We hope that, not just the two Koreas, but that

also through the heart of God the United States, China, Japan, Russia, and the world surrounding the Korean Peninsula will achieve peace.

It has been 67 years since the end of the war, but the Korean Peninsula is still in a state of armistice. In practice, the war is over, but legally, the war continues. This ongoing war is the root cause of instability on the Korean Peninsula. Marking the 70th anniversary of the Korean War, South and North Korea should be able to declare that the war is now completely over. We need an end-of-war declaration. Furthermore, we should move not only toward the end of the war, but also toward a more active peace treaty. The peace treaty is very important because it is a legal basis on which both Korean parties as well as countries around the world can choose peace, rather than war. The NCCK has been carrying out a campaign to sign a peace treaty on the Korean Peninsula since before the WCC General Assembly in Busan in 2013. Over that time churches around the world have joined us, but we ask all the more now that you all please pray with greater interest and join forces with us so that we can move on to an end-of-war declaration and the signing of a peace treaty.

Dear beloved sisters and brothers, I hope that in the Lord that we will all pray with all our might for peace on the Korean Peninsula. As we meet the God of peace, let us hope to see each other with trust and love, and to embrace each other. Let us hope to witness God's rule on the Korean Peninsula. We already have experienced the leaders of South Korea, North Korea and the U.S meeting and talking with each other. All of us were deeply moved by the April 27 Inter-Korean summit two years ago. The parties [to the summits] must meet again unconditionally to establish a peace treaty and a peace regime. We should meet and share our feelings and restore mutual trust. I believe that when we pray to the God of peace, the road to restoring trust and peace will open wide.

In 2020 as we mark the 70th anniversary of the Korean War, we hope that there will be great historical progress toward peace. Let us hope that the wounds of war will be healed, the danger of war will be eliminated, and that the peace God gives will fill in the void, and that not only for the Christians of South and North Korea, but also the Christians of the whole world, will worship and pray to God. I sincerely pray that the reconciliation and peace achieved through the cross of Jesus Christ will be fully present on the Korean Peninsula.