

Sermon for Sunday, July 16 2023

If you thought we were done with the crazy soap opera that is Abraham's family, you'd be wrong.

As our story ended last week, we heard of Isaac's marriage to Rebekah, a kinswoman who entered into Isaac's heart with love and comfort. Sounds pretty wonderful, doesn't it?

But now something interesting happens. The story doesn't continue. Instead, it's interrupted to give a sneak preview of the genealogy that will yield the promise that God made to Abraham: more descendants than grains of sand.

Except it's not so smooth a path to that vast number of descendants, because Rebekah, like her mother-in-law before her, seemed unable to conceive a child. Finally, after much prayer, Rebekah did conceive, and she and Isaac hit the jackpot: she was expecting twins!

Such a blessing, right?

Except that being pregnant with two lively twin babies in her womb in the desert heat was a misery. They were kicking, seemingly fighting with each other as siblings sometimes do, within her body. I've given birth more than once, and I can tell you that having a single kicking baby in your belly is not fun, because you can't get comfortable and rest, you're continually feeling like you've got – euphemism alert here - to powder your nose, and you're sort of tired of it all as the end of the pregnancy approached.

You want to give birth as much to meet your child as to get your own body back again. In Rebekah's case, times two.

She complains : "If it is to be this way, why do I live?" And she prays, and God gives her an answer: "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger."

Maybe an echo of Isaac and Ishmael, right? And then she gives birth, and these twins are about as different as you can imagine.

"The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob."

Their names reinforce their birth story: Esau means hairy and Jacob means either "heel" or "deceiver." We might wonder if that's where the notion of calling someone who is untrustworthy a "heel" even though it's explained in this passage that he was named that because he was born grabbing his brother Esau's heel. Esau grew up to be a skillful hunter. Jacob was quieter, sticking close to home. Esau went out into the world. Jacob might have even been something of a mama's boy, because the next part of the story has Jacob cooking a lentil stew when Esau comes back in from hunting.

Esau wants some of the stew. He's hungry. He says "give me some of that red stuff." Jacob says he'll give it to him if Esau will give him his birthright. Not a very even trade, because that birthright as first-born equates to two thirds of the inheritance the boys will receive after their father's demise. But Esau is a man of strong appetites and wants his needs fulfilled, and the inheritance business is distant in his mind, so he relinquishes something distant but valuable for something that sates a momentary need. And Jacob, the one who stays home and doesn't seem to do much of anything except for cooking a mean pot of lentil stew, is all about playing the long game.

And Jacob isn't done with his deceitful actions. Our reading today doesn't include this part, but you should know that Jacob tricks Esau again. Jacob, in cahoots with his mother Rebekah (I told you he was mom's favorite) tricks Esau out receiving his father's blessing. Esau is dad's favorite because he brings home delicious meat and game. He's also the eldest. Isaac is elderly and nearly blind, so Jacob pretends to be Esau. He's smooth, though, not hairy like Esau. So Rebekah puts some animal skins on Jacob's arms and he goes into his father and asks for the blessing. When Isaac questions if the person who has brought him some choice food, his favorite kind, is Esau, because the voice sounds more like Jacob, that deceiver lets Isaac feel the hairy skin that his mother has put on his arms. He lies and says, "see I am Esau." And Isaac gives him the blessing. Then Esau shows up with the food his father had asked him to bring, and Isaac says, "what's this?" and Esau says "it's the food you wanted," and Isaac says, "you already brought the food." And the deception is revealed, and Isaac realizes that by virtue of that blessing, Esau is now subservient to Jacob, just as God said to Rebekah when she was so unhappy with the boys fighting each other in her womb. Not surprisingly, Esau really despises Jacob because of this, and he leaves to plot the murder of his treacherous brother.

If we were in the realm of rom-coms last week, now we're firmly in the land of "Game of Thrones." It's nasty. Jacob is an awful human being. Rebekah is just as bad, no longer the pretty bride but a conniving stage mother. Isaac is the defanged patriarch, blind, near death, taken for a fool but his wife and second son.

So we might ask ourselves this: if they're behaving so badly, why doesn't God smite them? God does a lot of that in other parts of the Old Testament.

Here's the clue: Jacob is described as "a quiet man." The Hebrew word for this is *tam*. Tam can also be translated as "*being obsessed with the blessing of God*", or "*offering perfect service to God*."

It's hard to equate that kind of religious perfection with what we see Jacob doing here. Jacob is a jerk. But that understanding of that descriptor *tam* helps us understand why Jacob would want the blessing so badly, even though we ardently dislike his methodology. The OT scholar Ellen Davis says that Jacob is obsessed throughout his life with that blessing, "which he can never possess as fully as it possesses him."

Jacob is a complicated character. He's described in much greater detail than his father. His story continues, and he evolves into a person who is hunted, who struggles to understand what God wants of him – he actually wrestles with God or God's messenger at one point – until he finally comes more fully into himself. Nothing here excuses the bad behavior, but Jacob is used by God to further God's work. Even though he's a heel.

Rather like each of us. None of us is perfect. Some of us have done things that, in retrospect, we wish we hadn't done. We have squabbles. We forget that God is a part of our lives. We say unkind things. We demand what we want when we want it – echoes of Esau there, right? – and pitch a fit when we don't get what we want.

And yet God still uses us, in all our imperfection. God's work gets done by ordinary people, like Isaac, like Rebekah, like Esau, like Jacob. God's work gets done, with God's blessing, by God's grace, in response to God's patient love for us.

There are many blessings in our lives, not just a single bowl of lentil stew. Listen for what God tells us. We can do this. If Jacob could, so can we.

Amen.