

Sibling Rivalry; Meet Jacob and Esau

July 10, 2011 (Ordinary 15A)

Scriptures: Psalm 119:105-112

119:105 Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

106 I have sworn an oath and confirmed it, to observe your righteous ordinances.

107 I am severely afflicted; give me life, O LORD, according to your word.

108 Accept my offerings of praise, O LORD, and teach me your ordinances.

109 I hold my life in my hand continually, but I do not forget your law.

110 The wicked have laid a snare for me, but I do not stray from your precepts.

111 Your decrees are my heritage forever; they are the joy of my heart.

112 I incline my heart to perform your statutes forever, to the end.

Genesis 25:19-34

19 These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham was the father of Isaac,

20 and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean.

21 Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived.

22 The children struggled together within her; and she said, "If it is to be this way, why do I live?" So she went to inquire of the LORD.

23 And the LORD said to her, "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."

24 When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb.

25 The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau.

26 Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

27 When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents.

28 Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob.

29 Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished.

30 Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!" (Therefore he was called Edom.)

31 Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright."

32 Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?"

33 Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob.

34 Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

Proclamation of the Word

If you read through the story of our ancestors in faith, you will find many a skeleton in the closet. As one author writes,

"Reading this Genesis narrative feels like walking into a county court house and sifting through a musty box of birth, marriage and death certificates, not to mention public records of lawsuits born of family pathology and resentful letters never meant to be read by others. But such are the places and manner of our redemption."¹

In an I'm Okay, You're okay world, God breaks in and uses broken people that are certainly not okay. I have been thinking about those who are not okay:

- The man who just received news of a brain tumor
- The family who struggles with depression of one member
- The parent who loses sleep wondering if the children are going to be okay
- The town torn apart by drug violence
- The husband and wife who cannot trust each other
- The child whose parents cannot take care of themselves let alone take care of him
- The newcomer who feels totally alone in a new place
- The old timer who feels like the world has changed right under his feet
- The teenager struggling with pain who cuts herself to relieve it
- The person who has been done wrong by a business associate
- A friend who just lost her job

When I read the Bible I am not bowled over by the goodness and righteousness of the people. We can only be amazed that God's redemption and transformation works through earthly circumstances and earthy vessels like you and me. In other words, God takes those skeletons out of the closet and makes them dance. We worship and serve a God who uses scoundrels, sinners, and even scandal to bring about God's purposes. For God chose what was weak of this world to show forth God's strength. God uses a cross of all things. God uses our weakness and foolishness to point us to him.

As Paul writes to the church at Corinth,

God purposefully chose what the world considers nonsense in order to shame the wise, and he chose what the world considers weak to shame the powerful. He chose what the world looks down on and despises and thinks is nothing, in order to destroy what the world thinks is important. This means that no one can boast in the presence of God. (1Cor. 1:27-29, Good News translation)

God uses broken people who are not okay. God works through infertility and conflict. We will explore the Jacob Saga for the whole month of Sundays in July. And if you are looking for "family values morals" here stop. There are lies and deception, multiple wives and infertility, a quest for prosperity and plenty of trouble ahead. And folks we are talking about God's elect, the chosen ones. Jacob and Esau are two generations shy of the promises made to Abraham that his descendents would be as numerous as the stars in the sky and the grains of sand. This nation born of Abraham would be a blessing to all nations. Jacob and Esau are grandsons of the promise. It is through them that the blessings of God will be made manifest, but it is not without trouble and conflict.

We know there will be trouble because Rebekah is told so by the Lord. The two boys will be the fathers of two different nations. One will be stronger. The older will serve the nation born of the younger son. God knows things will be this way. Here is where we receive our understanding of Election or chosen-ness. And God is notorious for choosing the unexpected ones. Presbyterian type Christians hold that Election is a major theological tenet of our faith, but it can be so misunderstood. Election is not fatalism, for we shall see that Esau and Jacob do make some interesting choices throughout their lives. Two other brothers in the faith, John Calvin and Arminius had differing ideas of this idea- one of the many sibling conflicts of the faith throughout history.

The story is told about the Arminian and the Calvinist who were walking together one day. While descending a flight of steps, both tripped and fell to the bottom of the stairwell. Both were unhurt. But the Arminian got up

and, while brushing himself off, said, "I wonder what sin I committed to deserve that?" The Calvinist stood up and said, "Boy! Am I glad that's over!"

The story shows a caricature of these two theologians. But it points out that Election means we are saved by grace and by nothing we do. God saves, we do not save ourselves. But how we respond and live out that call matters. Abraham and his descendents are chosen and destined by God to serve God's purposes. In the prophecy Jacob is chosen and destined, "one will be stronger than the other; the older will serve the younger." The boy Jacob which literally means "heel," will be stronger than the boy named "hairy". These twins, Hairy and Heel will do the unexpected. The purposes of God will be tangled in a web of human self-interest.

God is making waves again. Every ancient society practiced primogeniture or the birthright of the first-born son (sorry daughters). The younger sons could serve at the will of the first-born who would inherit all that the father owned. But God will choose the 2nd born, the last born to fulfill the promise. Jesus talked about this too. Six times in the gospels, Jesus says, "the first shall be last and the last shall be first." (Matthew 19:30, 20:16, Mark 9:35, 10:31, Luke 13:30). Such is the scandalous grace of God. Grace is not tied to society's customs such as the birthright. God in God's sovereign Grace will work God's will out. As my Theology Professor Shirley Guthrie used to say "God can do whatever God darn well wants to do." We worship a Sovereign God who picks unlikely characters: weak, younger brothers, and the likes of a teenage mother to bring about God's rule of justice and love. God chooses to reveal His plan to Rebekah, a barren woman, and not to Isaac. Indeed, God's ways are mysterious.

Paul will pick up on this theme in Romans 9:6-13. God in freedom chooses to include the younger sons and daughters, the Gentiles, into the promise, not only God's first-born, the Jews. God's election for salvation is about call. God told Rebekah what her sons would become before they had done anything either good or bad. If you know the grace of God, have turned to God in response, you have a call as well.

Do you see yourself in the face of Jacob or Esau or the parents who favor one over the other? It is a hard question. I question each son's motives and tactics. One clear difference in the Esau and Jacob is vision or lack of thereof. Jacob is looking down the road at the big picture even if selfishly so. Jacob trusts God's future. Jacob has been described as the more spiritual and Esau the materialistic one. Esau in this scene seems only concerned with immediate gratification- bread and stew. But both the birthright and a quick lunch involve physical, material things. The birthright will insure land, prosperity, and fertility in the long run. (see Hebrews 12:12-17) Esau is satisfied with pottage or lentil stew right now, while Jacob takes his place in the promise and defers his blessing.

So much of life is lived for immediate wants, without trust in God's future. It reminds me of a current fable in the Harry Potter stories.

Hagrid the gamekeeper in the stories gets a chance to own a dragon egg. He wants it so much that he does not think about the consequences. He ignored the fact that it was illegal, that dragons have fiery breath, poisonous fangs and grow large. Hermione reminds Hagrid that he lives in a wooden house which doesn't suit fire-breathing dragons. Once the dragon hatched more trouble comes. Finally, Ron, Hermione and Harry smuggle little Norbert out of Hogwarts, but everyone got into trouble in the process. Hagrid regretted taking that dragon egg in the first place.² Esau realizes later that he was foolish for trading his birthright for a bowl of red stew. He could not see beyond his wants, his desire for easy gratification.

On the other hand, Jacob takes his place in the promise, steps into the vision. He boldly steps into the place where he was called to be and trusted that even with the troubles, God would be true to the promise. God will grow a nation through him that would not exist for itself, but to be a blessing to all people.

I pray we will trust our place in the promise and redemption of God,
not only for the blessing of becoming what God calls us to be,
but to be a blessing to all God's people.

Now to God who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20) be all honor and glory. Amen.

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¹ Daniel B. Clendenin, "Jacob and Esau: A Theology of Pathology," *The Journey with Jesus: Notes to Myself*, Journey with Jesus Foundation, 2005.

² See JK Rowling, Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone, chapter 14