

Retelling the Biblical Story: Jacob
Text: Genesis 32:22-31

Do you remember this children's song in Sunday School?

Who was born a twin

Many years ago?

Who was born a twin?

Tell me if you know.

Jacob was his name,

Esau was his brother.

Isaac was his dad,

Rebekah was his mother.

I

Esau was born first, Jacob arrived second clutching the heel of his brother. That is how he got his name, Jacob, which means "heel-holder". But to catch somebody by the heel is also to trip them up, to "supplant", and this meaning foreshadows what is to come.

As first-born, Esau was entitled to special honor and double the material benefits from his father. Culture was ordered by the law of primogeniture, the first-born son having preeminence. (All through scripture, however, God seems to be upsetting this cultural pattern.)

Jacob arrived second, a close second; but as the saying goes, close counts only in horseshoes and hand grenades. So great were the advantages enjoyed by the first-born in those days that when twins were born, the midwife fixed a red thread around the wrist of the first-born so there would be no mix-up.

Esau needed no red thread—his hair was thick and red.

The boys could not have been more different- Esau rough, rugged, the hunter; Jacob, mother's helper, clever, introspective, close to the kitchen. Esau subscribed to *Field and Stream*, Jacob read Julia Childs. Esau hunted game, Jacob made quiche. Esau played linebacker, Jacob played Mozart.

A favoritism was set up—with terrible and wounding consequences. Isaac favored Esau, and was never quite comfortable with Jacob; Rebekah favored Jacob. The RSV says, “Isaac loved Esau...but Rebekah loved Jacob.” How do we explain such things, or fathom their consequences? How is it some children grow up feeling blessed, others unblessed? How is it that it is easier to bless one child than another? I think it fair to say that we cannot pass on what we have not received, and the unconscious mind plays at least as big a part as the conscious mind in such things.

II

One day Jacob was in the house as usual, in the kitchen as usual, cooking a red stew, and Esau as usual was out in the fields hunting. Esau came in famished and begged Jacob for some of the stew.

Jacob bargained—if he was not good at hunting, he was good at this! “The stew is yours if you trade me your birthright,” he offered. Esau agreed. It was not until his belly was full and he slept the night that he realized what he had done and what Jacob had done to him.

But the trickery wasn't over. In Rebekah's eyes Jacob deserved not only the birthright but also the blessing that Isaac would give the first-born Esau. So when Isaac,

old and blind, said to Esau, “Go kill some game and make me a stew and I will give you my blessing”, Rebekah over heard and began her scheme. She coached Jacob in an act of deceit.

Jacob came into father Isaac’s room with the stew, dressed in Esau’s clothes and wearing animal skins on his arms so he’d smell and feel like Esau. Isaac, fooled by the disguise, took the stew and gave Jacob the blessing intended for Esau.

When Esau came in from the fields, prepared his stew and knelt before Isaac for his blessing, Isaac trembled with the terrible recognition. He had given his blessing to the wrong son. Then Esau cried out the painful words: “Have you only one blessing, father? Bless me also.” And scriptures say, “Esau lifted up his voice and wept.” (Genesis 27:38). I bet Isaac wept too.

I saw a sculpture in Glasgow, Scotland. It seemed larger than life-size. Father Isaac was reclining, his son Esau lying before him with pleading eyes and imploring hands. The inscription?

Have you but one blessing, my father?

Bless me, even me also, O my father.

As I stood transfixed in front of it I saw the pain wracking Esau’s face, but Isaac’s face looked oddly passive. Then I walked around the sculpture to the feet of the figures. Then I saw Isaac’s face from a new angle. It was ravaged with pain.

Esau’s anger grew to murderous rage, and he swore to kill his brother. Rebekah got word and planned Jacob’s escape. She sent him to her brother Laban’s house in Haran. Jacob fled, not looking back.

III

Who would have imagined? This father-to-be of the twelve tribes of Israel, a young man of dubious character, who conspired with his mother, cheated his brother, deceived his father and is now on the run, a fugitive from home and from God and from his own true and real self.

En route to Haran he stopped for the night in the desert, found a stone for a pillow, sank into sleep and had a dream. What he might have expected was a nightmarish dream, disturbed, guilty, anxious, the kind you wake from exhausted and full of dread.

Instead God gave him a glimpse of heaven. In the dream a ladder appeared stretching from earth to heaven, bathed in God's unearthly light, with angels ascending and descending. (*Was it a spiral staircase? "Every round goes higher, higher."*) Such beauty he had never seen, never imagined. "Too late I have loved you O Beauty, so ancient, so new.", wrote Augustine. Jacob saw the beauty of God. Then a voice came and said:

I am the God of Abraham and Isaac. By you and your descendants all the earth will be blessed. I will go with you and will keep you and never leave you until all these promises are fulfilled.

Deserving a "blessing out", what Jacob received was "Blessed Assurance". His troubled guilt was met by grace.

When he woke he said, "Surely God is in this place. This is none other than the house of God and the gate of heaven."

So he took the stone that was his pillow, anointed it and called the place Beth-el, which means “House of God”.

IV

When he arrived at his uncle Laban’s house he instantly fell in love with Rachel, Laban’s daughter. Smitten, he asked for her hand in marriage. “I’ll work seven years for the right to marry her”, he said. Laban, like the cartoon character with dollar signs in his eyes, agreed. And the scripture says, “And the seven years seemed to him but a few days because of his love of her.” Coleridge wrote: “No man who could love like that could be wholly bad.”

When the seven years were up Jacob was married and spent his first night of wedded bliss, only to wake up and discover that the woman whom he had married behind the veil and with whom he had consummated the marriage was not Rachel but Rachel’s sister Leah, who was not nearly so pretty and whom he certainly did not love. Sounds like a Shakespearean comedy!

Laban had pulled a fast one, out-conned the con-artist. The law required that he marry his eldest daughter first: Leah. Laban had failed to mention that tiny detail, and Jacob, blind with love, had failed to read the fine print.

You can imagine the dismay when he awoke and saw Leah there in bed with him. In the Jewish commentary on this passage the rabbis have inserted this dialogue:

Jacob said: “All night long I called you Rachel and you answered me. Why did you deceive me?”

Leah answered: “And you, your father called you Esau and you answered him. Why did you deceive him?”

So Jacob agreed to work seven more years to marry Rachel as his second wife. Greater love hath no man than to work fourteen years for a woman! That Jacob did, finally marrying Rachel.

So now Jacob had two wives, and some days he may have wished God had called him to a life of celibacy. He got caught in a war of jealousy between the sisters. They vied for his attention and first place in his life, and babies became the way to win.

But the sisters at first had trouble conceiving, so they brought in their handmaidens to bear Jacob’s weary seed and bring forth children. The race was on to see who could accumulate more children. By the time the dust and bed-feathers were settled Jacob was the proud, not to mention worn-out, father of twelve sons and one daughter. This is how we got the twelve tribes of Israel!

During his years in Haran, Jacob became a wealthy man, but he yearned for home. So one day while Laban was away Jacob gathered up his wives, concubines, children, flocks and possessions and left. Here was Jacob still on the run.

V

As Jacob’s story draws near its end we come to the most mysterious part of the story. It could be called “the luminous dark.” “The beautiful struggle.” Buechner called it

“The Magnificent Defeat.” If a musical score were created for the scene it would be *Barber’s Adagio for Strings*.

When Jacob got to a river called Jabbok he heard that his brother Esau was on the way to meet him with 400 men. Jacob sent the rest of his party ahead with peace offerings- hoping to settle his brother’s rage. Bargaining still.

Now he was all alone. As Jacob waded into the stream, something hit him there in the water, in the dark. There began a wrestling- fierce, agonized, decisive and long, all night long. The text called the figure a man; Jacob’s contemporaries might have called him a river god. Later scripture called him an angel. Jacob later said it was God, but when he entered the stream and was met by that force he did not know what in heaven’s name- or hell’s- had hit him.

They wrestled all night. At moments Jacob may have thought he was winning, at least holding his own. But near dawn his opponent reached out and touched his hip, wrenching it out of its socket, and Jacob knew whoever or whatever it was who had hold of him was playing with him, or having mercy on him, and could have won at any moment.

The Other said, “Let me go; it is daybreak.”

Jacob said, “I will not let you go until you bless me.”

The Other said, “What is your name?”

“Jacob”, he replied- - Heel-holder, Supplanter, Cheat.

The Other said, “You shall be called Jacob no more, but Israel, for you have striven with God and have prevailed.”

Then Jacob asked, “What is your name?”

“Why do you wish to know?” said the Other elusively, then was gone.

Jacob named the place *Peniel*, Face-of-God, “for I have seen the face of God and my life is preserved.”

The scene ends with the words “The sun rose on him as he passed Peniel, limping on his hip.” *He had been blessed, and he was wounded.* Something had died and something had been reborn. Jacob was now Israel.

VI

And that was not all of the story. Blessing also happened the next day when the brothers met. As Jacob hobbled to Esau, bowing seven times in humility, Esau ran to meet him, grabbed him around the neck, wept and kissed him. Inexplicable grace.

Jacob said, “To see your face is like seeing the Face of God.”

He had met God face to face in the wrestling by night and in the embrace of Esau by day.

Is this not how we experience God? In the dark night of the soul when life hits us hard and leaves us limping and in sweet human embrace?

Here at Grace we wrestle with God until we are blessed. We ask all the questions we need to ask for our faith to be vital and real. Hang on! Until you are blessed. This is

faith. And know this: When you lose your hold, you are held, held in the Everlasting Arms.

Let us not forget the golden ladder that stretched from heaven to earth with angels descending and ascending, and God's words to Jacob: "I am with you and will be with you and keep you wherever you go."

There is such a ladder in each of you stretching from earth to heaven and heaven to earth, from your real humanity into the presence of God. A gate of heaven is in every soul.

John's gospel says that *Jesus* is the gate of heaven and is the ladder with angels ascending and descending. (John 1:51)

The old song goes "We are climbing Jacob's ladder." May we climb that ladder today, so that whether by the wrestling in the night or the embrace of Esau by day, or in the dream of a golden ladder and blessed assurance we will say, "Surely God is in this place."