

21 June 2020

Jacob and Esau
Genesis 23-32

Sometimes the Bible Story is inspiring, giving us examples of courage or faith or integrity to imitate. Not often, but sometimes. Last week we talked about Abraham, for instance, and for all his flaws, he remains a model of faith. Today, however, we look at Abraham's grandson, Jacob. Not really a model to imitate. In fact, the prophet Hosea remembers Jacob as an example of all that Israel does wrong. We read Hosea 12, verses 2-6:

² *The Lord has an indictment against Judah,
and will punish Jacob according to his ways,
and repay him according to his deeds.*

³ *In the womb he tried to supplant his brother,
and in his manhood he strove with God.*

⁴ *He strove with the angel and prevailed,
he wept and sought his favor;
he met him at Bethel,
and there he spoke with him.*

⁵ *The Lord the God of hosts,
the Lord is his name!*

⁶ *But as for you, return to your God,
hold fast to love and justice,
and wait continually for your God.*

After years of waiting, Sarah and Abraham had at last had a son, Isaac, to gladden their old age. But they *were* old, and Sarah died before she saw any grandchildren. Abraham decided to get his son married before he also died, so he sent his oldest and most trusted servant back to the land where he and Sarah had come from, to Haran, to choose a bride for Isaac from his people there. Now Isaac was forty years old, and you might wonder why Abraham didn't let him choose his own bride. Well, it doesn't say exactly, but in pretty much every story about Isaac, he comes across as a bit passive and indecisive. Frankly, sort of a wuss. Anyway, Abraham sent a servant off to choose a bride for his middle-aged son, and the servant – who knew Isaac – chose a bride who was strong-willed enough for both of them. Her name was Rebekah. But here's the thing: weak-willed or not, God's promise still rested on Isaac, and when Abraham died, God appeared to Isaac and repeated to him the promise he had made to his father: your descendants shall be a great nation, as numerous as the stars, and shall possess all this land, and they shall be a blessing to all nations.

Fulfilling the next step of the promise, Rebekah conceived a child. Well, not exactly *a* child. At the end of a thoroughly miserable pregnancy and horrible labor, the midwife declared that it was twins – twins who already weren't getting along. Even *in utero*, they seemed to be jockeying for position. Eventually, though, one had to be first, and so out came a large, ruddy, healthy boy covered in hair, but even as that boy emerged the hand of his younger brother was still clinging to his heel, as if trying to pull him back and climb over him. Biblical names often

have some deep spiritual meaning, but Rebekah may have been a little too tired be spiritual. She called the eldest Esau, which means something like “hairball,” and the younger she called Jacob, which means “heel.”

Now you never want to say that a person’s personality is fixed from birth, but every now and then it seems to happen that way. Esau grew into a burly, hairy-chested, macho sort, who loved hunting and camping: a man’s man. So, of course, he was his father’s favorite. Jacob, on the other hand, was *smooth* – and I’m not just talking about body hair. Let me illustrate. One day Esau returned from hunting empty-handed. As he came back into the camp the first person he saw was Jacob, who had a large pot of stew on the fire.

“Jacob! Give me some of that! I’m starving!”

“Aw, did hunter-boy have a bad day?”

“God did not bless my hunt,” Esau said.

“Really? God blessed my staying at home. I have lots of food. Tell you what, I’ll let you have a bowl of stew if you’ll sign over your birthright as the first born.”

Esau said, “If I die of starvation, you’ll get my birthright anyway. Sure.”

“Seriously? I mean . . . all right. Swear it, and I’ll even let you have two bowls.”

Well, you get the picture. Now, one of Isaac’s less attractive traits was that he was a bit of a hypochondriac and tended to think himself at death’s door a lot. One day he took it into his head that he was dying and called Esau to him. “My son,” he said faintly. (Spoiler alert here: Isaac’s going to live another twenty years. Okay, back to the story.) “My son, my days draw to a close. I must bless you before I am gone.”

“All right, Dad. Bless me.”

“No . . . before I do, will you go out hunting, and then prepare whatever you kill in that special way I like and bring it to me?”

“Uh, sure, if you think you can last that long. I’ll hurry!” said Esau, and he went hunting.

Now as it happened, Rebekah heard this exchange and inasmuch as she preferred Jacob to his brother, she sent for him at once. “Quick, Jacob.” She explained where Isaac had sent Esau. “Your father’s all but blind. He can’t tell you apart. We’re going to steal your brother’s blessing. I’ll kill a lamb and prepare it the way your father likes, and you’ll take it in to him and get the blessing. Here are your brother’s other clothes. Put them on.”

“Gross, Mom.”

“Just put them on, all right?”

“Mom, it’ll never work. What if he feels my arm? I’m smooth-skinned, and Esau doesn’t just smell like a goat, he feels like one.”

“Put a goatskin over your hands, then. Stop arguing and do what your mother says.”

Well, it worked. Even blind, Isaac was a little hesitant at first – the voice didn’t sound like Esau’s – but then they embraced, and the body didn’t feel, or smell, like Jacob. So he ate his favorite dish, then laid his hands on Jacob’s head and blessed him: “Let peoples and nations serve you, my son, for you will rule them. You will rule over your brother as well; all who bless you will be blessed, and all who curse you will be cursed.”

A few minutes after Jacob left, in came Esau. “Here I am, Dad. I have your favorite food all ready for you.”

Well, of course, it wasn’t hard to figure out what had happened. Even Esau could fit those pieces together, and he expressed his displeasure in typically straightforward fashion: “I’m going to kill Jacob.” Jacob decided to lay low for a while. Now, as it happened, Esau had already taken a couple of wives, local girls, and Isaac and Rebekah both hated them. That was Rebekah’s opening. She went to Isaac. “These Hittite girls are driving me crazy! If Jacob marries one like that, I’ll just curl up and die. We need to send him back to Haran to find a bride there. . . Like, right now.”

Thus, Jacob found himself in the peculiar position of having acquired both Esau’s birthright and paternal blessing – and still having to run for his life. His first night on the road, as he lay huddled against the desert night, his head resting on a flat stone, he had a dream. In his dream, he saw a great ladder ascending to the sky, and shining beings climbing up and down between heaven and earth. In his sleep he saw a world he’d never imagined, a world in which the messengers of God were all around him, all the time. Then the voice of God said, “Jacob, I am the God of Abraham and Isaac, and I am with you now. One day your descendants shall own this land, and all nations shall be blessed in you.” When Jacob awoke, the dream was still vivid. “Surely God was in this place, and I never knew it.” Starting with the stone that he had used as his pillow, he built an altar there to God, and he called that place Bethel, which means “House of God.” Then Jacob said, “So, God. If you’re really here, I’ll make a deal with you. If you’ll take care of me on the journey, keep me safe, and give me food and clothing, then I’ll let you be my God. I’ll even make offerings to you.”

Whether or not God felt honored by Jacob’s unselfish offer, he did keep his promise to him, and Jacob arrived safely in the land of Haran, where he sat down at a well outside his mother’s home city and wondered what to do. At that point, a beautiful shepherdess came up, leading her flocks to the well. The woman’s name was Rachel, and Jacob fell in love with her at once. He helped her water her flocks, then introduced himself. And yes, Rachel was a cousin. She was the daughter of Laban, Rebekah’s brother. Rachel took Jacob home with her, and just like that, Jacob had a place to live.

But Jacob wanted more than just a tent over his head. So, a few months later, when Laban suggested that he really should be paying Jacob something for all the work he was doing, Jacob said, “I don’t want your money. I want to marry Rachel.”

“Oh, my dear boy!” Laban exclaimed. “Nothing would give me more joy than to take you into the family.” Jacob’s heart leaped, and Laban added, “Shall we say seven years of working for me in return for my daughter’s hand?”

“Oh,” said Jacob. “Um, sure.”

So, Jacob lived with Laban and his sons and his daughters, Leah and Rachel, keeping Laban’s sheep, and a very sweet verse in Genesis 29 says that the years seemed like a few days because of Jacob’s love for Rachel. After seven years, Laban held a great wedding feast. There was much food, and much wine, and at last Laban steered Jacob to his tent, where his new bride was waiting.

“Laban!” Jacob roared the next morning. “What is this?”

“What do you mean, my son?”

“I woke up this morning and looked at my wife, and it’s not Rachel!”

“Well, of course not. That’s Rachel’s older sister, Leah.”

“I know it’s Leah! I just don’t know why!”

“My dear boy, we couldn’t marry off the younger sister before the older is married. It’s not our custom here. But look at it this way, now that Leah’s married, Rachel’s available. Why you could take her as your second wife and be married to both sisters.”

“Oh,” said Jacob. “Well, I can’t imagine anything that could possibly go wrong with that. All right. I’ll do it!”

“Great!” said Laban. “So, let’s say another seven years for the second sister?”

“Oh,” said Jacob. “Um, sure.” In so many ways, Jacob deserved Laban.

Moving ahead quickly, Jacob ended up not with two competing wives but four. He loved Rachel more than Leah, but it was Leah who bore him children. Four sons, in fact: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah. Well, Rachel couldn’t let her sister have all the children, so she decided to do what Sarah had done years before with Abraham: she gave her maidservant, Bilhah, to Jacob as his third wife. Bilhah bore Jacob two more sons: Dan and Naphtali. So then Leah, to stay ahead of her sister, gave *her* maidservant, Zilpah, to Jacob as wife number four. Zilpah bore two more sons, Gad and Asher, after which Leah bore another two, Issachar and Zebulun, along with one daughter, named Dinah. Finally, Rachel had a son of her own, whom she named Joseph. If you were counting, that’s four wives, eleven sons, and one daughter.

While all this was going on, Jacob was becoming rich. Once he’d worked off his bride costs, he and Laban worked out a different wage. Jacob got to keep all the sheep that were born spotted and multi-colored, while Laban kept the ones that were white. And all the sheep were born spotted. Laban changed Jacob’s wages again and again, but no matter what he did, Jacob grew wealthier. Laban got rich, too, mind you, but more and more of his wealth was passing to Jacob. This didn’t sit well with either Laban or Laban’s sons, and when they began looking at Jacob with – let’s call it *unfriendly* eyes – Jacob decided it was time to go home to Canaan. So, while Laban was away for a few days, Jacob packed up his family and headed south. But it was slow going, what with all those spotted sheep. Laban caught up with them on the third day. It was an interesting meeting, with each accusing the other of all sorts of deceitful behavior. If you can imagine. But the truth was, Jacob had only taken what was his, so Laban couldn’t complain.

They set up a marker and made a covenant with each other. This was their covenant: “You stay on that side, and I’ll stay on this side.”

And Jacob and his family traveled back to the land that God had promised him and his fathers. As they traveled, Jacob had time to ponder a new worry: Esau *had* said he was going to kill Jacob. Jacob cut some sheep out of the flock and sent them ahead with a few servants, as a present. The next day, he sent another advance party with another gift. Soon, the first group of servants came back, “We gave the sheep to your brother. He said he’s coming to meet you in person. He has four hundred men with him. He should be here tomorrow.”

And Jacob raised his eyes to heaven and prayed. “God? Last time I made this journey you made me a promise. You said you would be with me. And now that I think about it, you have been. Every step of the way. I see that now. I know, I’ve acted as if everything I have is the result of my own cleverness, but that’s not true, is it? I’ve been a conniving weasel my whole life, and I don’t deserve one thing you’ve given me. And now what I deserve is about to catch up with me, and there’s not one thing I can do. God, I’m afraid: help me.”

It was the first real prayer Jacob had ever prayed.

That night, as he slept fitfully a little ways apart from the rest of his camp, a man came to him, pulled him out of bed, and threw him in a headlock. Jacob fought back, and the two wrestled until morning. When the dawn rose in the sky, the stranger pulled back, but Jacob wouldn’t let go. “No,” he said. “You can’t just fight me all night, then leave. Who are you? What is your name?”

The stranger replied, “You aren’t ready for my name. But you’re ready for a new one for yourself. From this day, you will no longer be called Jacob, the Heel, but you will be called The One Who Wrestles with God. You will be called Israel.” Jacob – or, rather, Israel – let go and stared at the stranger, stunned. And when he was alone again, he said, “I shall call this place Peniel, the Face of God.”

The sun rose, and there, on the horizon, was Esau and his regiment of men. Jacob limped forward in silence to face him. “Jacob,” said Esau, looking around. “Who are all these?”

“These are the wives and children that God has given me.”

“And what were all those sheep you kept sending me?”

“They were gifts.”

Then Esau laughed. “I have plenty of sheep, Jacob. God has been good to me. I’m just glad to have my brother back. Welcome home.”

Jacob looked into Esau’s face and saw the last thing he had expected to see: grace. But he recognized that look. He had seen it once before, in fact earlier that same day. Grace is the face of God. And Jacob, for the first time in his life, came home.