

Jacob & Esau 2



Genesis 32:26 "But Jacob said, 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me.' So (the stranger) said to him, 'What is your name?' And he said, 'Jacob.' Then the man said, 'You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.' Then Jacob asked him, 'Please tell me your name.' But he said, 'Why is it that you ask my name?' And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, 'For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.'"

So at the end of last week's sermon, Jacob and his two wives, with their handmaids, and their 12 sons and one daughter are heading back to Canaan, back to the Promised Land. Over the twenty years that Jacob lived with his uncle Laban in Haran,

Jacob's flocks have grown and flourished, more than Laban's had done, and Laban rightly suspected some kind of deceit on Jacob's part for this, so Jacob decided it was time to return home, that he was no longer welcome there in the 'old' country. Just before this morning's reading, Jacob has sent messengers on ahead to his brother Esau announcing that Jacob his brother was on his way home. The messengers were sent with gifts of hundreds and hundreds of oxen, donkeys, flocks of goats and sheep, and camels, and cows and bulls, and male and female slaves; all in order that he might find favor in Esau's sight upon arrival.

Remember that Jacob is returning home to claim his inheritance, that which his father unwittingly promised him as a result of Jacob and Rebekah's deception, that which was rightfully his brother Esau's. So Jacob is still concerned about his brother's wrath. So much so, that Jacob sent these messengers ahead with a peace offering of sorts, a bribe perhaps. Now, Jacob has learned from his messengers that Esau is coming out to meet him, and that Esau is coming out with a company of four hundred men. And Jacob is greatly afraid and distressed. Jacob is so frightened that he will lose what he has, that his brother will seek revenge upon him, that Jacob shrewdly divides up his property into two camps, divides up his own flocks and herds and camels and even his family members, thinking that if Esau attacks one half, then the other half of

his family and goods will be able to escape. Note that in dividing up his family, Jacob put the maids with their children out front, then Leah with her children, and finally last of all, at the end of company, Jacob put his beloved Rachel and their son Joseph. Then Jacob prays to God for deliverance.

That night, Jacob was haunted by dreams and nightmares after which he ends up wrestling with a divine stranger at daybreak who pronounces a blessing upon Jacob, which Jacob interprets as reaffirming his right to the covenant of Abraham and his paternal inheritance. Unfortunately, that is where our lesson ends. We are left with Jacob, though supposedly blessed by God himself, still afraid and greatly distressed, despite his dream of a ladder to heaven from two weeks ago, or this wrestling today with a mysterious stranger who blesses him. The question of Jacob's inheritance, of God's promise to Abraham and whether that is now rightfully Jacob's, has haunted him since he left Canaan, since he swapped his brother's inheritance for a bowl of red porridge and since he deceived his father Isaac into giving him, his older brother's paternal blessing. Remember Esau was so enraged at Jacob's deceit that he threatened to kill him, which is why Jacob left twenty years ago. So how confident is Jacob now that he has really possesses his brother's inheritance and his father's blessing, how confident is Jacob that he is the recipient of God's promise to their forefather Abraham that he,

Jacob, will inherit the land forever and will become a great nation? These are the real concerns that Jacob was wrestling with, as he slept alone that night at Peniel.

If you continue reading in Genesis, you will find that Jacob goes out ahead of the crowd and leads his two companies onward to meet his brother Esau; that Jacob goes out in front of the two companies, bowing himself to the ground seven times as Esau approaches, a sign of great humility; he doesn't turn back, but where else could he go anyway? Jacob trusts in the blessing of God that he claims as his own. But Jacob wrestles with God in the end, and not his brother Esau. For in a scene reminiscent of Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son, Esau spied his brother Jacob from a great distance and went to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept, and they were reconciled with one another. And they both lived peacefully thereafter in the land of their father Isaac, for there was more than enough to go around, for the Promised Land was flowing with milk and honey.

But not everything went well. As Jacob's family settled near Shechem, Dinah, Jacob's only daughter was raped by the son of the King of Shechem, a Hivite. When Dinah's eleven brothers (remember Benjamin has not been born yet), heard of this, they were indignant and very angry, even though the king asked thereafter that Dinah be given in marriage to his son, and

agreed to whatever wedding present they desired. So interestingly, the boys demanded as the wedding gift that every male of the King of Shechem's tribe be circumcised, for their sister, they said could not marry into an uncircumcised family. So every male of the city went outside the gate and was circumcised with their king and their prince. And on the third day thereafter, when the men, we are told, were still in pain, Simeon and Levi, two of Jacob's sons, and the blood brothers of Dinah, took their swords and came against the city unawares, and killed all the males, including the king and his son. And when the other sons of Jacob came upon the slain, they plundered the city, because their sister had been defiled. They took the flocks and herds, the donkeys, and whatever was in the city and in the field. All the city's wealth, all their little ones and their wives, all that was in the houses, the sons of Jacob captured and made their own. Jacob scolded his sons, saying you have brought trouble upon us; that the Canaanites and Perizites were many, and their own number was few. But the brothers replied, "Should our sister be treated like a whore?"

And in the days that followed, a mysterious terror from God fell upon the cities all around them, so that no one pursued Jacob and his family. And then, and only then, did God appear to Jacob at the place where he dreamt of the stairway to heaven when he first fled the land, and God granted Jacob the promise

he had given to Abraham, giving the land thereabout to Jacob, and to his offspring forever. And Jacob through his many sons became a great nation.

Then his beloved Rachel gave birth to Benjamin, his twelfth son, but alas his beloved Rachel died in childbirth. And Jacob buried Rachel, and set up a pillar at her grave, it is the pillar of Rachel's tomb, and is there to this day. And then alas, Jacob's father Isaac died, at the age of 180 years, and his sons, Jacob and Esau, buried him together there in the cave of Machpelah, east of the oaks of Mamre, in the field that their forefather Abraham had bought from the Hittites. And so the story moves on next week to the next generation, to the stories of the sons of Jacob, and especially to the story of his favorite son, Joseph. AMEN.