

## JACOB AND ESAU



Genesis 28:13 "And the LORD stood beside (Jacob) and said, 'I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.'"

And so the Patriarch Abraham died and was buried by his two sons, Isaac and Ishmael, next to his wife Sarah in the cave of

Machpelah, east of the oaks of Mamre, which he purchased from the Hittites. Meanwhile, Abraham and Sarah's son, Isaac, their only child together, married Rebekah, in the reading two weeks ago, Rebekah at the well. As we heard in last week's reading, Rebekah gave birth to her only children, twin boys, Esau and Jacob. Note in the story, however, that Esau is born first, that Esau is the elder son; that Esau is the one who should inherit his father Isaac's land and wealth, and should be the beneficiary of Isaac's promises from God that he would possess this land and be the father of a great nation, just as earlier Ishmael was the first born son of Abraham, but the promise passed to Isaac, not to Ishmael. So Esau is the one to whom the promise should now pass, but his brother Jacob he is not going to give up that inheritance to his older brother Esau easily, which is perhaps foreshadowed in the description of their birth last week, with Jacob born clinging to his brother's heel as they were born and Esau coming out of the womb red --- like lentil stew.

So at the end of last week's reading, Jacob took advantage of his brother, Esau's, great hunger. For having come in from a hunt, because Esau was a man's man, he was a hunter, he was hairy, he was favored by his father Isaac, while Jacob, Jacob was a momma's boy and a farmer with smooth skin, who preferred to live in tents; he was favored by his mother. So Esau is so

hungry from his hunt that begs his brother Jacob to give him some of the red stew that he is cooking, cooking which is women's work in those days, and Jacob unexpectedly demands in return, his birthright as the elder son, and Esau is so hungry that he surprisingly sells his birthright to Jacob for bowl of red porridge! Esau is thereafter called Edom, we are told, which means 'red' in Hebrew, and his descendants after him were called the Edomites, who settled south of the Dead Sea, bordering that larger body of water even further south, which takes its name from Esau, the so-called Red Sea.

But oh there's even more to this story that you have not been told. While we get the story of Jacob's ladder in today's reading, and the story of Jacob wrestling in God with two weeks' time, our lectionary skips the very most intriguing story about Jacob, the one that explains why he has fled his home in today's reading. Two chapters after last week's reading, as Esau has sold his birthright for a bowl of red porridge, as their father Isaac is getting old and his eyes had grown dim and he knows that his days are numbered, Isaac asks his elder son Esau to go out and hunt some game for him and then to prepare a savory meal for him, the kind he likes, and then, then the Patriarch Isaac will give Esau his eldest son his final fatherly blessing. Ah but mother Rebekah overhears this conversation, and she prefers her younger son Jacob, and so she tells Jacob to go out quickly

to get two of their goats and she would prepare a savory meal like her husband likes, and Jacob can pretend that he is Esau, and get his father's final blessing instead. Jacob is leery of this plan, but his mother pushes him. She prepares the meal, puts some of Esau's clothes on Jacob, and then she puts the skins of the goats on his hands and neck, in case Patriarch Isaac reaches out to touch his son. So Jacob does as his mother says, and serves the meal, and lies about who he is to his father's face, twice. Isaac seems confused, the voice is Jacob's he says, but when he reaches out he feels the goat skins and thinks it is his hairy son Esau, so he enjoys the meal and then gives his fatherly blessing to his younger son Jacob, believing him to be his older son Esau. When Esau comes in from his hunt and discovers the deceit, he is furious. He plans to kill his younger brother Jacob who has taken now both his birthright and his father's blessing, but mother Rebekah again hears of this, and warns Jacob, and so it is that Jacob, the younger son of the Patriarch, possessor now of the land and flocks of his father, both by birthright and by paternal blessing, flees to the old country, to his family in Haran, to seek a wife, as his father did before him, which is where the story picks up next week.

In today's story, where Jacob's dream of a ladder to heaven, he is on his way to Haran, and in this reading today Jacob receives God's blessing, but remember this is only a dream. And

then just before our reading today, the Scriptures casually mention that Esau who saw his father Isaac bless Jacob and then sent Jacob away to Haran to take a wife from there, and that as Isaac blessed Jacob he charged him, "You shall not marry one of the Canaanite women." So when Esau saw that the Canaanite women did not please his father Isaac, Esau, who already had two Hittite wives from Canaan, went to his uncle Ishmael and took Mahalath daughter of Abraham's son Ishmael, to be his wife in addition to the other wives he already had. He do this all in hopes of still winning back his father's approval.

So why is it that there are so many characters in the Bible who are liars and hustlers and tricksters? Why do so many of these stories seem to favor crafty, cunning individuals over their more commanding opponents; where the underdog wins not by strength or military power, but by cleverness or shrewdness or deceit? As we have seen already this summer, the great Patriarch Abraham saves his own life and acquires great wealth by passing off his beautiful wife Sarah as his sister, even though she temporarily ends up in the Pharaoh's harem. Then his son Isaac does the exact same thing, having his wife Rebekah lie that she is his sister and not his wife in their dealings with King Abimelech of the Philistines in order to save his own life. Then last week the Patriarch Jacob pressures his brother Esau to give up his inheritance for a bowl of porridge and then literally

steals his father's paternal blessing, by pretending to be his brother Esau. And Joseph in the next generation will deceive his brothers when he becomes Prime Minister of Egypt in order to save his family from a famine. Miriam will deceive the Pharaoh and save Moses from the bulrushes. Tamar will dress up as a prostitute to trick Judah into having sex with her, thus preserving the future Davidic line. Delilah repeatedly tricks Samson. The left-handed Ehud tricks the King of Moab and kills him. Jael seduces the Canaanite King into her bed with a glass of warm milk only to drive a tent peg through his temple. Why do we have all these stories of lying and deceit and trickery in the Old Testament?

Well, if nothing else, these details provide a sense of authenticity to these stories, that these stories are not just fictional fables or the myths of super heroes like Greek Gods, but are stories of very ordinary and fallible human beings. These are stories about real people, like you and me. We can identify with them. We can see ourselves in their lives. For in the end, we are not really any different from them. For we too are liars and tricksters and hustlers in our own lives and in our own ways. We may rationalize our own little dishonest acts in life as something other than self-serving, but we are more like those biblical characters than we might like to think.

The good news is that these stories from the Old Testament remind us that God can still work through people like us, despite our flaws and failings, and that God has a plan for us and for our lives too! And we, thus, have no excuses not to fulfill them! We cannot ever say that we are not good enough, that we are not worthy! For these stories suggest otherwise.

AMEN