

JACOB AND ESAU



Genesis 24:24 "When (Rebekah's) time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. The first (one) came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob. . . . When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob."

So, as I told you a few weeks ago, the readings from the Old Testament in this season sequentially tell the long story from the Patriarchs of Israel to Moses and the Exodus. Last week's reading had the Patriarch Abraham send his servant back to the old country to find a wife for his beloved son Isaac, a servant who met Rebekah at the well. She became Isaac's wife; and he loved her. So, Isaac was comforted after his mother's death, we are told.

Today Rebekah gives 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, who according to the cultural principle of primogenitor, should inherit his father Isaac's land and wealth, and should be the beneficiary of Isaac's assurances from God that he would possess the land promised to his father Abraham, where he would be heir of a great nation. But Jacob is not going to forsake that inheritance easily, which is perhaps foreshadowed in the description of their birth, with Jacob born clinging to his brother Esau's heel and Esau was coming out of the womb, red --- like lentil stew.

Jacob, as we see, will take advantage of his brother. Remember that 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, and he was favored by his mother. So then we are told that Esau returning from a hunt one day is so hungry 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 brother's birthright as the elder son, and Esau is so hungry that he surprisingly sells his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of red porridge! Esau is called Edom, we are told, which means 'red' in Hebrew, and his descendants after him are called the Edomites,

who eventually settle south of the Dead Sea, bordering that larger body of water further south, which some argue takes its very name from Esau, the so-called Red Sea.

But oh, there's even more to this story than that. While we get the story of Jacob's ladder in next week's reading, our lectionary skips the most intriguing of all the stories about Jacob, the one most full of deceit, that explains why he has fled his home next week. For two chapters after today's reading, where Esau has sold his birthright for a bowl of red porridge, we are told that their father Isaac was getting old and his eyes have grown dim and he knows that his days are numbered. So, Isaac asks his favored elder son Esau to go out and hunt some game 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, very important in the Jewish tradition.

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 puts the skins of the goats on Jacob's 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 to flee, 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 safety of the old country, back to his family in Haran, where he might find a wife as his father did before him, which is where the story picks up in two weeks, with more deceit and tomfoolery.

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 beloved stories, like David and Goliath, 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 simply deceit? As we have seen already this summer, the great Patriarch Abraham saves

his own life and acquires great wealth by lying that his beautiful wife Sarah is really 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 his dealings with King Abimelech of the Philistines, again in order to save his own life. Then today the Patriarch Jacob pressures his brother Esau to give up his inheritance and then literally steals his paternal blessing. Uncle Laban will soon trick Jacob into marrying his elder daughter Leah and not Rachel as he thought. And Joseph in the next generation will deceive his brothers when he becomes Prime Minister of Egypt and put them to the test, in order to save his family from a famine. Miriam will then 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 of Jesus. Delilah repeatedly tricks Samson. The left-handed Ehud tricks the King of Moab and kills him while he is on the john. Jael seduces the Canaanite King into her bed with warm milk only to drive a tent peg through his temple while he sleeps. Why do we have all these stories of lying and deceit and trickery in the Old Testament? Why indeed?

Well, if nothing else, they make for more interesting narratives. These details also provide a sense of authenticity

to the stories, that these stories are not just fictional fables like those of Aesop or the myths of superheroes like the Greek Gods, but are instead real stories of very ordinary and fallible human beings. These are stories about real people, like you and me. We can identify with them perhaps. We can see ourselves in their lives. For in the end, we are not really any different from them. For we too are often liars and tricksters and hustlers in our own lives and in all sorts of 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 from these stories of the Old Testament, of course, is to remind us that God can still work his purposes through people like that, through people like us, despite our flaws and failings and deceit, and that God has a plan for us and for our lives too as surely as he did for Esau and Jacob! And therefore, we have no excuses not to trust in God, and not to seek to fulfill God's desires for us! We cannot ever say that we are simply not good enough for God's providence, or that we are not worthy, as though that would disqualify us from becoming agents of our God! For these beloved Old Testament stories suggest otherwise. AMEN