

Last week, in our exploration of the supremely challenging story of Abraham's attempted sacrifice of Isaac, we saw how God has a habit of taking heartless cultural practices and *subverting* them from within. We considered how Abraham, embracing the barbaric custom of his neighbors concerning child sacrifice, was on the point of killing his son when an insight slammed into his consciousness which was so "foreign," so completely out-of-context with his culturally-bound way of thinking, that our best option is to see it as direct communication from God to Abraham through the medium of God's spirit: "break with your neighbors! What I am commanding you to do is not to sacrifice your first-born son the way everyone else you know is doing."

Today we meet the sons of Isaac and Rebecca: Esau and Jacob. Before we get to this morning's text, which occurs when Jacob is a young man, we need to flashback to Rebecca's pregnancy, which was an exceptionally difficult one. Scripture tells us that "the babies in her womb struggled with each other." Rebecca complains, crying out: "if this is the way it is to be, why go on living?" She asks God what is going on, and God responds to her: "two nations are in your womb, two tribes in your belly who will be rivals. One will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger." God's statement "the older will serve the younger" is the first indication we have that God is going to subvert another time-honored tradition. This time the tradition is that of primogeniture. In the culture of that time the first-born son, upon the death of his father, was designated as "head and ruler of the family," and entitled to inherit twice as much as any of his brothers.

The biblical text continues: "When the time came for her to deliver, she gave birth to twin boys. The first to enter the world was very ruddy, and he had so much hair on his body that he looked as if he was wearing a fur coat. So they named him Esau, 'rough one.' When the second came out, he was grasping Esau's heel, so they named him Jacob, 'heel-grabber.'" The text quickly informs us that "Isaac... favored Esau while Rebecca favored Jacob." The Hebrew and Christian scriptures are unique among the sacred writings of the world's great faith traditions in that they "tell it like it is;" they don't flinch from revealing the not-so-great characteristics of the heroes and heroines of the "Old" and "New" Testaments. We have already seen how the custom of having multiple wives at the same time brought tragedy to the lives of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, and Ishmael. Now we are let in on the undoubtedly unspoken "family secret" of Isaac and Rebecca preferring one son over the other. We don't have to look all that closely into the family dynamics of all the major families described in the foundational book of the bible, Genesis, to see all sorts of *abuse* and *co-dependency* at work.

Among other things, the book of Genesis is telling us that from the time human beings left paradise families have been seriously in trouble. Our contemporary concern for family wholeness and harmony isn't all that "contemporary," but goes all the way back to Cain killing his brother Abel, back to the unstable foursome of Isaac,

Rebecca, Esau, and Jacob. Most of us remember the story of Jacob tricking his brother out of his birthright from Sunday school. Esau is a hunter; while Jacob is a stay-at-home "mama's boy." The boys are now teenagers. One day, Jacob is cooking up a stew -- the Hebrew can also mean that Jacob is "cooking up trouble." Esau comes in from hunting, famished. He asks for some of Jacob's stew. Jacob craftily replies: "only in exchange for the rights you own from being firstborn." Esau replies, "Here I am ravenous for food. What good is my birthright to me now?" Jacob, master manipulator that he is, says, "Swear to me first!" Remember that swearing in those days was a binding promise. The text continues: "so Esau swore to Jacob and sold his birthright. Only then did Jacob give Esau some bread and the lentil stew." Bemused, this section of the text concludes, describing Esau: "he ate and drank, then got up and left. This is how little Esau valued his birthright."

Now, what is the point of this story? The point of this story is the *gratuitousness* of God's favoring Jacob over Esau. Jacob has done nothing to deserve God's favor. Indeed, at this point in his life, Jacob is a scheming creep. The point of Jacob having done nothing to deserve God's favor is an extremely important theological point for the biblical author, who repeats it in connection with God's choice of Israel over the surrounding nations. In the context of unmerited blessing, the fitting response to God's call to be his "chosen person" (as in the case of Jacob), or to be God's "chosen people" (as in the case of Israel), would be humility and service, not arrogance and aggrandizement. In the context of God's gracious favor, both Jacob's and Israel's arrogance and aggrandizement stand under severe censure. We tend to side with Esau, and consequently have difficulty getting the full theological import of this story. Humanly speaking, because of his status as first-born, Esau would have been the "obvious" choice. Because of their greater power and wealth, many other nations should have been the "logical" choice as God's "chosen people" before Israel. The theological point that the biblical author is making -- again, completely against the grain of the cultural customs of the time -- is that God does not choose according to human standards of status, might, or wealth. God, being "stuck," so to speak, with the custom of primogeniture, simply subverts it from within.

Back at the tent of Isaac and Rebecca things continue to devolve in terms of the relationship between their sons. The next episode in this soap-opera, again familiar to many of us from Sunday school, is Jacob tricking Esau out of the special blessing that was his as first-born son. What's the big deal, we might think, but in those days blessings were considered to bring about what was conferred, much like our understanding of sacraments. To review and fill-in: Jacob and Esau are now young adults. Sensing that his days are numbered, Isaac decides that it is time to bestow his special blessing on his eldest son, Esau. He sends Esau off to hunt some game for his favorite dish. Rebecca overhears -- the reader is supposed to ask the question, 'why is Rebecca in the right place at the right time to overhear -- Rebecca overhears and plots with her favorite, Jacob, to steal Esau's blessing. Rebecca prepares a stew from two young goats (again, the connotation here is that she is "cooking up trouble"), and clothes Jacob with the skins so that when Isaac touches him, he will feel like his brother.

The dialogue at this point is significant, so I will quote from the bible: "Jacob said, 'father!' 'Here I am,' replied Isaac. 'Which of my sons are you?' 'I am Esau, your firstborn,' Jacob replied. 'I have done as you told me. Here, sit up and eat some of the game, so that you may give me your special blessing.' 'How did you find it so quickly, my child?' asked Isaac. Jacob replied, 'It was the Lord, your God, who let things turn out in my favor.' Isaac told Jacob, 'Come closer, then, and let me touch you, so I can tell if you really are Esau or not.' Jacob moved close to Isaac, who touched him. 'The voice is Jacob's;' said Isaac, 'but the hands are Esau's.' Isaac was confused, because Jacob's hands were hairy like Esau's, and in the end Isaac gave Jacob his blessing."

The story of Rebecca and Jacob deceiving Isaac -- think of this story being told around campfires at night century after century -- was meant to be entertaining. But in addition to being entertaining the story also contained a warning: "this is what happens to families who lie to and deceive one another." The theft of Esau's blessing triggers just what Rebecca had hoped to avert, the loss of her sons -- Jacob fleeing for his life, and Esau bitterly leaving home.

Jacob's character as revealed in this story stands in critical need of spiritual maturation, a development which, fortunately, does take place within the later stories concerning him. We will encounter one of these later stories next week, when Jacob wrestles with God. But now we turn specifically to today's text.

Understandably, Esau has threatened to kill Jacob. Jacob has fled to "the land of the eastern tribes" to find shelter with his distant relative, Laban. On his way there he has the dream described in today's scripture reading. Jacob's dream is significant. It powerfully affirms God's *continuing presence* with Jacob, continuing presence in spite of the major character defects that Jacob has demonstrated only too well. Again, the all-important biblical theme surfaces: God's grace, God's love is totally unmerited. The biblical author purposefully contrasts God's graciousness with Jacob's scheming: God says to Jacob: "know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go..." Jacob says to God: if God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God..."

Basically, Jacob has the nerve to bargain with God: "*if* you do so-and-so for me, *then* I'll do so-and-so for you." Now, it's all too easy for us to look down on many of the people described in the Bible and comment on their lack of character, or their lack of spiritual maturity. That's an easy way out, and a good way for us to remain superficial. Biblical characters are intended to be mirrors in which we see ourselves reflected. We are supposed to see parts of ourselves in Isaac and Rebecca's playing favorites; parts of ourselves in Isaac's allowing himself to be taken advantage of; parts of ourselves in Esau's demanding immediate gratification and losing something of great value in the process; parts of ourselves in Jacob's getting what he wanted by any means necessary, including lying and deceiving. The overarching point of all these interrelated stories is that God hung in there with each of these broken people, just as God hangs in there with the broken people that we are. The overarching point of all these interrelated stories is that God did not give up on any

of them, just as God does not give up on any of us. Each of us is a bit like Jacob, the main protagonist in these stories. Jacob is portrayed as someone who needs to grow into the inspiring person of faith and wisdom that God intends him to be. Each of us has more growing into the inspiring person of faith and wisdom that God hopes for each of us to be.

Every song in our carefully and prayerfully planned worship this morning echoes this theme of our need and our desire to grow spiritually. Remember St. Augustine's affirmation that "to sing is to pray *twice*." So in our opening song, "now is the time," we prayed: "spirit of light, dance within our darkness. Make us your own, now is the time." Even though these words were not literally Jacob's, I suspect that they capture the deepest longings of Jacob's heart as he lay down to sleep that night so long ago. God answered Jacob with that beautiful dream, in which he told Jacob "I am with you...I will not leave you," echoing the oft repeated line of this morning's anthem: "I will never forget my own." Our African-American spiritual mentors who were slaves in this country, turned Jacob's ladder into a powerful metaphor for spiritual growth: "every round goes higher, higher, every round goes higher, higher..." and in our second hymn, which we will soon be singing, we will be praying the words "breathe on me, breath of God, fill me with life anew, that I may love the way you love, and do what you would do." I can imagine Jacob hearing the music of the harp in his dream -- ancient instrument that it is -- and saying upon awaking: "surely the Lord is in this place -- and I did not know it!"

How many of us -- in spite of our selfish maneuverings or relational denseness -- have been unexpectedly met by God, who demonstrated to us first-hand that God's grace and God's love are totally unmerited, totally undeserved. How many of us -- in spite of ourselves -- have awakened, as if from a dream, and realized "surely the Lord is with me -- and I did not know it!"

Amen.

Copyright 2012: Rev. Paul Wrightman