

Genesis 28, Jacob series, July 2017

Many of you have asked how our sabbatical study time away was, and I can tell you that it was wonderfully enjoyable and instructive. Along with going to fun places and having some different experiences that are outside of our usual routine, there was also the opportunity to do some reading and learning that doesn't always otherwise happen. I studied geography over my month away. Don't ask me why, but I never learned geography in my public education years. As I have come increasingly to appreciate the importance of history; both general history and Biblical history, I've also come to appreciate that geography *is* history, to some degree. I had a gaping lack of knowledge in that area. This lack of knowledge not only impacted my understanding of history, but of present politics. Events happen in specific places, often for specific reasons related to the place, and I had come to realize that all that was going right over my head. So, I set out to memorize the location of the around 200 countries in our world, and specifically of the geography of the middle east and even more specifically, the Holy Land. I feared it would be tedious, but instead it was fascinating and gripping, and I was grateful to discover that my memorizer still works. I now have developed the obnoxious habit, whenever a news story or travel commentary comes up, of saying, "I know where that is!" (Because I do!) And it most definitely impacts one's perceptions of history and current events to know where places are.

One of the most impressive things to me in this learning process was recognizing how so much in this world is about location, location, location, as realtors assure us. That's location in terms of the natural resources available, transportation routes, and access to other parts of the world. But, while *location* matters, *size* may *not* so much matter. I mean many of the nations that have had great empires over time; ancient Greece, or ancient Rome in Italy, or even Great

Britain in the last century or so, have been relatively small nations to begin with. Other factors made them strong and fearsome. And nowhere is the importance of location and the *lack* of importance of size better demonstrated than in a study of the Holy Land. This Holy Land is now called Israel; in the time of Jesus, it was called Palestine; in the time of our lessons today from the Old Testament, it was called Canaan. But, here's my point. This land is teeny. On a world globe or map, you can barely see Israel. It is, in fact, the size of the state of New Jersey. Which means it is 1/10 the size of our state of Minnesota. It's more or less the size of Cook, Lake, and St. Louis counties combined. That's it! The Holy Land that is central to three world faiths, that has turned the world on its head continually, and that is now the tragic center of so much turbulence is practically negligible in terms of size. It's not about size, but it *is* about location. Because that ancient country of Canaan was part of the most direct highway situated between the two great empires, the Egyptian to the west and the Mesopotamian to the east; and Canaan was also situated on the Fertile Crescent, which made it a promised land of milk and honey, amidst much surrounding dessert land. One of the marvels of our faith is that God chose this small nation, which mattered only mostly in terms of how it was situated between *other* nations that *did* matter, to be the cradle of faith and promise for the world. Which shows us that God, as we should already know, often makes surprising choices, does things that seem backwards or crazy to us, and tends to favor the underdog. God likes to take us off guard by using unexpected and unlikely means through which to accomplish amazing acts. We see this in the choosing of the Hebrew people and tiny nation of Canaan; we see it in the story of the shepherd boy David, taking on the giant, Goliath; we see it in the incarnation of the Eternal Word in a fragile human infant; and we're going to see it in our lesson from Genesis for today, also.

We're about to spend five weeks in Genesis, with a focus on the patriarch Jacob, but let's just set up a context for a moment. The book of Genesis, the first book of our Bible, is in many ways a *family story*. Between 2000 and 1800 BC Abraham and Sarah, the grandparents of Jacob, lived in the Mesopotamian area of the Middle East, in the country that is now Iraq. (I know where that is!) Abram and Sarah had the courage to "go" when God called them to go to a new land—the land of Canaan, now the country of Israel. As a result, of this faithful courage, Abraham would in fact receive these promises of God: he would inherit a great land, he would father a great nation, and he would be a conduit of blessing to all the families of the earth. Abraham did indeed do these things, overcoming the odds of having descendants with Sarah, who had been barren, when they conceived in their old age as a result of God's blessing.

In today's lesson we read of how Isaac, that son of old age, marries Rebekkah when Isaac is 40. Like Sarah before her, Rebekkah had difficulty in conceiving, seeming to put God's promise of descendants in jeopardy again. But, through prayer and perseverance, she does indeed conceive---bearing not just one child, but two, a set of twins, Esau and Jacob. Jacob, whose name will later be changed to Israel is crucial to the story of this family and God's family, as his changed name becomes the name of the entire people: Israel.

While there is much to be said of Abraham and Sarah, the original generation, and of Jacob, their grandson, there's not so much about that middle generation, Isaac or his wife Rebekah-- except to note that their parenting skills left much to be desired. They apparently never took parenting courses, and their twins suffer because of it. Of course, the cultural traditions of the time added to the difficulties of these twins. In Hebraic society, to be the eldest male heir was everything; to be a second son was very little. The oldest son inherited 2/3 of all there was to inherit, and a second son received 1/3. In the case of male twins, then, it was crucial

to establish which twin was born first. In this case, it was Esau, followed by Jacob, who came out, as we read in our lesson, with a fist around Esau's heel. He was, accordingly, named Jacob, which means "heel". And just as in our English language, it's not altogether a nice thing to be labeled a "heel", so it was in the ancient Hebrew, too. Jacob not only came out with a hand on Esau's heel, Jacob *was* a heel, of sorts. In Hebrew, the word Jacob had a connotation of being a trickster, a deceiver, a con man. Jacob lives up to his name.

Sometimes we hear about the marvelous and amazing bond that exists between twins, especially identical twins. Even when separated at birth and reunited years later, they turn out to not only be identical in appearance, but to have similar interests, abilities, and a sense of being simpatico with one another. Esau and Jacob are *not* those kinds of twins. For one thing, they're not identical. Esau is born covered with red hair and grows up to be a brawny hunter and farmer. Jacob is apparently smooth skinned and prefers the quieter pursuits of the civilization of that time, such as it was. They do not look alike; they are not similar in interests and abilities, and they definitely are not simpatico. Even within the womb, they are at odds. There is apparently an extraordinary degree of alarming movement by these babes during Rebekkah's pregnancy. No ultrasounds are available, and Rebekkah instead prays to God about all of this. She receives the following response: "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger." As we attempt to parse this all through, it would help if we spoke ancient Hebrew, which we don't. But, tradition suggests that Esau was the patriarch of the Edomites, a neighboring nation next to Israel. And the name Esau and Edom are similar in Hebrew and mean "red"---so it is that Esau is born with red hair and really wants his red stew later in this lesson, because he will father the red nation, Edom. Jacob, in contrast, will father the nation of Israel, and so it is that two nations

that will have a contentious history for centuries to come are *already* warring within Rebekkah's womb. That's some pregnancy, huh? From conception on, these twins can't get along for anything!

Of course, compounding the problem is that poor parenting. Esau likes to hunt, like his father, and he and his father are huntin buds. Jacob prefers to stay home with his mother, Rebekah, and keep her company in the kitchen. He becomes his mother's favorite, a Mommy's Boy of nearly 4,000 years ago. And, rather than making a point to try and treat their sons similarly and create a bond between them, these parents make things worse by each picking out a personal favorite and setting them against each other.

There are two particular events recorded in Scripture where these boys, now young men, come into sharp conflict. We see the first one in our lesson today, involving the red stew. Esau, coming back from a day of hunting, is famished and wants some of the enticing stew that Jacob has most likely intentionally been cooking with the intent of luring Esau into this trap. Jacob, that heel and trickster, offers short-sighted, impulsive Esau a big, satisfying bowl of stew in return for---Esau's birth right. In other words, that bowl of stew can be Esau's, if Esau is willing to allow Jacob  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the inheritance and receive for himself  $\frac{1}{3}$  instead. Well, let's do the math! How much farther would Esau have had to walk to get stew from some other source, and how much is he about to lose here? But, Esau swears to the deal, declaring that his birthright is of no use to him when he's ready to drop from hunger. And Jacob serves his older twin some bread and stew and the story ends, "So Esau despised his birthright."

What do we learn from this story, this remarkable character study of twins? Certainly Jacob appears in an unflattering light; he is manipulative, ready to take advantage for his own gain. Esau also appears in less than heroic terms; he is completely caught up in immediate

pleasures of the flesh and gives no thoughts to consequences. Not much to admire about either of them, actually.

Let's dig a little deeper, though. The real issue for Esau is that he "despises his birthright", according to our text. Esau doesn't *value* his heritage and inheritance. And ironically, *Jacob* wants that heritage and inheritance above all else. Think of Jacob's frustration; he is only the younger son instead of the older son by moments; he's born clutching his brother's heel ahead of him, as if even in the womb he wanted to be first. Above *all*, he wants that birthright and blessing that go to his twin through a lucky twist of birth order, and his twin doesn't really even value them. How aggravating is that? Think of the resentment that builds year after year as Jacob sees Esau treat carelessly what he, Jacob, would treasure above all things and has no means of obtaining. And Esau is strong and manly, too powerful a figure for Jacob to take on physically in any way. Jacob *has* to use his wits and his cunning instead. Which he does, with help from his mother, Rebekkah.

Because if Jacob wants that birthright of inheritance, he even *more* covets the official *blessing* of their father, Isaac, which is to go that first born, Esau. Esau, who is his father's favorite, anyways. The *birth right* was about material inheritance; the *blessing* is the spiritual component passed on from Abraham to Isaac, and now to Isaac's son---the promise God made of descendants, lands, and a people that would be blessed to be a blessing to the world. Esau isn't super interested in this, but Jacob covets it intensely, as does his mother, on his behalf. So, later on, when Esau is to receive the final blessing from his now-dying and blind father, Isaac, Rebekah and Jacob go into their act again. Jacob, at Rebekah's urging, deceives his blind and aged father into thinking he *is* Esau, by means of wearing animal skin over his naked skin. Thus, when his blind father thinks he's feeling Esau's manly, hairy arms, he is in reality feeling an

animal pelt over Jacob's hairless arms. Isaac mistakenly gives Jacob the blessing that was to be reserved for Esau by means of this deception, fulfilling Jacob and Rebekah's deepest desire. Again, not the happiest and most united of couples or families, would you say? And then Isaac dies, and Jacob has stolen the birthright and blessing, and his twin, Esau, is mad. He may not be the brightest bulb in the pack, but he's angry, and he's skillful with a spear. It's time for Jacob to put some distance between himself and his angry twin brother. His ever-helpful mother, Rebekah, tells him to flee for his life until Esau cools down some. That is the point at which we will meet up with Jacob in our text next week.

But coming back to our present text, what is this about? What can we learn from this extraordinary story about dysfunctional families? We see the dangerous power that resentment and envy can have, when we allow them to dominate us, as Jacob and Rebekkah do, in regards to Esau's inheritance and blessing. Nelson Mandela once said, "Resentment is like drinking poison and thinking it is killing the person you resent"—wise words from one who lived with the oppression of injustice and apartheid in south Africa---I know where that is—for years. Resentment festers and poisons the one who resents, leading to actions that are often far from honorable. Do we too easily and eagerly harbor resentment?

But, we also learn something about what matters to us. This story, as seen from Esau's willingness to give up his birth right, might prompt us to ponder what we value. Do we place enough value on our heritage, our promises, our inheritances of faith and tradition, or are we careless of them, too short sighted to treasure them as we ought?

Finally, though, this story and the entire Jacob saga, should teach us something about how God uses the small, the unlikely, the underdog, to accomplish great things. Because the nation of Israel and the figure of Jacob are all of those things: small, unlikely and underdogs.

And if God can use them anyways, maybe God can use us too? Or our smaller church? Even if we don't figure that largely by many measures, might we, in God's scheme, still have important ministry and work to be about? This story would certainly suggest that. Furthermore, it suggests that even in the midst of impressive dysfunction, God can be at work to bring blessing.

So, you know what? You think your family is dysfunctional? You fit right in. You think your life isn't on track? You belong here. You think you're not quite the best version of yourself, not yet living out the person God meant you to be? You fit right in. You think you've hit a new low? You belong here. And start looking for God, because God shows up in just such times to just such people, with promises and blessings and the grace of God's very presence. Not because of the success or mess you've made of things, but because that's how God is. I once heard a description of God that stayed with me: God can draw straight with crooked lines. Jacob is a crooked line, but God can still draw straight with him. God's promises will be kept and the blessing received, in spite of all those crooked lines. If your life is full of crooked lines, too, don't despair; God draws straight with crooked lines. Amen.