

“Jacob, Jacob, Jacob...”

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church Portions of Genesis 27-28

Pastor Bill Chadwick September 24, 2017

This story is told about John D. Rockefeller, the oil tycoon who founded Standard Oil and at one time controlled 90% of the oil in the U.S. After important negotiations with business leaders in his high-rise office building, John D. Rockefeller used to say goodbye to his visitors at the elevator. While the visitors filed into the elevator, an innocent looking man would slip in and ride with them to the ground floor. He would follow the group out the door and then cross the street. A few minutes later, the innocent looking man would go back to Rockefeller’s office to deliver a detailed report of what the unsuspecting visitors talked about during the ride in the elevator. (“The Conversion of a Scoundrel” from King Duncan, *Collected Sermons*, Dynamic Preaching, 2005.)

John D. Rockefeller undoubtedly would have liked the Old Testament character, Jacob. There was no doubt about it, Jacob was shrewd. A very colorful character.

In today’s narrative lectionary reading we have the story of the first part of Jacob’s life. Some of you will know the story of Jacob from Sunday School and other church teaching and some of you will not. Jacob is one of the biblical patriarchs in Genesis: Abraham, his son Isaac, whom we met last week and Isaac’s son Jacob. Jacob is eventually renamed Israel, and is the progenitor of the 12 tribes of Israel, but that is in the future, not in today’s lesson.

I’m mostly simply going to tell the biblical story today. Not a lot of sermon afterwords. As my Lutheran pastor friend, John Schramm, likes to say before reading the scripture: “Listen up! What I’m about to read is way more important than anything I’m going to say about it afterwards.”

We pick up the story in Genesis 25. Abraham’s son Isaac, who was not sacrificed, married a woman named Rebekah. After many years of childlessness, Rebekah finally became pregnant, and the children struggled within her. 25:26 ff.: “The Lord said to her, ‘Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger.’” When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; ... they named him Esau. Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau’s heel; so he was named Jacob (that is, “He takes by the heel” or “Supplanter.”)...

As the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, an outdoorsman, a man’s man, while Jacob was a quiet man, spending his time in the library and the kitchen. The Bible says Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of the taste of wild game; but Rebekah loved Jacob, the mama’s boy.

Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stuff; I'm starving!" ...Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright". (Now the birthright was the father's special blessing upon the eldest son, a blessing for abundant children and lands and flocks.) Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. The narrator concludes, "Thus Esau despised his birthright," which is a biblical way of saying, "Esau is as dumb as a box of rocks."

We pick up the story a chapter later. Father Isaac is now very old and half-paralyzed and nearly blind. He knows his days are numbered. It's time to give the first-born son the final blessing. Isaac called his son Esau and said, "Take your bow and go out and hunt game for me and prepare me a savory dish to eat, and then I will bless you before I die."

Now Rebekah (Isaac's wife, the boys' mother) was listening when Isaac spoke to his son Esau. So when Esau went to the field to hunt for game and bring it, Rebekah said to her son Jacob, "I heard your father say to your brother Esau, ⁷ 'Bring me game, and prepare for me savory food to eat, that I may bless you before the LORD before I die.' ⁸ But I've got a plan. Go to the flock, and get me two choice kids, (baby goats, not human children) so that I may prepare from them savory food for your father, such as he likes; ¹⁰ and you shall take it to your father to eat, so that he may bless you before he dies." ¹¹

But Jacob said to his mother Rebekah, "Thanks, Mom, but that ain't gonna work. My brother Esau is a hairy ape, and I am a man of smooth skin. ¹² Perhaps my father will feel me, and I shall seem to be mocking him, and bring a curse on myself and not a blessing." ¹³ His mother said to him, "Let your curse be on me, my son; only obey my word, and go, get them for me." ¹⁴ So Jacob went and got them and brought them to his mother; and his mother prepared savory food, such as his father loved.

¹⁵ Then Rebekah took the best garments of her elder son Esau, which were with her in the house, and put them on her younger son Jacob; (Now this was before deodorant and frequent laundering of clothes—Esau's clothes would have smelled like Esau, which I am sure was not good.) ¹⁶ And she put the skins of the kids on his hands and on the smooth part of his neck. ¹⁷ Then she handed the savory food, and the bread that she had prepared, to her son Jacob. ¹⁸ So he went in to his father, and said, "My father"; and Isaac said, "Here I am; who are you, my son?" ¹⁹ Jacob said to his father, "I am Esau your firstborn. I have done as you told me; now sit up and eat of my game, so that you may bless me." ²⁰ But Isaac said to his son, "How is it that you have found it so quickly, my son?" Jacob answered, "Because the Lord your God granted me success." ²¹ Then Isaac said to Jacob, "Come near, that I may feel you, my son, to know whether you are really my son Esau or not." ²² So Jacob went up to his father Isaac, who felt him and said, "The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau." ²³ ... so he blessed him.

A few minutes later in came Esau with the food that he had prepared and Isaac realized that he had been tricked and he told Esau what had happened. Esau cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry, and said, "Bless me also, Father."

But Isaac said, "There is only one blessing for the firstborn and Jacob has tricked you out of it."

But Esau took it well. He said, "As soon as my father is dead and the days of mourning are over, I will kill that expletive deleted brother of mine."

Rebekah heard of Esau's plan and told Jacob to flee to where her brother Laban lived in Haran.

28:10 So Jacob high-tailed it out of there, knowing he was no match for his brother Esau. Jacob came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. He took a stone for his pillow and lay down in that place. 12 And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven. (The Hebrew word translated ladder is actually more of a stair step ramp.) And the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. 13 And the Lord stood beside him and said, "I am the Lord, the God of (your grandfather Abraham) Abraham... and the God of (your father) Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; 14 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. 15 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." 16 Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!" 17 And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." ¹⁸

Jacob. A scoundrel. Wittier people than I have described him thusly. Lawrence Semel writes, "(Jacob's) name means 'heel holder' and he spends his life tripping up others for his own advantage." Kory Wilcoxson: "...If you gathered a room full of famous people of faith, Jacob would be the guy picking their pockets and selling their watches down on the street corner." As I've pondered this story anew this week I wondered if Jacob wasn't perhaps the first person to be called a "heel."

Three simple thoughts to ponder. How many of you, in Sunday School or at church camp, sang the old song, *We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder*? Sing it with me: *We are climbing Jacob's ladder (X3), Soldiers of the Cross. Every rung goes higher, higher (X3), Soldiers of the Cross.*

Now think, what do those lyrics have to do with this story? Nothing, other than borrowing the phrase, "Jacob's Ladder." (Justin Tull) For in this story Jacob isn't climbing the ladder, this one. But Jacob has been climbing a ladder all his life, a ladder of his own making, grabbing for everything he can get. (J. Howard Olds) And it leads to misery and fear.

Second. It's interesting that God didn't become known to Jacob until he stopped running and laid down. J. Howard Olds writes, "Do you remember the children's book about Stripe, the caterpillar. Stripe burst from his egg and straightaway began to eat the leaf on which he was born. Then he ate another leaf and another. Bored by getting bigger, Stripe crawled down the friendly tree in search of something more. But nothing seemed to satisfy. Stripe joined a group of climbers, determined to rise above average caterpillars. He climbed up. He climbed down. He frolicked in the grass with a lady named Yellow. But it was not until Stripe stopped, grew very still and waited in the darkness, that Stripe the caterpillar became a butterfly."

I've got news for you. God wants to make something beautiful out of your life. The question is simply this, will you stop long enough for the metamorphosis to take place?

As the Psalmist (46:10) encourages, "Be still, and know that I am God."

If we are too busy to pray, we are too busy.

If we are too busy to see God in the amazing people and creation around us, we are too busy.

Stop running. Anyone need that word this morning? I do.

Third. It is very interesting to me that God does not rebuke Jacob for his behavior, for how he treated his father and his brother. (Keith Krell) It's really a good thing, for a lot of reasons, that I am not God. I'm not that patient.

Jacob is a first-class jerk; he's the Prodigal Son of the Old Testament, but God loves him anyway. God's love for Jacob is unconditional. The promise God gives to Jacob is absolute, "I will bless you and give you land and offspring and be with you and keep you." No conditions. No "If you do this, *then* I will bless you." Grace.

Years ago I read of a Sunday School teacher who each week at the conclusion of Sunday School, would give this benediction to her students as they left her classroom: "Be good, children, so God will love you."

Fortunately, that's not how it works. God's love for us is not dependent on our behavior. I think God's love has gotta be something like how you grandparents feel about your grandchildren. They don't have to be perfect little angels for you to bless them with ice cream and candy and your presence, both spellings of the word "presents/presence".

This life of faith is gift and grace. May we slow down enough to revel in that fact.

It's all grace, my friends. It's all grace. Hallelujah!