

Not Worth a Bowl of Beans

With our Genesis passage this morning, we begin the saga of the third great patriarch of the Jews – Jacob, later to be renamed Israel, whose 12 sons were the progenitors of the 12 tribes that followed Moses out of Egypt and became the Kingdom of Israel under Saul, David and Solomon. We'll be spending the next five Sundays and the next three Wednesdays exploring stories of Jacob and his sons and daughters, yet we'll still leave out many of the stories in this rich vein of the history of God's Chosen People.

We'll soon discover that, like his grandfather Abraham, Jacob often seems like a curious vessel for God's grace and promise. He's a bit of a rogue, our Jacob, not above using trickery and deceit to get what he wants. But we'll also find that, like Abraham, Jacob is ultimately faithful to God's promise, believing in it wholly. And, like Abraham, Jacob enjoys an intimate relationship with God, who Jacob finds to be present most fully at the most difficult times of his life.

Our little story this morning is a perfect set-up for the greater tale of this slippery, ambiguous patriarch. Howard Wallace, an Australian professor of Old Testament, points out that three themes which dominate the Jacob saga are first touched on here. There is, for example, the theme of strife. Jacob and his family continually find themselves at odds with each other until Jacob's children are reunited in Egypt. Jacob is pitted against his brother Esau when they are still in the womb and their rivalry eventually causes Jacob to flee to his uncle Laban. That relationship also ends up in bitter enmity, with Laban pursuing Jacob for wrongs both real and imagined. Jacob's wives feud and their hostility carries over to their children – Jacob's favored son is sold into slavery by his brothers.

There is also, as I mentioned earlier, the theme of trickery running through Jacob's story. There is certainly a sense that Jacob has dealt treacherously with Esau in this morning's story, getting him to sell his birthright for a bowl of bean soup. Later, Jacob and his mother, Rebekah, will trick Isaac into giving Jacob the blessing reserved for the older son. That story is not in the lectionary, but I think most of us know it. When Isaac is nearing the end of his life and blind, he sends Esau off to hunt game for one last satisfying dinner for his father. Taking advantage of Esau's absence, Rebekah disguises Jacob with Esau's clothing and with animal skins on his arms to mimic Esau's hairiness. When Jacob presents Isaac with a heavily spiced lamb stew, the ruse works and Isaac blesses Jacob as the inheritor of God's promise. Later, Laban will trick Jacob into marrying his elder daughter and Jacob will trick Laban into giving him a large flock of sheep and goats.

Finally, there is the theme of inversion. The stories in the Jacob saga always seem to end up with results upside-down from what the culture of that age would expect. The younger is always favored over the elder. Rebekah receives the oracle of the Lord that the firstborn of the twins she is carrying will serve the younger and, indeed, younger brother Jacob gets the birthright and the blessing. Those who heard this story later on in Israel's history would have known full well that the children of Israel came to dominate the children of Esau, then known as the kingdom of Edom. Jacob falls in love with Laban's younger daughter, Rachel, rather than her sister, Leah. And it is not Jacob's first born, Reuben, whom his father loves best and who ultimately saves the family from starvation, but little brother Joseph, he of the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat.

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But let's turn now from the overarching themes of the Jacob saga to the specifics of today's story, shedding some light on its more obscure features and finding the lessons in this ancient tale for our modern lives. The naming of the twins and the matter of the birthright, so central to this passage, are matters far removed from our own experience. Yet there are important truths here, once we clear away the mists of time, and we can track similar impulses, actions and consequences to those experienced by Jacob and Esau in our lives. Although the themes of trickery and strife are indeed central to the story, their opposites, faithfulness and hope, are implied and are our ultimate inheritance through the line of Israel.

So, what about those names? What was it in Esau's hairiness and Jacob's clutching that inspired their parents? There is not quite the clear correspondence in this naming that we see in other Biblical names, such as their father being named Yitzhak for laughter or their uncle Ishmael, whose story illustrates the truth of his name, "God Hears Me." Jacob's name, or Yaakov, probably means, "May Yahweh Protect," but Biblical Hebrew is rife with puns. The Hebrew word for heel is *'akev* and there is another pun on Jacob's name to be found in the story of his deception of Isaac. When Esau discovers that his brother has stolen the blessing, he says, "Is he not rightly named Jacob (*ya'aqob*)? For he has supplanted me (*wayya'equebeni*) these two times!" Esau's nickname of Edom is easy – it is the Hebrew word for red, referring both to his red hair and to the bowl of "red stuff" for which he bargained his birthright. His given name is a little more obscure. It was only in an article by Rabbi David Zauderer in (and, again, I'm not kidding about this publication's name) *Jewsweek* that I found the answer. Born with a full head of hair and a hairy body, the baby looked more mature than many newborns and his name is similar to the Hebrew word for complete, "*asui*."

We also read about the twins that, "When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents." The Texas Baptist scholar, James Adair, interprets that statement in light of the twins' conflict in this way: "Esau was an existentialist, living for the moment, enjoying life to the fullest. Jacob was a schemer, putting off immediate pleasure for the sake of long-term gain. Esau was too antsy to sit with the flock; he had to be out hunting for game. Jacob was too calculating to wander about hunting; he preferred the sure thing: a goat in a pen." Adair also draws some conclusion about what we can learn from both brothers and he is far more generous to Esau than many theologians have been. "From Esau we can learn to savor life, to enjoy it to the fullest every moment," he writes. "From Esau we can also learn the dangers of blowing a minor problem (hunger) into a major catastrophe, with the subsequent fallout. From Jacob we can learn to think long-term, to look at the big picture. Life is (usually) about more than just your next meal, and postponing pleasure can lead to greater rewards in the future. From Jacob we can also learn the dangers of treating achievements as more important than people, for what good is a birthright without a family in which to claim it?"

Adair's reference to the birthright leads us naturally to another ancient practice for which we have little referent today. In ancient Israel, as in most of the ancient world, the eldest son was given a priority over his brothers in the inheritance. He had the "birthright," which gave him a double portion of the assets distributed at his father's death and he was automatically considered the head of the family upon the death of his father. This gave him power over his brothers and sisters and over their children as well as long as the tribe remained together. We can learn from other Middle Eastern sources that the birthright was not always given to the eldest brother, but

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exceptions to the rule were rare enough that there is always a mild sense of scandal connected to what Howard Wallace called “the inversion” that happens again and again in the story of God’s people. It should always stand as a reminder to us that God often chooses the unlikely, the poor, the weak, the vulnerable, to carry the promise of God’s love and our redemption.

It’s hard to know what could have caused Esau to be so cavalier about his birthright. In this family, after all, the one with the birthright was the inheritor of God’s promise to Abraham, the promise of the land from the Nile to the Euphrates, the promise of descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky, the promise that those descendants would be a blessing to all nations. Was Esau’s acceptance of Jacob’s shrewd bargain simply a matter of impulse, the result of an empty belly and the enticing aroma of an immediate dinner? Did Esau think Jacob was joking? Perhaps at first, but surely not after Jacob made him swear to the deal. Was Esau simply overly confident in being the eldest, possibly the biggest and strongest, in being their father’s favorite?

Rabbi David Zauderer, drawing on the origin of Esau’s name and a long tradition of Jewish thought offers a slightly different understanding. “Esau saw himself as a complete and finished product,” he writes. According to this interpretation, Esau was so confident in his own abilities that he thought he had no need of his patrimony, not even the promises of God. Esau stands as the example of all those who would devalue the Kingdom of God in favor of their own strength, even to this day.

Or perhaps to Esau, ever the man of action, the birthright and the promise of God were just words. What were words to the strength of a man’s arm and the skill of a man’s hand? But words were important to Jacob. That’s why he made Esau swear to their bargain. Rabbi Zauderer also cites an old tradition that Jacob spent part of his time as “a quiet man, living in tents,” studying the written words of the promises made to Abraham and to Isaac. Rev. Sarah Buteux writes, “Jacob understood the power of words and took them extremely seriously. He seems to have understood that words don’t necessarily have to be uttered with thoughtfulness or sincerity to have an effect. Words, in and of themselves, are extremely powerful.” Again, it is a powerful reminder to us, for like Esau we too often use words carelessly. We say hurtful things that we later regret, make promises that we cannot keep, and generally, as James the Just wrote in his general epistle, do not “tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.” Perhaps it was Esau’s functional dismissal of the importance of God’s words, God’s promise, which caused the designers of the Revised Common Lectionary to pair this story with a portion of Psalm 119, the great hymn to God’s word given in Torah.

But whatever Esau’s motivation, it is clear that he gave up his birthright for a bowl of beans, that he was not faithful to his potential place in the promise, and over the millennia most Jews and Christians alike have regarded him, as another Old Testament writer might have said, as “a hissing and a curse.” The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews certainly used him as a negative example in the story of Israel’s faith: “See to it that no one becomes like Esau, an immoral and godless person, who sold his birthright for a single meal.”

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Are there ways in which we, too, run the risk of selling our birthright for a dish of stew? Consider the birthright that belongs to all humankind, that of our beautiful planet. We have known for decades that we are damaging our only home; the global warming crisis is just the latest example. And yet we are continually told by governments and industries alike that solutions are too expensive, that they would slow down the economy, that they would impact our way of life. Anna Grant-Henderson, another Australian commentator, compares modern humanity to the pleasure-first Esau: "It is also true of our hedonistic society that we live for the day and fail to be responsible to future consequences as did Esau with his birthright. We cut down forests and denude the land which is then susceptible to mud slides, etc. Many of us have used modern white goods which emit noxious gasses that have affected the ozone layer. We could go on and on with examples of our short sighted actions." Are we not as unfaithful in this way to God's promise as Esau was?

Then there is our birthright as followers of Christ Jesus, in whom we have become, in Paul's words to the Romans, "heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ." Are we, like Esau, so careless of our own futures in the promises of God that we are guilty of despising our birthright? In the Gospel passage for this morning's lectionary is Jesus' well-known parable of the sower and the seed, found in Matthew 13. Perhaps Esau could be compared to the seed planted in rocky soil. Born into the family of promise, he thrived initially, but as soon as he was distracted by his own belly, his faith withered away and he traded God's promise for beans. The Epistle reading for this morning, also from Romans, might also be applied to Esau: "Those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh; but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace."

I get all kinds of stories by e-mail from all kinds of folks – family members, friends and colleagues from over the years, even some of you. I read them all – I appreciate the thought that caused the sender to forward them but I get so many, I can't keep them all. I got one last week that I immediately remembered when I started working on this passage. Several years ago, according to the story, a preacher from out-of-state accepted a call to a church in a mid-size southern city. Some weeks after he arrived, he had an occasion to ride the bus from his home to the downtown area. When he sat down, he discovered that the driver had given him a quarter too much change. As he considered what to do, he thought to himself, "You'd better give the quarter back. It would be wrong to keep it." Then he thought, "Oh, forget it, it's only a quarter. Who would worry about this little amount? Anyway, the bus company gets too much fare; they will never miss it. Accept it as a "gift from God" and keep quiet."

When his stop came, he paused momentarily at the door, and then he handed the quarter to the driver and said, "Here, you gave me too much change." The driver, with a smile, replied, "Aren't you the new preacher in town?" "Yes" the preacher replied. "Well," said the bus driver, "I have been thinking a lot lately about going somewhere to worship. I just wanted to see what you would do if I gave you too much change. I'll see you at church on Sunday." When the preacher stepped off of the bus, he bowed his head in prayer and said, "Oh God, I almost sold your Son for a quarter." The story makes me wonder – how often do I sell my birthright in the sacrifice of Christ Jesus by my careless or selfish behavior?

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But Esau is not the only brother who behaves badly in this story. Whatever we may think of Esau, Jacob was clearly guilty of taking advantage of his brother in the deal they made, just as he was guilty later of taking advantage of his father's blindness. In his book, Understanding Genesis, Nahum Sarna points out that Jacob also reaped bitter consequences from his actions. "The quiet, mild-mannered, home-loving Jacob," Sarna writes, "favorite of his mother, was forced into precipitate flight, abandoning home and hearth, exiled from his nearest and dearest, to be ruthlessly exploited for twenty years by his uncle Laban." Sarna goes on to point to all of the difficulties Jacob faces in later life. Although the Genesis accounts tell us that Abraham died at "a good ripe age, old and contented," and that Isaac likewise died "in ripe old age," Jacob says near the end of his life that the years of his life have been "few and hard." Jacob and his sons after him inherit God's promise but this does not protect him from the cost of his own misdeeds.

Still, as we consider the story of Jacob and the story of Esau, we can find hope in God's faithfulness to them, even in the face of Esau's faithlessness and Jacob's conniving. Jacob was renamed Israel, did become the father of a nation. Esau, too, was the forefather of a nation, and even without his patrimony became the owner of huge flocks and lived well. As he told his brother upon their reunion, "I have enough." It is a reminder to us that even when our steps in the path of Christ Jesus are less than perfect, God will still bless us. God can still use us to accomplish amazing things.

So begins the story of Jacob, called Israel, whose life was a wrestling with God. For all his faults and failings, we find in his story an ultimate faithfulness to God and God's promise. Among his last words to his sons were the declaration that he still waited on the Lord for his salvation; his last thoughts were of God's Promised Land. Whatever our faults, may we too remain faithful to the God of promise, rooted in God's love, serving the Lord by serving the world which God loves so much.