

Scripture Reading Gen 27:1-35

Message -- 2024-07-28 "When the center breaks."

Imagine if you will a young couple in the doctor's office who have been struggling with infertility awaiting the results of their latest pregnancy test. They have been trying to get pregnant for several years and so far, nothing has worked.

But on this visit to the doctor, she returns to them with a broad smile on her face and says to them, "I have good news. Congratulations, you are pregnant!"

The couple is elated, and they have barely had time to catch each other's eye when the doctor says, "There is more...You are having twins!"

I asked some friends of mine with a similar story if they remember what was like and they said when they heard the news that it was just, "Pure Wow!"

Doing some math from Scripture indicates that for twenty years Isaac and Rebekah struggled with infertility. Then in Genesis 25, Isaac prays to the LORD for Rebekah to be able to conceive. (Probably not the first time he prayed this prayer)

And God answered his prayer!

Isaac was sixty years of age when he learns that finally, they would have a child! Rebekah was likely much younger, perhaps 20 years younger so she may have been 40.

As Rebekah's pregnancy progressed, so did the unrest in her womb. There was so much jostling (rib bruising?) going on inside of her that she thought something was terribly wrong. I wonder if she asked other mother's if they had experienced anything like this, and all of them were saying, oh, my goodness, no.

So Rebekah inquires of the Lord, "**Why am I like this?**" She seems to have been even a bit despondent like, "Why did you bless me with a child, if it is going to be like this?"

And God says, you are not just having twins, **you are birthing two nations.**

Was that just Pure Wow! I don't know, it isn't clear.

And this blessing comes with a surprising and maybe a heavy burden, These two will always be striving with each other and "**The older will serve the younger.**"

I really don't think that Rebekah ever forgot this, and probably wondered how this would even come to pass in their culture where the norm was for the blessing and the inheritance would go to the eldest son, not to the son who would be born second.

Rebekah's first born came out with a reddish appearance and a very hairy body. They named him Esau which means hairy.

But Esau was not free from the womb even though his little hairy body was out because the hand of the second son came with Esau. A tiny fist was wrapped firmly around Esau's ankle. And this boy was given the name Jacob which means **heel grabber, which was an idiom for "for someone deceptive you have to watch out for."**

As the boys grow, Esau becomes a hunter and loves the outdoors. Jacob likes staying at home, near the tents.

Isaac probably spent a lot of time with Esau and Jacob probably spent a lot of time with Rebekah. And Isaac loved Esau, and Rebekah loved Jacob.

When there are family favorites; it never makes things easier.

This was a family portrait ripe for a meltdown. It just needed the right trigger.

Many years later, when Isaac sensed his time on earth was short, he decided it was time to give his official blessing to Esau. This would be the normal cultural way of passing on the blessing. It went to the eldest son.

But Rebekah overhears what is about to take place and devises a plan for Jacob **to receive the blessing by deceiving Isaac** into thinking that Jacob is actually Esau.

While Esau is off hunting for game to prepare a dish for his father to then receive the blessing from him, Rebekah prepares a tasty dish that she knows is Isaac will love. Jacob is not hairy – he is smooth skinned - so she covers him with animal skins to make him feel hairy to the touch like Esau. And with Isaac's eyesight so poor, it didn't seem to matter if Jacob looked the part, he need to feel and sound like Esau for this to work.

When Jacob approaches Isaac as Esau, Isaac is not immediately convinced. This boy feels like Esau but sounds like Jacob. Isaac asks him how did you return with your catch of game and prepare it so quickly. Jacob said it was your God who gave me success.

After Isaac eats, he pulls Jacob close who also has Esau's clothes on, and it is **the smell of the clothes that seems to convince Isaac**, "Ah, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field that the Lord has blessed."

Then Isaac proceeds to bless Jacob believing that he is Esau.

After receiving the blessing, Jacob leaves and almost immediately, Esau enters with a savory dish he has made from his hunting.

**And Isaac begins to tremble
to shake uncontrollably.**

He is hit with the gut punch of knowing if this is Esau, then he just blessed the wrong person!

And Esau is distraught.

He begs for Isaac to bless him, give him even a little blessing, and Isaac says he cannot, he has given it all to Jacob, he has even made all his bothers his servants.

This is like the stunning reading of the will to find out that the wrong person has inherited the siblings rightful shares. For Isaac, this was not his intent, but he could not take it back. And he says the awful truth, "It was your brother who came deceitfully, dressed as you and tricked me.

Esau is now boiling with anger and then in Gen. 27:41 says, "When the days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother, Jacob."

The results were catastrophic for their family. Even their best Facebook photos with matching outfits posed on the beach could not save this family portrait. It broke the very center!

It's easy to heap lots of blame for this story on Rebekah. She was the one who thought up the plan and was brazen enough to even go against her husband which is remarkable in such a patriarchal culture.

It is interesting though that it was God that introduced the prophetic word that Esau would serve Jacob. And Rebekah may have internalized that in terms of seeing Jacob's identity through that lens. How often she must have thought about this as she watched them grow up together. And now she is faced with Isaac ready to bless Esau. She must have felt like God's plan was going to fall apart and needed a redirect and fast!

I am grateful that Scripture doesn't hide their family dysfunction. Because we all have our own dysfunction, and perhaps we can see some elements of hope in their story because God continues to work with them in spite of the wrecked relationships.

They are in a different culture and in ancient history, but their motivations are not that different from what we struggle with at times.

May we give Rebekah some grace.

She had a pregnancy like no one around her.

She heard a prophetic word directly from the Lord that would go against the observed customs of her community.

And she probably believed she would have to witness the upending of that prophecy if Isaac went through with the blessing of Esau.

Translate that to our lives. If we believe we know how something is supposed to work out, and we see a way to influence the outcome, we are very likely to act, *especially* if it is on behalf of one of our children.

So we act, we find some lever of history that can bend the plot to the outcome we want and that we believe is best.

Don't we all struggle with that? If we have the power to get things toward an outcome that we believe is the right one, we may feel it is irresponsible to not take action.

We want to believe that our actions are just and that our motivations are pure. But as I look at this story, I wonder, what was Rebekah motivated by? Was she afraid if she did not intervene that God's promise would fail? Were her actions born out of fear? Or were her actions motivated by love? Not just love for Jacob, but love for Esau and love for her husband, Isaac?

Was she so sure of what God told her that it could even mean acting out in ways that would cause breaks in relationship with other family members and hurt them deeply?

But I wonder, what might have happened if Rebekah could have shared the burden of her prophetic word?

How might this story go had Rebekah shared her word from the Lord with Isaac, Esau, and Jacob? Would there have been a way to use their creativity to work together toward a solution rather than deceive each other for the sake of a prescribed outcome?

It is an important question to ask ourselves when we are in tension with someone and want to act to get things to turn out how we want them or think is the right outcome.

Am I motivated out of love?

Or

Am I motivated out of fear?

And when our actions do harm to others, do we take responsibility for our part of the broken or strained relationship? Even if we think only 5 or 10% of break in relationship was our responsibility. Each person needs to take responsibility for their part in order to grow to a better and healthier way of relating.

It is interesting that even after Jacob has deceived Isaac and Rebekah knows Jacob needs to flee because Esau has vowed to kill him, she doesn't share that with Isaac and doesn't own up to the fact that it was her plan to deceive Isaac.

So she shades the truth and tells Isaac that she doesn't want to see Jacob take a wife from the foreign people around them so please send him to my brother Laban so he can find a wife from our lineage.

So Isaac sends Jacob to Laban. It wasn't primarily to find a wife, it was to escape Esau and as Rebekah says, Stay with Laban until Esau forgets what you did to him."

As Jacob flees in chapter 27, it says that he came to a “certain place.” This place was a barren, rocky mount defined only by the fact that this is where he needed to stop and rest for the night. There was little comfort. He only had a rock to use as a place to rest his head upon and try to sleep.

I wonder what thoughts must have been swirling in Jacob’s mind.

He and his mother had conspired together to steal the blessing from Esau by deceiving his father.

Esau has vowed to kill Jacob.

And now Jacob is on the run. A fugitive.

He is now separated from his family and a long way from the success of his clever scheme. He is no longer welcome in his home. He is separated from his mother and must wonder how long it will be before as she said, “Esau forgets what Jacob did.”

Do you ever lie awake at night, wondering how things are going to work out after what has happened. Our days keep us busy and keep our minds from fixating on our worry, our regret, and our doubt about what is next.

But when we come to the pillow, to lie in our bed, in the silence, the stillness, the thoughts often return and try as we might to not think of whatever “It” is, “It” can keep us up at night.

Whatever Jacob’s thoughts, his worry, regret, his doubt, he somehow found a way to get some sleep, using a rock for his pillow.

Then...

during the night, Jacob has a dream where a ladder or stairway went from the earth all the way up to heaven where God dwells.

And the angels of God were going up and down the ladder busily moving from heaven to earth and back up to heaven again.

And Jacob realizes that there is more going on in this “certain place” than he had assumed.

It was not just the empty, barren, rocky landscape, it was a place where God inhabited and was active. God was there with Jacob and God speaks to him,

I am the God of Abraham and your father Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your descendants. They will be like the dust of the earth, and will be without number like the stars of heaven as God had said to Abraham.

In the middle of his fear and abandonment, God says,

I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

And Jacob declares when he wakes from his sleep that

Surely, God is in this place, and I did not know it. How Awesome! This is none other than the house of God. So he named it Beth-El which means house of God.

We tend to make judgments about whether God is in a certain place or not. Is God at work in my life? Is God at work in yours? Is God at work in our congregation? Is God at work in our nation? Our schools? Our workplaces? Is God paying attention to what is happening in our world...

Or do we think that the stairway has been pulled back up to heaven and the door is now shut.

Despite what Jacob had done, maybe even wondering if God could possibly want to work with him anymore after what he had done, that ladder had not been pulled up away from him.

God was present and acting in Jacob's life, and God even affirms the promise of Abraham is now going to Jacob and adds this line that is full of grace...I am going to use you to bring blessing to all the families of the entire earth. Genesis 28:13-14.

You who have caused such great pain to your own family, I am going to make you a blessing to all the families of the earth.

I think that is one of the fundamental truths we need to hold onto in broken relationships is that God is working, and that God is paying attention. There is more going on in the other person than we know. God continues to work with you, God continues to work with the other. No one stays where we think they do. We might freeze them in the place and in the time where we were harmed, but people do keep growing.

We will do what is ours to do, and let God do what is Gods to do. And that takes some discernment together around Scripture and around our stories.

And the harms are real. Rebekah probably didn't expect to have to send her favorite son to her brothers. And I don't think Rebekah or Jacob believed this would be the last time they saw each other.

I really think Rebekah thought it might be for a few months, a few years at worst, but Jacob was gone for 20 years and his mother would die before he returned. Scripture doesn't indicate that they ever saw each other again.

This story isn't about easy forgiveness. There is a saying that family systems are not fooled by time or distance. It is almost laughable to hear Rebekah telling Jacob to flee but he can come back when Esau has forgotten. Families don't forget.

And it helps us understand that to **"Forgive and Forget" is one of the least helpful pieces of advice out there for healing families** and restoring relationships.

What we need is to "Re-member and Change."

And that is very hard work.

So may we ask ourselves every now and then, are my actions motivated out of love or am I motivated out of fear. One releases, one grabs for control. One sees outcomes over people the other sees people over outcomes.

Am I willing to take responsibility for how I contributed to the break in relationship? Even if it is a small part, it is important for growing together and for our personal growth.

And may we stick with the story. The end isn't yet written. God is working in ways we don't know and cannot see.

After all the catastrophic events of this family meltdown, Jacob came to a place, a barren rocky mount, a place he expected nothing and experienced something so Awesome, that it caused him to be afraid. He had encountered the living God and a power he knew he could not control. And he named the place Bethel – the house of God.

May we find hope in this God. We may ask where God is when our relationships fall apart? This story shows that God is in the very center of our broken relationships, working with us, often unseen. And my prayer is that you are in a barren, rocky place, that you may be able to experience God in a way that will leave you saying,

Surely, God was in this place, and I did not know it.

Amen.