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JACOB AND ESAU: "ALL MY CHILDREN"
You don't get to pick your family

Why are people drawn to soap operas? It's not just the detergents! Perhaps we see ourselves in the drama. We can relate to the aspirations, failures, loves and desires, dreams and ambitions, losses, jealousies and competitions, pleasures and successes, sufferings and conflicts. In the words of Zorba, "The whole catastrophe!" So it is also with the epic stories from the Hebrew Scriptures in which we can easily locate our blemished and loveable humanity. The stories from Genesis are not historical so much as mythic and archetypal. They inform us how the religious leaders of Israel understood God and God's interactions with his "chosen people". We might see ourselves as better than the flawed characters and perhaps we are. But to paraphrase one teacher, *not much has changed in human dysfunction over the millennia.*

Today we return to the story of the patriarchs of ancient Israel, a drama with shadow and light. Several weeks ago, in the lectionary, when the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham, his father, seemed all but certain, the future of Israel hung by a thread. The sacred promise was teetering on the edge of an abyss. Isaac (and the future of the Hebrew people) was saved by divine intervention. He went on to marry Rebekah. Like Sarah, her mother-in-law, she too was "barren". We should note the obvious, that in those times, people thought that childlessness was caused only by women. Men were never seen as impotent. In any case, childlessness can be painful in any era or culture.

Rebekah and Isaac were in their advanced middle age. The story suggests that they had been trying to have a child for 20 years. So Isaac went to God in prayer asking for a child. His prayer was answered and the glory went to God. Like Sarah before her, Rebekah conceived late in years. To the listeners of this epic, this was a white-knuckle suspense. God had promised a great nation to Abraham. The fulfillment of that promise was never certain. Would God be faithful to his word? Would this less than promising ("stiff-necked people") tribe be successful? Yes, but only with God's forbearance and intervention. This is how they understood God.

In fulfilling the desires of Rebekah and Isaac, there is good news and bad news. God is something of a trickster. Not only would there be a son and an heir, there would be two. "Double trouble." Miracle babies, as all babies are! The Semitic root of the name, Rebekah, means "to tie, couple or join". The twins within her would be tied together in life.

We hear that "*The children struggled within Rebekah; and she said, 'If it is to be this way, why do I live?'*" There is something almost humorous about the brothers already clashing in the womb. Nevertheless, Rebekah foresaw trouble for her family and herself. The struggle inside her body between Jacob and Esau foreshadowed their conflicts in life. Some scholars understand this story to be etiological, that is as written after the fact to explain the later enmity between the Arab and Jewish nations, especially Egypt and Israel. Creating the myth to explain the contentious politics.

((Commentator, Dan Clendenin writes, "*One should keep in mind that these narratives are told from a pro-Jacob/pro-Israel perspective. The portrayal of a God who sides with the powerless, the weak, the younger brother, the barren woman is moreover a theological perspective that reveals something of Israel's self-understanding as a tiny, powerless people who lived in the midst of much stronger nations.*")

The story of Jacob and Esau is a religious and cultural foundation myth. Esau, who came out first, was "red" and hairy. His name means, "completely developed". Jacob came second grasping the heel of Esau. His Hebrew name, a play on words, means, "supplanter", "heel grabber" or "leg puller". Primogeniture was critical in establishing family hierarchy and maintaining social order. Esau's arriving first set the stage for the drama to follow. Though it was only a matter of seconds, by virtue of being born first, Esau had all the privileges of the first-born male. As such, he was entitled to two

thirds of his father's wealth and property and all of his authority after his death.

These boys were different in every way. Esau was "a man of the field", an outdoorsman, a man's man, a skillful hunter and a one-day-at-a-time sort of guy. He was the favorite of his father, Isaac. Jacob, on the other hand, was a "quiet man, living in tents." He seems to have been domestic, reflective and introverted. He was his mother's favorite. From these profiles of the two boys one might assume that Esau, the hunter, would have been the aggressor. Not so.

Here then are the family dynamics; father Isaac and Esau in alliance; mother Rebekah and Jacob in an opposing alliance. The parents' taking sides reinforces the sibling rivalry. How unusual is this? Not very, though most parents and most children might not be aware of or want to acknowledge such pairings and competition. Sibling rivalries are often played out at an unconscious level

One way to look at Jacob and Esau is to see their different natures as complimentary, two sides of a whole person. In what ways do they complete each other? What would each need to do to separate from their twin-ness and become whole individuals?

Talmudic scholars say the boys were 15 years old on the day of the "stew" incident. Esau had been out hunting and returned "famished". He asked for "some of that red stuff" (probably lentil stew) that Jacob had been cooking. Jacob's next words may be outrageous, but at least they are direct and honest. He says, "*First sell me your birthright.*" Ouch! His brother is hungry and this is the way he responds? What happens next is equally astonishing. Esau says yes. "*I am about to die, what use is my birthright?*" Then again Jacob, "*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 went his way.*" Jacob is a wheeler-dealer. This characteristic will surface again when he steals the blessing from Isaac that belongs to Esau. In this first instance with the stew, there is a certain ruthlessness but no deception. Jacob is a man with a plan and the cleverness and will to pursue it. Esau comes across as impulsive and non-reflective, a man driven by instinctual appetites and unacquainted with delayed gratification. In spite of his flaws, I think I would prefer Jacob to Esau as my leader.

((It may be that the first half of one's psychological life is devoted to negotiating peace with mother and father. The second half appears to approach the more complex sibling relationships (in which the deceased or living parents still play their parts). Often in groups and organizations this complexity may be acted out in ways without anyone even being aware of what is going on.

I don't have any awareness of how all this works in the case of single children, but I suspect they have their own challenges.))

The paragraph omitted by the lector today was added to a later edition of the text. In it, God tells Rebekah, "*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.*" I omitted this paragraph because it attempts to explain away the human frailty of Jacob and Esau, ascribing what they do and what happens to them as destiny or providence. Misbehavior and weakness are then justified because they seem to fulfill God's prophetic will. But God's gain in this case diminishes human freedom.

If we include the italicized portion, Jacob could say that the Lord made me do it, or, I betrayed my brother to please God. If you think the evil you are doing is God's will you can do almost anything to harm or destroy God's creatures and creation. You do not have to look far in the world to see this perverse misreading of the divine heart to suit human connivance.

Let's suppose that each of us has an Esau and a Jacob in our psyches and that they contend with each other. If we cannot identify with either of those two types, at least we can probably acknowledge the presence of disparate factions within us: love and anger, fear and aggression, compassion and disgust, generosity and stinginess and other dualities. It would take Jacob and Esau over 40 years to be reconciled. That's not too bad when you look at a fraternal conflict such as that of Israel and Palestine, two Semite peoples with the same Abrahamic ancestor.

Neither is forty years a long time to reconcile the estranged parts of our own souls and hearts. In fact, 40 years might be short. But the promise of spiritual harvest is always there for each of us at any age. Jesus treats everyone as a "first-born". Everyone.

In his parable of the sower, most of the seeds fail to flourish. I do not take this to mean that there are good people and bad people, but that each of us goes through seasons where the seeds of spiritual growth may or may not take root. We all have good soil. It is the birthright of each of us to “bring forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

Let anyone with ears listen.”

Genesis 25:19-34

⁹These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham’s son: Abraham was the father of Isaac, ²⁰and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean. ²¹Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. ²²The children struggled together within her; and she said, “If it is to be this way, why do I live?” So she went to inquire of the Lord. ²³

((And 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.”)) ²⁴

When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. ²⁵The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. ²⁶Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau’s heel. So he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

²⁷When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. ²⁸Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob.

²⁹Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. ³⁰Esau said to Jacob, “Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!” (Therefore he was called Edom.)

³¹Jacob said, “First sell me your birthright.” ³²Esau said, “I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?” ³³Jacob said, “Swear to me first.” So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. ³⁴Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.