

September 24, 2017
Fugitive Blessing
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Genesis 27:1-4, 15-23; 28:10-17

When Isaac was old and his eyes were dim so that he could not see, he called his elder son Esau and said to him, “My son”; and he answered, “Here I am.” ² He said, “See, I am old; I do not know the day of my death. ³ Now then, take your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field, and hunt game for me. ⁴ Then prepare for me savory food, such as I like, and bring it to me to eat, so that I may bless you before I die.”

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; 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 he 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?” He 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 He did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau’s hands; so he blessed him.

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¹⁰ Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹ He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head 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; 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 Abraham your father and the God of 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.”

When she turned 80 years old, the grandmother of my good friend, Gwenie, invited her ten grandkids to tell her in a note what they'd like to have from her house, when the time came for her things to be divided up. To a one these ten grandkids love Grandma Macy and would never, ever want her to think them greedy or demanding. And to a one, each and every one of them asked for that special hand tool she had in her kitchen for slicing potatoes into waffle fries. It was #1 on all ten lists! Grandma Macy's feelings were just a little hurt that no one wanted anything more than a potato slicer. But that was twelve years ago and she's totally over it now. And she won't say who is getting the potato slicer. A potato slicer or a million dollars we can get our heads around, but an inheritance of words makes little sense to us. We'd say, "Well, that didn't count!!"

Seems like Isaac ought just to take it back – have a do-over with Esau, once he'd realized he'd been tricked. But word was more than gold to them. Word spoke reality into being. Word and gesture were the very activity of creation – the blessing could no more be taken back than an arrow, shot, can be unshot.

It makes my stomach hurt to read how Rebekah and Jacob had this plan in place. How as soon as they heard Isaac say to Esau, "It's time," they were ready. I trash-talked husbands last week. But Rebekah – Rebekah is as bad as Abraham. She all but wishes one son dead – and treats her husband disgracefully.

And I know you've read your homework, so I know that you know that this jealousy and favoritism between the boys is old as they are. Jacob is mean. Esau strikes me as more trusting than bright. Jacob has schemed against Esau since birth. He's coveted the blessing since they were old enough to build a fire. The blessing is the Promise itself given to Abraham from God – the promise of descendants numerous as the stars, and land to belong to them.

The blessing – the promise – was everything. But what Rebekah and Jacob heard (I guess – I don't really know what they thought the blessing consisted of. Maybe they wanted it mostly because they couldn't have it – but I'm imagining they imagined it as wealth, control of so much wealth): The Promise was enormous – more than a person could fathom. And yet, it passed from one generation to another in such frail ways. Remember how Sarah and Abraham panicked and ended up with Ishmael too? In this case there are the words and touch of a bedridden, blind man who believes himself at death's door. He is not, in fact. He will live two or three more decades.

He calls his good-hearted, but not the-sharpest-tool-in-the-box, son to his side and says, "It's time. Go kill and cook our last meal, so we can eat, and I can speak to you the blessing." Meanwhile the other two spring into action. Jacob gets on his costume and practices his lines. Rebekah thaws the roast and bread she's had ready for months. Isaac knows something isn't right, but either he doesn't have the strength to discern for sure or he doesn't have the heart to admit to himself what is happening – to admit to himself what his own wife and child are doing. He'll risk the blessing before he'll admit that.

It is sickening to listen to Jacob lie to his father. And worse to watch Esau weep. It's called pathos – this aching, sickening sorrow between the father and the son. Without pathos we'd have a very skinny Bible – and hardly any literature at all. The parent failed to keep one brother from doing his best to kill the other, and the injured brother is devastated. The injury can't be undone or taken back. The daddy comforts the injured one as best he can, already planning how to protect the lying child from the weeping one, knowing that grief is going to turn to murderous rage really soon.

Jacob inherits everything and becomes a fugitive. Through him the promise will continue. Fleeing back to his mama's people, although he's never met them, where Esau hopefully cannot follow. Genesis 28:10-17 is the centerpiece text of the Jacob narrative, the stairway to heaven dream in which he receives the same promise his grandfather received – directly from God.

I love how Frederick Buechner wrote it in his Who's Who of Bible characters. The hardest part of the Jacob story is the same hardest part of the David story and the Peter story – and the Paul story: Jacob's a jerk; he's a crook; he really is truly awful – and God is on his side. Jacob wishes his brother dead, he steals from his dying father, he hightails it out of town – and God blesses him double.

It makes me crazy. I want the Bible to make sense – not just any sense, but the sense I like, where the good things happen to good people who make good choices to be kind and generous to everyone all the time – people who, when they get bored or scared, don't turn selfish and jealous and conniving and mean. But of course that can't be how things work, since that isn't how people are. What could God get done only using people who only ever make good choices? Practically nothing, I suspect.

Years ago a certain boy was really, really terrible to one of my girls. He was a year or two ahead of her in high school. I fantasized about running over him with my car. My daughter said, "Let it go, Mom. The universe will take care of him." Here's the thing: when it's not my life and not my kid, especially when it's a story on a page, I can see that faith in God can only happen in the ordinary flow of ordinary human existence, in the course of how people truly live and behave – not how they ought to behave or should behave, but how we actually DO behave in the messiness of being alive and being related to other human beings.

It was God's idea to arrange us into families in the first place. When it works, it's awesome. But even when it works it's not awesome every day – amen? Some days stink – amen? And for clarification: by *family* I'm talking about people who are blood kin to each other. I'm also talking about people who just sort of fall in together and end up calling each other *family*. I am also talking about church: folks with nothing in common but faith. It is all family.

But every single family that ever was or is or will be has one thing in common. For better or worse, we are what God has to work with. How families ought to act and

should act may seem obvious. It just isn't very relevant when it comes to God's will getting worked out in the world.

Jacob was a trickster and a crook. But he had nothing on his Uncle Laban. (You'll read about him in this week's homework.) Uncle Laban swindled Jacob out of 14 years of labor before Jacob knew what hit him. Jacob eventually caught on – and caught up in the swindling business. He swindled Laban right back and then had to run away again, this time with his four baby mamas: two wives, two concubines, as many as two dozen kids, servants, flocks and herds. It was a slow train.

And guess where they were headed? Back to Esau – about whom he had no idea: will he take us in or kill all of us on sight? He has nowhere else to go. Plus, the Promise sends him there. I like thinking God could be generous with young Jacob, because God knew what the universe had planned for him over the next thirty years. If God could move the promise from one generation to the next only when folks were acting right, it would have never gotten past Abraham and Sarah.

And I'm convinced it's not by default either, as if God is settling with less than what God wishes for us. But rather, God knows it is very difficult to be a human being related to other human beings. Most of us are calculating and covetous on our best days. The only faith we have is the faith God gives us. And this is what God has to work with – by God's own design, mind you, but still, this is it.

It's true that Jacob got the blessing, but I'm not sure Esau didn't have the happier life. He certainly had less drama. Everything terrible Jacob did to his own daddy, was paid back to him tenfold by his own sons. They were horrible brothers. And also next to inherit the blessing, then lose it for the next 400 years, obliterated from their memories. The very ground you lie upon shall be yours and your descendants', is what God said in Jacob's dream. Jacob could reach out his hand and touch it. And yet, it wasn't to happen in his lifetime.

Turns out the fugitive isn't Jacob after all. The fugitive is the blessing itself – forever slipping between the petty coveting and the calculations of brothers, generations of brothers – and a sister here and there – who simply cannot trust the Father's love for them. A blessing the fulfillment of which is always moving further and further away in time and space than Jacob ever could have dreamed, the night he dreamed it on his stone pillow. This promise he covets and cannot take care of: 400 years it's buried in Egypt, utterly forgotten by Jacob's great-grandchildren's children, until a baby in a basket comes floating down a river to be discovered by a princess who carries it home and says, "Can we keep him, Daddy?" Having no idea there was a fugitive promise in the basket too, that very, very naïve daddy – he told her yes.

Would you pray with me?