

“Blessing and Deception: The Story of Jacob”  
Genesis 24 -35, selected verses  
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Oh, what a tangled web we weave. Is there a single, solitary hero in this story? Rebekah and Isaac play favorites. Esau sells his birthright for a mess of pottage. Jacob deceives his father, with assistance from his mother. Esau vows revenge and murder. Their mother rescues her favorite, and sends Jacob off to her brother Laban. Uncle Laban in turn tricks Jacob into marrying his eldest daughter Leah. Jacob, who learned well from his parents, plays favorites with his wives. In the meantime Laban's sons are getting edgy about the goods Jacob is accumulating. Jacob skips town with everything that's not nailed down. Uncle Laban catches up; they settle with a pact. Then Jacob sets his face for home ... where Esau – the one who sought to kill him -- awaits.

And God somehow blesses it all.

It is a profound witness to the faithfulness and power of God to use people as they are. Not just Jacob, but the whole Shakespearean cast of characters surrounding him: his mother and father, his brother and uncle, his two wives who are sisters. All of their cunning and foolish and weak choices are woven into the fabric of the mantle of blessing God would weave.

But it is Jacob on whom we focus today ... on Jacob, the one God whom names Israel.

Israel. What does this name mean to us? For the moment, set aside whatever you think of the modern nation-state of Israel. For the moment, consider instead what the Bible had in mind when it was written ... Israel, the people once enslaved in Egypt ... Israel, the nation under King David ... Israel, overtaken by Assyrians and exiled by the Babylonians ... Israel, returned to its land but occupied -- by Persia, and then Greece, and then Rome. When Jacob is renamed Israel, we are meeting not only the father of a people ... we are also getting a first glimpse of the nation that bears his name. The Jews – and we Christians engrafted to the covenant – we *are* Israel in these stories. As we encounter Jacob – Israel – in these readings, we come to know our tribal patriarch ... but we also come to know the whole family of faith that sprang from him. It is, if you will, his faith's DNA that we are glimpsing ... his faith's DNA that we ourselves carry ... his faith's DNA that repeats itself in us. So Jacob's – Israel's -- story becomes our story, the paradigm of our faith. Today we will explore what that paradigm reveals for us ... and *in* us.

First, note well Jacob's desire to manipulate outcomes. Now, seizing control is not a new trait in our faith story. Last week, we saw how close Abraham and Sarah came to derailing God's promise of offspring, because they took matters into their own hands. Abraham gave Sarah away to Pharaoh to be a wife; he tried to name Eliezer, his slave, as his heir; Sarah gave Hagar, her maid, to bear a son; and both Sarah and Abraham openly doubted God – openly laughed in God's face at the promise. But still, God chose Abraham to be the father of many nations, a blessing to all the earth, the rock upon which God would rebuild creation –after God tested him, to make sure the foundation would hold.

That desire to manipulate the outcomes – to seize control -- we see it again in today's readings; only this time Jacob's motivation isn't noble. At least Abraham and Sarah were seeking to fulfill *God's* promises when the going got rough. Jacob's only agenda is to tilt things in his favor. He buys Esau's birthright; he tricks his father into a blessing; he cheats Laban blind,

and then he runs away like a thief in the night. Jacob's cunning is endless, and his brazenness is breathtaking.

And if we find ourselves approaching life with similar aspirations, a similar desire for power, even similar Machiavellian devices, well, we come by it honestly. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, the tree of Jacob our father. The tactics of using our friends and family to get ahead, or deceiving people if we want something badly enough, or swindling people out of what is not ethically ours, or running away to avoid responsibility – these are not original to us.

Now, let me be clear -- God doesn't condone or applaud these manipulations. But what I find most interesting is the way God *uses* Jacob's proclivities to further the divine agenda. It would be dangerous to over-generalize this: I'm not suggesting that anyone should be a dirty rat, so God's gracious will can prosper; or, as St. Paul more eloquently put it, we should not "sin, so that grace may abound." But if we find ourselves – or those around us – with ignoble character flaws, it bears asking the question: how can God use this, even this, for his will?

The second faith-trait of Jacob's that bears naming is this: the pattern of family brokenness. Dysfunction permeates every generation of Jacob's family: husband against wife, uncle against nephew, sister against sister, brother against brother. When earnest Christians talk about returning to Bible-based family values, I hope that they're not looking here.

And yet ... and yet, I do hope they look here, and look with compassion, for I don't know any family that is untouched by such intimate pain. Every child wants to know that he or she is loved ... but most of us know that, in spite of our parents' protestations, one of the siblings in our household is loved best. And the roles we play in our families get replayed over and over again in our lives: whether dutiful eldest, or wild renegade, or fragile china doll, or the self-defining pioneer that can't wait to leave home. We may like to think we have defined ourselves in these roles, but reality tells us that our parts have been assigned to us in no small part by the family system that swirls around us ... in our mother's ambition, our father's preference, our grandparents' unfinished business. It is no wonder there is tension, silent or spoken, within the family compounds our generations occupy.

So it is that Jacob's family experience is repeated again and again as the paradigm for our lives. Jacob's – Israel's – story is, at a very real level, our story. But lest we despair, we must remember that it is not just the brokenness of his family that relives in us. It is also the remarkable fact of reconciliation ... the surprising grace that appears out of nowhere again and again. Esau has every reason to kill his brother ... but their mother intervenes and sends him safely to her brother's home. Jacob might justifiably hate his uncle ... but his love for Rachel overcomes his anger. Jacob fears for his reunion with Esau ... but instead his brother weeps at seeing him again, the two estranged men sobbing on each other's necks. In the end, they come to peace – a separate peace, but peace nonetheless. And God keeps appearing, over and over in the midst of them, leading the way, leading Jacob home. And I do believe that this part of the story can repeat itself powerfully in us too, as God brings us grace, and forgiveness, and a way forward.

As with Jacob/Israel, God uses our desire to manipulate outcomes ... and as with Jacob/Israel, God offers us peace in our broken families.

And thirdly, as with Jacob/Israel, God appears in our worst struggles to transform us. This third aspect of Jacob's story that repeats itself in us is the most important one of all: ... the transformative power of our struggle in life ... the transformative power of our wrestling with God. This theme of formative struggle repeats itself over and over again in Scripture – in the Israelites' flight from Egypt ... in King David's inner wrestling with his sin ... in the people's punishing years of exile ... and even in Jesus' life, when for forty days he wrestled with the devil in the wilderness. Every human life has its struggles ... but when God is part of the equation, our labor is not in vain ... our struggles are not without meaning.

And Jacob's life is one struggle after another. With his mother, Rebekah. With his brother, Esau. With his father, Isaac. With his uncle, Laban. With himself. And ultimately, even with God. But like an immutable chemical reaction, Jacob is transformed by every interaction. He is a changed man: when he was cheated by Laban, he learned the cost of deceit; when he was threatened by Esau, he learned the price of betrayal; standing alone at the Jabbok, he learned what it means to fear God. He emerged a different man: renamed by God as Israel.

I cannot know what your struggles in life have been, what demons within or battles without. I can only promise that it is the nature of the life of faith to have them.

Life's struggles can appear in many forms. Sooner or later, we will, all of us, grapple with illness, the decline of our bodies or the assault of age. Even when our pains are "normal," it is no small thing when we feel our very flesh betray us. And many of us know the struggles of doubt in our relationships, or the demons of worry in our minds. For some, we hang on for dear life when the ground shifts under our marriage, or depression pins us to the bed in the morning, or anxiety freezes us in our tracks, or the fear of getting fired makes us physically ill. No matter what our struggle, we, all of us, know what it's like to wrestle as if our life depended on it – to wrestle with powers out of our control, or to wrestle with the people who we'd hoped would love us the most, or to wrestle our worst selves to the mat ... or even, even to wrestle with God.

What we may not know yet is that in wrestling, we are changed. Like Jacob who wrestles God through his own dark night of the soul, we are so involved in surviving the battle that we don't recognize our transformation.

But one day, we wake up from the nightmare we endure, and we find ourselves on the other side of the Jabbok, limping, but alive. Freed from fear ... filled with gratitude ... and clearer than we've ever been about the purpose of our lives.

It is a profound witness to the faithfulness and power of God to use people as they are. Not just Jacob – Israel -- but us too – prone to manipulating outcomes for our favor ... entangled in family dynamics that sometimes tear us apart ... bruised by the struggles and trials life dishes out. God uses us in ways we cannot imagine. God uses us as blessings beyond what we would ever, on our own, intend. God transforms us, not just for our sake, but so that his purposes may be accomplished. God uses us – all of us – we, who are Israel's children. Amen.