

**ORDER OF WORSHIP** Aug. 1, 2021 Trinity UMC

**Children's Time**      *We are Climbing Jacob's Ladder* #418

Gen. 28: 10 – 20

Meanwhile, Jacob left his home Beersheba and traveled to see his Uncle Laban toward Haran. <sup>11</sup> At sundown he arrived at a good place to set up camp and stopped there for the night. Jacob found a stone to rest his head against and lay down to sleep. <sup>12</sup> As he slept, he dreamed of a stairway that reached from the earth up to heaven. And he saw the angels of God going up and down the stairway.

How many times does God say the word 'will?'

<sup>13</sup> At the top of the stairway stood the LORD, who said: "I am the LORD, the God of your grandfather Abraham, and the God of your father, Isaac. The ground you are lying on belongs to you. I am giving it to you and your descendants. <sup>14</sup> Your descendants **will** be as numerous as the dust of the earth! They **will** spread out in all directions—to the west and the east, to the north and the south. And all the families of the earth **will** be blessed through you and your descendants. <sup>15</sup> What's more, I am with you, and I **will** protect you wherever you go. One day I **will** bring you back to this land. I **will** not leave you until I have finished giving you everything I have promised you."

<sup>16</sup> Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I wasn't even aware of it!" <sup>17</sup> But he was also afraid and said, "What an awesome place this is! It is none other than the house of God, the very gateway to heaven!"

<sup>18</sup> The next morning Jacob got up very early. He took the stone he had rested his head against, and he set it upright as a memorial pillar. Then he poured olive oil over it. <sup>19</sup> He named that place Bethel (which means "house of God"), although it was previously called Luz.

How many times does Jacob say 'If?'

<sup>20</sup> Then Jacob made this vow: "**If** God will indeed be with me and protect me on this journey, and **if** God will provide me with food and clothing, <sup>21</sup> and **if** I return safely to my father's home, then the LORD will certainly be my God. <sup>22</sup> And this memorial pillar I have set up will become a place for worshiping God, and I will present to God a tenth of everything he gives me.' "

Jacob had trouble trusting God but when God says something, God is true to what is promised.

**Sermon**      ***What Happened to Jacob?***

**Scripture**      Genesis 27: 27 – 29, 30 – 40

Genesis 28:1- 5

Genesis 32: 11 – 21

I am continuing with this summer's topic about Family Conflict in the Bible.

Some of you who notice these things, may have been expecting me to talk about Dinah and her brothers. I didn't take into account how much there is to say about Jacob! Like Uncle Laban last week, Jacob has been nagging at me all week because I haven't yet told you the rest of the story about his life. You heard Uncle Laban's perspective last week and Jacob's love life the week before but that's only a few chapter of a much longer story.

So today, let's all pretend that we are part of the Abraham, Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah family group. It's quite probable that everyone knew that Jacob was Rebekah's favorite and that Esau was Isaac's favorite.

Everyone would have known that the two brothers were feuding with each other from before the time they were even born.

And then one day...Jacob just disappeared from the community.

Here one day...gone the next.

Imagine the buzz around the campfires: **What happened to Jacob?**

He was such a stay at home kind of young man always hanging around the tents. .

Where did he go? What happened to Jacob!?!?

Let's imagine, if you will, that there was maybe a water boy who went from tent to tent filling up the water jars. And one day, he was by Rebekah's tent and overheard, as servants sometimes do...Rebekah telling Jacob to go trick his poor, old, blind father Isaac into giving him the blessing intended for Esau.

If you were that water boy...wouldn't you rearrange your schedule to be hanging around Isaac's tent a while later to over hear what happened when Jacob appeared, dressed in Esau's clothes, carrying a delicious tray of food for the patriarch, Isaac?

Let me read to you what that water boy would have overheard.

Gen. 27: 27 – 29

<sup>27</sup> So Jacob (pretending to be Esau) came near and kissed his father, Isaac; and Isaac smelled the smell of his garments, and blessed him, reassured that he was in fact Esau. And Isaac said,

"See, the smell of my son

is like the smell of the field that the LORD has blessed.

<sup>28</sup> My son, may God grant you from the dew of heavens,

and of the fat of the earth,

and abundance of grain and drink.

<sup>29</sup> May peoples serve you,

and nations bow before you.

Be over lord to your brothers,

and may your mother's sons bow before you.

Those who curse you be cursed,

And those who bless you, blessed.<sup>iii</sup>

The water boy would have something to tell the others: Imagine him saying:

'He did it. Jacob got the blessing from Isaac. Under false pretenses but none-the-less.

Wow...'

Anyone listening would have said: **That Jacob. Always scheming. Devious. That's the way he is and he'll never change. You gotta watch that one. So then what happened to Jacob?**

The waterboy would go on to say:

He went out from the presence of his father Isaac and in came Esau. Bringing freshly captured and prepared food from the fields just like Isaac asked. And you should have been there because there was a scene to tug at your heart strings even now.

**Genesis 27: 30 – 40** At the sound of Esau's voice...Then Isaac trembled violently, and said, "Who was it then that hunted game and brought it to me, and I ate it all<sup>[a]</sup> before you came, and I have blessed him?—yes, and blessed he shall be!"

<sup>34</sup> When Esau heard his father's words, he cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry, and said to his father, "Bless me, me also, father!" <sup>35</sup> But he said, "Your brother came deceitfully, and he has taken away your blessing."

<sup>36</sup> Esau said, “Is he not rightly named Jacob?<sup>[a]</sup> For he has supplanted me these two times. He took away my birthright; and look, now he has taken away my blessing.” Then he said, “Have you not reserved a blessing for me?” <sup>37</sup> Isaac answered Esau, “I have already made him your lord, and I have given him all his brothers as servants, and with grain and wine I have sustained him. What then can I do for you, my son?”

<sup>38</sup> Esau said to his father, “Have you only one blessing, father? Bless me, me also, father!” And Esau lifted up his voice and wept.<sup>iii</sup>

***Isaac was trembling. Esau was weeping. Oh it was a tragedy all right because Esau loved his father. And Isaac favored Esau. They were so close.***

<sup>39</sup> And Isaac his father, *finally*, answered and said to Esau:

“Look, from the fat of the earth be your dwelling  
and from the dew of heavens above.

<sup>40</sup> By your sword you shall live,  
and your brother shall you serve.

And when you rebel,  
you shall break off his yoke from your neck.”<sup>iv</sup>

The water boy would be surely, at the center of attention at that point. And those listening to him would have noticed:

Esau was out of his mind with fury. And maybe the older, wiser ones in the group would have realized what Esau didn't...He DID get a blessing from his father. Yes, it was muted, restrained, limited but Isaac gave Esau a blessing so similar to the one that Jacob had received...

Father Isaac had the wisdom to know that there was sufficient fat of the earth and dew from the heavens for both of the boys. God gave with generosity and abundance. Enough for everyone. Enough that no one would have to go hungry.

But Esau was angry and heard only that part about ‘...your brother you shall serve.’ Which is too bad because Isaac, again with the wisdom of age and experience, Isaac said: The time will come, Esau. You will rebel against your brother and the yoke he has cast this day will be broken from your neck.

No, Esau could not hear the hope of those words and he was filled with fury and said in his heart: ‘As soon as the time for mourning my father comes around, I will kill Jacob my brother.’

One of the younger children might have asked...do you think Esau will really do it? The elders would have said: Esau has a reputation for being impulsive but he knows from long years of experience with Jacob...sometimes it's best to wait. It's even possible that Esau loved Isaac so much, that he wanted to spare his father the pain of losing his younger son.

At this point, I can imagine someone saying...All right, all right **But what happened to Jacob? You gotta watch that on...he's pretty sneaky!**

Well the tragedy continues. He may have gotten the birthright and the blessing from his brother but he lost so much. His mother, Rebekah, told him, ‘So now, my son, listen to my voice, and rise, flee to my brother Laban in Haran and stay with him.’ We know from last week that Uncle Laban was more than glad to take in his nephew who showed such promise in treachery, deceit and manipulation but...that wasn't the hardest part.

Rebekah and Jacob, as far as we know, as close as they were to each other all those years...never saw each other again. What happened to Jacob is he gained a blessing from his father but lost his mother. And she...lost her favorite son.

**But before he left town, one more thing happened to Jacob:**

And this time, maybe it was a servant girl, carrying bread from tent to tent. Or kindling for the fire. Maybe it was she who got bragging rights later with the others. Let me read what she might have heard, hanging around Isaac's tent. **Genesis 28: 1- 5**

...Isaac summoned Jacob and blessed him AGAIN, and commanded him and said, to him.... “...Go to the house of Bethuel your mother's father and take you from there a wife from the daughters of Laban your mother's brother and ... <sup>3</sup> May El-Shaddai, God Almighty<sup>[a]</sup> bless you and make you fruitful and multiply, so you become an assembly of peoples. And may God grant you the blessing of Abraham, to you and your seed as well, that you may take hold of the land of your sojournings, which God granted to Abraham.”

Yes, Jacob received a DOUBLE blessing from Isaac. One by trickery that should have gone to Esau. Another blessing that was the real deal...handed down from Abraham to Isaac and now to Jacob. Freely given. Intentionally given. Rightfully given. But I don't think Jacob was too impressed with that and he rushed off to get away from Esau.

That's when **another thing happened to Jacob**. On his way to Laban's ...he had an encounter with God! Remember **Children's Time**? Yes, God/El Shaddai came down the ladder and made covenant with Jacob...the same Covenant that Isaac and Abraham received. The same blessing that Isaac passed on to Jacob. A covenant that only God could make.

**Genesis 28: 13 – 15** Your descendants will be as numerous as the dust of the earth! They will spread out in all directions—to the west and the east, to the north and the south. And all the families of the earth will be blessed through you and your descendants. <sup>15</sup> What's more, I am with you, and I will protect you wherever you go. One day I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have finished giving you everything I have promised you."

Jacob thought he hit the jack-pot with his father Isaac's blessing of earthly power and riches but really...God had something else in mind for Jacob. And only God has the power to make nations, to turn a single family unit into a blessing for all the earth...a blessing as numerous as the stars in the sky and the dust of the earth!

And what did Jacob do? He turns God's covenant into a contract saying...If God does this then I will do...set up a house of God, tithe 10% of everything God gives me. Yes, Jacob does his own special brand of wheeling and dealing with God! Amazing. **Some people just never change.**

Yes, many years passed. Many adventures for Jacob and Esau both. They married—multiple women. We all know about Jacob's epic dramas with Rachel and Leah and Bilhah and Zilpah but did you know that after 2 Hittite wives, Esau settled down and married Mahalath, daughter of Ishmael, the first son of Abraham? Both brothers had children—many of them and in truth, the blessing of their father, Isaac for prosperity from the fat of the land and the dews of the heaven did indeed come true for both.

We heard last week how Jacob got sick of his Uncle Laban. And he packed up to go home to his father's land. Home to his mother's grave. Home to face the music of his conflict with Esau. Which was probably kind of scary because he heard that Esau was riding out to meet him with 400 men. (I told you Esau had done well—I doubt if very many of us could pull together a crowd of 400 men to go on a 500 mile journey with us.)

In his own true style, Jacob prepared himself with all kinds of bargaining chips...goats and sheep and camels and cows and donkeys. And intermediaries to offer these 'gifts' to Esau before he got as far as where Jacob was. Jacob even divided up his family and servants into 2 groups so that if one of them was destroyed by Esau he wouldn't lose all of them! That's Jacob for you...covering all his bases to be sure that he comes out OK no matter what. **Some people...that's just how they're made and they never change.**

**So what happened to Jacob? (Gen. 32: 22 - 31)** Well the night before he saw Esau for the first time in more than 22 years....Jacob went off to be by himself and a stranger came upon him and the two of them began to wrestle in the dark of night. It was a fight that seemed like it would never finish. Back and forth. Rolling and tumbling and panting and sweating.

The sun finally came up and the stranger saw that it was a draw...no one was going to win so the stranger touched Jacob's hip, maybe a pressure point, maybe divine power flowed and Jacob's hip was twisted out of its socket and ever after he walked with a limp....but I'm getting ahead of myself. Because even that was not enough for Jacob to back off.

The stranger said: 'Let me go, for dawn is breaking.'

Jacob said, 'I will not let you go unless you bless me.'

I ask you...how many blessings does this man need? Two from his father. God, from the top of the Ladder blessed him and still not enough, right? He wanted something from this stranger even. **Some people just never change.** And the stranger said: 'Not Jacob shall your name hence be said, but Israel, for you have striven with God and men, and have prevailed.' And maybe for the first time in his life, Jacob was humbled, overcome (but not vanquished) by the mighty power and presence of the God who made covenant with him as Jacob said: 'I will name this place where I have seen God face to face and yet my life is preserved, I came out alive.'

And thus was born the nation of Israel through this man, Jacob, who used deceit and disguise on his own brother to get a blessing that wasn't his to receive. A man who limped ever after—even as he crossed over a mighty river to his brother Esau that same day.

### **What happened to Jacob then? Was there fighting? Death? Destruction?**

**That may be the biggest surprise of all...** Esau was delighted to see Jacob: '...ran to meet him and embraced him and fell upon his neck and kissed and they wept together.'

Here we've been expecting bloodshed and a continuation of family feuding but no:

Esau refused the gifts Jacob offered because, as Esau said: '...I have much, my brother. Keep what you have.'

In response, Jacob humbles himself before this brother. Look it up. Jacob bowed to the ground 7 times as he approached Esau...his twin, whom he had hurt so deeply in earlier years saying,

'O, no, pray, Esau, if I have found favor in your eyes, take this gift from my hand, for have I not seen your face as one might see God's face, and you received me in kindness.'

And right after that, for the first time...Jacob, the collector of blessings, for the first time and finally... offered a blessing to someone besides himself—a blessing to his own older brother saying,

'Pray, take my blessing that has been brought you, for God has favored me and I have everything.'

### **What happened to Jacob? Can you see it?**

**Jacob** was transformed. **Oh my goodness, he changed!** from selfish and deceitful to grateful and generous. Jacob, meeting with Esau after all that time and drama, returned not only the birthright that he 'negotiated' for a bowl of soup but also...what happened is that Jacob made restitution for the father's blessing that he stole from Esau.

**What happened to Jacob is that he** recognized at last that it's God's blessing, God's covenant that is Jacob's calling and honor and responsibility and burden to carry all the days of his life. And he let go of that which wasn't intended to be his from the beginning.

Esau, even before meeting up with Isaac, had something going on too. He threw off the yoke of anger and revenge and the two brothers were finally able to live in the land.. as brothers. As sons of Isaac and Rebekah. As it turns out, just as their father Isaac and his brother Ishmael stood at Grandfather Abraham's grave together, honoring their dead. So too, when Isaac breathed his last, and died, and was gathered to his kind, old and sated with years, so too did the brothers Esau and Jacob bury him.

Much more happened in the life of Jacob but we can stop here and ponder the transformation of a selfish, manipulative, deceitful, profit seeking, womanizer, fertile with sons. A man named, Jacob who changed into yes, the Father of Israel, a family, a nation as numerous as stars, as dust, as sand and intended by God to be a blessing to all the nations. That my friends is **what happened to Jacob**.

And that, my friends, is the power of God working in this world on even the most ornery and self-centered people. You can draw your own conclusions from all of this but let me challenge you, the next time you run into someone who is irritating or taking advantage or deceitful...and you are tempted to say: 'That's just the way they are. They're never going to change. We just have to put up with them.' Stop...and think about **what happened to Jacob**. God wants us all to see him in our dreams and to struggle and prevail with the selfishness inside of us so that we too can be transformed. God's will be done in each of our lives...as it **happened to Jacob**. Amen.

**Prayer** Holy Jesus, we give thanks for the many ways in which you make yourself present to us...especially in this time Sacred and Holy Communion.

We pray for transformation in our own lives. That whatever is NOT useful for your purposes can be removed or at least reduce.

We pray that whatever we can do to yes be useful for your purposes will be revealed and strengthened in us.

We pray for our families who struggle with conflict and grief.

We pray Our families who celebrate and rejoice and laugh abundantly with each other.

We remember to pray for the Mission Team that they may find in their journey a deeper sense of love for you and commitment to this community of faith that seeks to support them.

We pray for your church in all of its many forms that we may truly be a light for the world as your disciples. In Your name we pray. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> NLT

<sup>ii</sup> Altar, Robert, The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary, New York, W.W. Norton, 2004, p. 142.

<sup>iii</sup> NRSV

<sup>iv</sup> Altar, p. 143.