

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY
Genesis 25: 19-34
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They got married a little late in life. Isaac was forty years old when he and Rebecca finally tied the knot. And as is sometimes the case with couples who marry late, they had difficulty having children.

This was well before the days of fertility drugs and artificial insemination so Isaac resorted to prayer. He prayed to God that he and Rebecca would have a child. But as most of us who have ever prayed for something specific have learned, you have to be careful what you pray for.

Isaac and Rebecca not only got pregnant, but they got pregnant with twin sons.

It was not an easy pregnancy because these kids, even in the womb, were not just kicking or moving occasionally, they were doing full body slams, and half-nelsons on each other. Wrestling and fighting in the womb, so that at about the eighth month Rebecca began to wish she were dead rather than pregnant. When the boys were born they were locked in combat, Esau the first one out, being trailed by Jacob who had grabbed a hold of Esau's heel. And so Jacob's name, in Hebrew, "he takes by the heel".

"You've got a real scrapper here, Mrs. Rebecca," the midwife must have said to the gasping mother. "That second boy, he's sure got chutzpah!"

During the pregnancy, Rebecca had prayed to God for patience with her interminable and hard pregnancy, as no doubt many pregnant women have before, but in her case God responded with an awful consolation, information passed on that she might have wished she didn't know.

'Two nations are in your womb, [God said to her] and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger.'
It was an awful prediction because it was so against everything that should have been.

The oldest son was Esau and the law of the firstborn dictated that he should have gotten twice as much as Jacob, inheritance, land, possessions. But God said that was not the way it would work.

And then there was the prediction of strife in the family. It's hard enough to raise two boys together, the rivalry, the teasing, the jealousy, the accusations of favoritism. Esau liked hunting; Jacob liked cooking. Can you imagine the pestering in that household? Every family has some measure of sibling rivalry. But in this family it would tear them apart.

It sounds like the plot of a Hemmingway novel except that it is the story of Israel. Because that's who Jacob was destined to be, the name God would give him, change it after a wrestling match one night, from Jacob to Israel. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Jacob's catalogue of offenses in life reads like the rap sheet of a juvenile delinquent. He is never content to leave things the way that they are. He cons his brother Esau into trading his birthright for a mess of pottage.

With his mother's complicity, he puts on a hairy shirt and wooly coverings to fool his father's failing eyesight and win from Isaac the blessing that was rightfully Esau's.

He out-smarts his double crossing father-in-law Laban, by fleecing him out of most of his livestock. And later, when Laban wasn't paying attention, he sneaked off in the middle of the night with both Laban's daughters and just about everything else that wasn't nailed down including the household gods.

As someone has said of Jacob, "He wanted the moon, and if he'd ever managed to bilk Heaven out of that, he would have been back the next morning for the stars to go with it." But it was then that perhaps the most amazing thing of all the amazing things that ever happened to Jacob happened.

It was on his way to Haran, fleeing his brother Esau's anger and Esau's oath to kill him for stealing his birthright, that Jacob laid down his head one night, weary from the journey. And he had a dream.

There was a ladder going up to heaven and the angels were going up and down it. And God spoke to him there, not a curse but a blessing, not a dressing down but a benediction. God said to him, "Know that I am with you, and I will keep you wherever you go. And this land that you see, will be the land where you live. And all the earth will be blessed through you and your offspring."

When Jacob woke the next morning, he took oil and poured it over the rock where his head had laid and named the place Bethel, in Hebrew, the House of God.

Now there is nothing in the story up to that point that would have indicated that Jacob was headed for such a blessing. In fact, in the hands of a writer of morality plays or fairy tales, this would have been the point at which some kind of reckoning should have taken place.

Something should have happened to call in the accounts, and haul this kid before Judge Judy, and straighten out his wayward life. Because up to this point, Jacob gets everything he ever wants in life, and he gets it by deviousness and chicanery. And what kind of moral lesson is that, and do you really want to have your kids have that as a moral example.

Now you can give Jacob the benefit of the doubt and call him clever, or mischievous, or a rascal if you want. Like a grandparent, you can wink and smile and forgive his otherwise obnoxious habits. You can excuse him as maybe having an attention deficit disorder or just a teensy touch of pathology.

I think Frederick Buechner, however, has hit the nail on the head. He calls Jacob a crook, plain and simple.

So say what you will about him, you have to wonder what was it about Jacob that made him so exceptional that God blessed him the way God blessed him. "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go," God said. And it was so.

"The God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob," we say to distinguish ourselves as his offspring so many generations removed. And I wonder why it is that our forebears in faith decided to keep him in the list of memorable patriarchs.

In order to answer that question we have to look at a more important question about how we read the Bible and what kind of stories of faith are in it. Barbara Brown Taylor says that when she reads the great stories of the Bible like the Jacob story, what she is "hunting for is the God in it ... " And by that, I think she means that she is searching not for the sterling character of those whose story is unfolding, why and how they earn or do not earn their good or ill fortune in life. She is looking for the story behind the story, the story of what God is doing in their life, through their life, beyond their life, and sometimes in spite of their life.

Terry Fretheim, an Old Testament scholar, says of these Jacob stories, "Jacob stands with qualities negative and positive, clear and ambiguous, simple and complex. Take [Jacob] or leave him. [But] the most astounding claim of the story is that God takes him." And we all might ask, "As is?" And the answer is "As is."

And so at last we come to why these stories of Jacob are remembered. Because they are stories of a generous and forgiving God who is full of hope for Jacob. And if God has hopes and even plans for Jacob, then God has hopes and maybe plans for us as well, rascals and troublemakers that we are ... people who have difficulty telling the whole truth, folks who have been known to look out for ourselves when divvying up the family inheritance, given to rivalry and resentment with our siblings, and, yes, wanting the moon if we can bilk heaven out of it, and back the next morning for the stars as well.

We thought the story was about Jacob. But all along it was a story about God. In the same way that we thought our story was about us, but all along it was about God at work within us.

The story behind the story of all of our lives is that God is doing something with us, difficult as it may be at times to figure out what that is. At some level, doesn't every parent know this truth? You watch your kids grow and marvel at the unique people that they are, an amalgam of you and your beloved. And while they are so like you, they also are so different.

There is no way to explain it but that what God is doing in your life, is not what God is doing in their life. You are called to different callings. You hear different drums. And while you can try to help them hear the beat you hear, and they may get a little of the rhythm, it's really the beat they hear that they are meant to hear. It is the beat of God's hopes and dreams for our lives, that sees us through better eyes and clearer vision than we see ourselves.

Don't get me wrong, there are people who are making a mess of their lives. People who are drinking themselves into a stupor day after day or shooting up drugs. People who are committing crimes. People who murder and torture and abuse others. I have no idea what God is doing in their lives, especially when there is no reckoning, no justice done, no repentance or calling to account. I can only assume that they hear a beat that is deafening, and one that cannot be of God's making, but of their own.

Some theologians say that we constantly underestimate the power of sin to capture a soul. And maybe that's it. Maybe that's the only way that we can keep from utterly despairing of human nature, to believe that some people just turn God off in their life, run from God and never look back. I don't know. I'm not wise enough to understand it.

What I do know is that God never seems to give up on us, even when we give up on God. God longs for us, aches for us, like a lover longs for her beloved. Because God sees more in us than we ever see in ourselves, dreams better dreams for us than we ever dream, holds better hopes for us than we ever hope, wants more for us than we ever seem to think we are capable of deserving.

We may give up on God, but God never wants to give up on us. That's the story behind the story of Jacob, the story of a God who never gives up on us, but who always seems ready to make more of us than we ever thought we could make of ourselves. Terry Fretheim is right, You can take Jacob or leave him, but the most astounding claim of his story is that God takes him.

The New Testament witness puts it this way, "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." None of us deserves such an extravagant sacrifice, but all of us are in need of it.

God never gives up on us, but takes who we are and transforms us in love to be what God imagines us to be. That's Jacob's story, and our story as well, if we can ever get the hang of it.

Because the story behind the story of all of us is that God is taking the rough edges of our lives and smoothing them out. God is working with us as the blacksmith with the iron, and always patiently envisioning what the end will be, seen through the eyes of love.

I wonder if any of us ever has an accurate understanding of what God is doing in our life, through our life, beyond our life, maybe even sometimes in spite of our life. I wonder if any of us ever understands what that is.

Maybe it's what St. Paul meant when he said "Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then (in God's time) we shall see face to face."

It was in a cemetery somewhere along the way that I remember seeing one of the most interesting of epitaphs, so appealing I have never forgotten it. It said simply, "His story was God's to tell."

And so is ours. God, whom the rabbis say loves a good story, and whose story envelops us all. Thanks be to God. Amen.