

Opening Prayer (offered spontaneously)

When young children get to a certain age, they start asking if they can read “chapter books” – not just simple stories that can fit in one book, but stories that develop over a series of chapters. The lectionary text has presented us with a chapter book, which we began last week.

If you were here last week, you heard about chapter 26, a scandalous story about two brothers, Esau and Jacob. Jacob was born moments after Esau, his older brother. We imagine Jacob, still in the womb *grasping* Esau heel, even as he passes through the birth canal and is born. This symbolized his later efforts to steal Esau’s birthright as the firstborn son of Abraham. In those days, the first born became the family leader and received twice the inheritance. Everyone knew this, expected it, and followed it.

One day after hunting hard all day long, Esau came home, starving for something, anything to eat. As a young man who preferred to spend his days inside tents, Jacob, not their mother, Rebekah, was waiting. He had a steaming bowl of lentel stew, which he held out for Esau to smell. We imagine Esau being tantalized from the moment he enters the family tent. “Let me have some of that”, he told Jacob, who replied, “First sell me your birthright”. A bowl of stew and some bread in exchange for being the head of the household and more wealth – a pretty shortsighted trade, wasn’t it?

That was chapter 26. Today we are on chapter 28, the story of God making a covenant with Jacob, just as God had made with Abraham and Isaac. It is the story of Jacob’s ladder, with a lovely vision of angels ascending and descending between heaven and earth. Just a quick aside, we assume angels are dressed in glowing white robes, and often in Euro-American tradition they are portrayed as white or Caucasian. Doesn’t it make sense that angels would be as diverse as the people God has allowed to flourish? So let’s imagine angels of every skin tone, gender identity, and socio-economic class ascending and descending. One of them might even look like you!

But wait a minute, some of you might be thinking, “what about chapter 27”? Why did you skip over chapter 27? One of the challenging phrases we will be covering in our Bible study about the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation is total depravity – not just depravity – but total depravity. Doesn’t that sound bad, maybe even nasty? I am reminded of Ertha Kitt singing the song, “I want to be evil”, which includes the “shocking” lines:

*I want to be evil, I want to spit tacks
I want to be evil and cheat at jacks
I want to be wicked, I want to tell lies
I want to be mean and throw mud pies*

Please check this song on Youtube for more “evil”...

One reading of chapter 27 is about the lengths to which we as human beings will go to, in order to get what we want. Chapter 27 is about deception, cheating, and stealing – so don't let anybody tell you that the Bible is just about being a good person. It is full of liars, cheaters, and murderers – lots of people who didn't follow the 10 Commandments.

It is full of examples of weak, corrupt, and broken people, out of which God makes spiritual leaders. There is a saying from the mid-16th century, “you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear.”

The Bible is one story after another of God doing exactly that – with Adam and Eve, Noah, Moses, Simon Peter, Saul before he became Paul, and in today's story, Jacob.

So let's get to the good stuff. In chapter 27, Isaac was old. The Bible tells us “his eyes were dim so that he could not see” (sounds like cataracts) and he is hungry, so he sends HIS favorite son, Esau, out hunting.

His wife, Rebekah, who favored Jacob, told him to put on some of Esau's clothes, so Jacob will smell like him. She takes the hide of a young goat, a kid, and puts it on the backs of Jacob's hands and the smooth part of his neck, so his skin will feel rough like Esau's and not smooth, like Jacob's. She cooks a savory dish and sends Jacob into Isaac's tent to feed his father. Isaac smells the food, Esau's scent and is tricked by the texture of the kid's hide into thinking Jacob is Esau. He blesses Jacob and says,

‘Ah, the smell of my son
is like the smell of a field that the Lord has blessed...the smell of a field that the Lord has blessed...
May God give you of the dew of heaven,
and of the fatness of the earth,
and plenty of grain and wine.
Let peoples serve you,
and nations bow down to you.
Be lord over your brothers,
and may your mother's sons bow down to you.
and blessed be everyone who blesses you!’

With the line, “be lord over your brothers and may your mother's sons bow down to you” Jacob succeeds in stealing Esau's birthright. Needless to say, when Esau finds out, he is enraged and wants to kill Jacob and he begins to hunt him down, using all of his highly developed tracking skills. Brother against brother – blood against blood. “Revenge is a dish best served cold”

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury: What do you think of Jacob now, having heard this sordid tale of trickery and short-sightedness?

<walk down to engage in dialog with congregation>

The story posed questions to us:

- Was it right for Jacob to take advantage of Esau?
- Should we just blame Esau, for being shortsighted, and praise Jacob for being clever?
- When is it better to just go along with the status quo, to passively accept customs and traditions, even if you have an opportunity to break out of it?
- Should the parents have intervened to stop this? When should parents intervene when their children have a dispute? Should
- Was it God's will for Jacob to take advantage of Esau? Looking at the meta-narrative of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the twelve tribes of Israel, a lineage that the writer of the Gospel of Matthew ultimately traced to Jesus, we would say "yes". But we have the advantage of knowing this much larger, much longer story; Jacob didn't.
- How would Jacob know what was God's will for his own life? Or, when he got what he wanted, was it appropriate for Jacob to declare it to be God's will?
- How do YOU know if a course of action is "God's will", especially in the moment?

Last Sunday those present during our curry lunch agreed that, after the Bazaar, we should begin to discern how our ministries might evolve and be enhanced by constructing a new building, either a combined social hall/multi-purpose room and kitchen; or a new preschool building. How will we discern God's will for us? What do you think? (prayer)

So back to our dramatic story of Esau and Jacob. The story is complete...or is it?

No, the angels appear on the ladder in Jacob's dream, ascending and descending. Then God stands beside Jacob and shares the same great covenant God had previously shared with his father, Isaac, and Isaac's father, Abraham: *"the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; 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."*

Is this dream of abundance an example of what God has in mind for us, as we think about a new building?

Did Jacob deserve this blessing? No. Do we deserve the blessings we have received from God? No. *Ultimately, blessings are not about me or you – they are a statement, they are a manifestation of the true nature of God. God blesses you, not because you have earned it – although it IS important to lead a good life – God blesses you because it is God's nature, as irrational as it is, to love – unreservedly, unabashedly, and without an ounce of shame. God loves you because God is powerless not to do so. God forgives, God saves, because God loves.*

I'm finding that my theology spirals; while it seems to return to a belief I previously held, I am in a different place, so it rises in an upward spiral. Old beliefs reappear and have new meaning for me. With this in mind, I remind us: *"for God so loved the world, that God gave his only begotten son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life."*

Eternal life is the gift of the eternal now. It doesn't matter who you have been or who you may become in the future. It doesn't matter whether you have been good, bad, or asleep.

The question from God for you today is, are you open to the presence of God right now? Don't open your heart because of guilt, open your heart out of love. Do you dare to be as vulnerable to God as God is vulnerable to you? Right now? Surely God is in this place. Do you know it? Amen.

Genesis 28:10-19a

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. 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. 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. 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; 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. 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."

Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!" 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." So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first.