

See the Stairway to Heaven
Genesis 27:1–4, 15–23; 28:10–17
John 1:50-51

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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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.” He said, “See, I am old; I do not know the day of my death. Now then, take your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field, and hunt game for me. 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.” 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; and she put the skins of the kids on his hands and on the smooth part of his neck. Then she handed the savory food, and the bread that she had prepared, to her son Jacob.

So he went in to his father, and said, “My father”; and he said, “Here I am; who are you, my son?” 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.” 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.” 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.” 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.” He did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau’s hands; so he blessed him.

...

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.”

John 1:50-51

Jesus answered, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.” And he said to him, “Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

Our story this morning requires a little context. You remember Isaac? The boy who was allegedly about to be sacrificed last Sunday?¹ Well, he's grown up, as boys tend to do. He's gotten married to a woman named Rebecca, and had twin sons, Esau and Jacob. While Rebecca was pregnant, she prayed to the Lord to ask why the twins were constantly moving, wrestling with each other. The Lord told her that,

“Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples born of you shall be divided;
one shall be stronger than the other,
the elder shall serve the younger.”²

When the boys grew up, the elder son, Esau, was a big, hairy man, and a skilled hunter. The younger son, Jacob, was a quiet man, preferring to stay in the tents rather than in the fields like his brother. Each parent had their favorite. Isaac preferred Esau, and Rebecca preferred Jacob.

Jacob extorted Esau's birthright, his share of the property, from him, before the story we read this morning. But Esau was still supposed to get their father's blessing, their father passing on God's blessing that he had received from his father Abraham. That blessing is far more significant, because it is more than a wish for things to be good for him. It is the kind of blessing that makes things be good for him.

What follows could be a scene out of any soap opera you can name – they have nothing on the Bible.

Isaac grew old, and his eyes grew so dim that he could not see. It doesn't matter whether we would call it glaucoma or cataracts – what matters is that he can't see. He figures that the day

¹ Genesis 21:1-3, 22:1-14

² Genesis 25:23

of his death is coming, soon. He sends his older son, his favorite son, Esau, out to hunt, and promises to give him that final blessing when he returns with food for dear old Dad.

Esau goes out hunting. While he's gone, Rebecca dresses up the younger son, her favorite, Jacob, in Esau's clothes. She puts goatskin on his arms and neck, so that he will feel like his hairy older brother. Then she hands him the food to give Isaac.

Jacob goes in and pretends to be Esau. Isaac puts his hand on his head, and gives him the blessing that he intended for Esau. This blessing includes, "Be the most powerful man among all your relatives, and may your mother's sons bow down to you."

As you can imagine, when Esau returns, he is not what we would call a happy camper. He threatens to kill his brother Jacob.

Rebecca sends Jacob away to stay with her relatives until Esau cools down.

On the way, Jacob has a vision. He is in the middle of the desert between Beersheba and Haran, and he sees a raised staircase going up to Heaven, with angels going up and down the staircase.

While he is looking at this, the Lord God confirms the blessing that his father Isaac had given him. God promises that Jacob's offspring will be numerous, and that they will bless all the families of the earth.

Jacob wakes up and says, "This must be the house of God, and the gate of Heaven." He puts up an altar, and worships the Lord. He names the place Bethel, which literally means, "God's House." Generations later, the people of Israel build a city there, and center the worship of God there until King David conquers Jerusalem.

God initially had a relationship with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. You remember Adam and Eve, the first people whom God created. That didn't work out, but not because God reneged on the deal. No, Adam and Eve chose not to obey God's one rule, and that destroyed what was supposed to be.

So God tried again, through a family. Abraham and Sarah and their descendants. Isaac and Jacob and Jacob's sons and all of their families.

God chose this family because they mostly obeyed God and went where God told them. God did not choose them because they were perfect. God knows, this is what today we would call a dysfunctional family, with a distinct shortage of perfect plaster saints.

Abraham lost faith that he was going to have the son that God promised with Sarah. He had a son, Ishmael, with the Egyptian slave woman Hagar. But God did not throw Abraham and Sarah away. God did not throw anyone away. God kept God's promises and gave Isaac to Abraham and Sarah. Ishmael grew up to found another nation, but God kept God's promises through Isaac.

Isaac got married at forty. He and his brother Ishmael buried their father Abraham when he died. He and Rebecca had the twins. Later, while they were staying in another land, he and Rebecca claimed not to be married, but to be brother and sister, because he was afraid that someone would want to kill him for his wife. And he died, after blessing his sons, not the way that he had intended but, apparently, the way that God had intended.

Esau was a brute who allowed Jacob to extort him out of his birthright. He married two Hittite women, though apparently their ethnicity was more of a problem for Isaac and Rebecca than the fact that there were two of them.³

³ Genesis 26:34-35.

Jacob swindled his brother first out of property, and then out of his father's blessing and the place in the family belonging to the firstborn son.

After the story we read today, Jacob makes his parents happy by marrying sisters from back home, Leah and Rachel.⁴ He has other adventures, including being swindled by his father-in-law and swindling him back,⁵ and then literally wrestling with God.⁶ He and Esau are eventually reconciled.⁷

Jacob did have twelve sons and one daughter by his two wives and by two servants, Bilhah and Zilpah.⁸ Those twelve sons founded the twelve tribes of Israel, which are called by the names of those twelve men.

All this sounds like about a five-year plot arc of a soap opera, I know, but it's history. You can look it up in Genesis, and I encourage you to read it yourself.

My brothers and sisters, the reason that we care about this soap opera is that, through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we have been grafted onto this family tree.⁹ When we are baptized, we are reborn, or born again, if you prefer, and we are adopted into this family, the family of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. The family of Sarah and Rebecca and Leah and Rachel. The family of Bilhah and Zilpah.¹⁰

That makes this our own family history, every bit as real as anything you find on Ancestry.Com or any of the other genealogical websites.

⁴ Genesis 29.

⁵ Genesis 31.

⁶ Genesis 32:22-32.

⁷ Genesis 33:10.

⁸ Genesis 30.

⁹ Romans 11.

¹⁰ Genesis 30. I am not saying, "the family of Hagar," because she was cast out in Genesis 21.

This is good news! We have not been adopted into a family of dour, joyless people who have never thought about putting a foot out of line. We have not been adopted into a family who are all alike, or a family that has always done everything exactly the same way. We have been adopted into a multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-everything family of real human beings who make mistakes, and who are sorry, and who forgive each other, and who go on with their lives. A family of real people like us.

This means that, if you worry that you are not worthy of being part of God's family, don't. If Jacob, God's own son, can father the nations, you are probably okay. We will see other examples this Fall of God using less-than-perfect people.

If you worry that you have done something that God cannot or will not forgive, don't. Confess your sin to God and, if you are truly sorry that you did whatever it was, God can and God will forgive you.¹¹

If you worry that someone else is not worthy to be part of God's family, don't. That's between them and God.

So, we're part of the family of Abraham. So what?

If we are part of the family, then we are part of the family business. Abraham was called to be a blessing to the nations, to partner with God in changing the world for the better.

If we are part of Abraham's family, so are we.

¹¹ The "unforgivable sin" discussed in Mark 3 and Matthew 12 is beyond the scope of this sermon. It is denying the existence of the Holy Spirit. If you deny the person of God through whom God works in the world, you cannot, logically, ask for forgiveness. Whom do you ask? If you're in worship and you're worried about this sin, you're almost certainly not committing it.

We can start changing the world right here, right now, by how we look at ourselves and at our brothers and sisters. We don't have to be perfect. They don't have to be perfect. What we, and they, have to do is keep trying.

And, if they are our brothers and sisters, then we have family members who are without power or shelter right now in Puerto Rico. We have family members mourning loss in Mexico. We have family members who are fleeing violence and oppression in Syria. We have family members who are hungry on the streets of Columbus.

This is not God's will for the world.

We are called to change the world, so that God's will is done on earth as it is in Heaven. I pray that all of us would continue to get better at how we respond to that call.

Amen.