

Sunday, July 5, 2020 Genesis 25 and 27

Struggling Siblings: Jacob and Esau

“At Your Request” has become somewhat of a summer tradition at Glenwood Church for several years with congregational members suggesting specific Bible passages or topics for further discussion and how these relate to God, Jesus and the Spirit as well as how these topics are relevant to us today. This year’s topics are outlined on our glenwoodunited.com “upcoming services’ page and will include a variety from “original sin’ to the doctrine of the Trinity, the first miracle of Jesus and treasured Bible stories of the Old Testament!

Our focus today is “Jacob and Esau” whose story is found in Genesis 25, 27 and 32. Before we learn more about these brothers we must recall their family tree. Abraham and Sarah could not conceive a child for many years. Sarah has her maiden Hagar be with Abraham and she eventually gives birth to Ishmael. Then years later God enables Sarah to have her own son Isaac. When this occurs Hagar and her son are sent away, they are cared for by God but no longer living near Abraham and Sarah. Sarah’s son, Isaac grows up and as was shared just a couple of weeks ago, God tested Abraham’s faith. He takes Isaac and two helpers on a journey of 3 days where he is told to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham is just about to kill his son when an angel appears and tells him that his faith is strong. God then provides a ram for the sacrifice. After this Abraham returns home with Isaac.

Many years pass and Isaac grows up and marries Rebekah. For a long time, Rebekah could not conceive a child, much like Sarah her mother-in-law. But then something amazing happens, Rebekah is not only pregnant but expecting twins! While pregnant, Rebekah felt a lot of movement and pain as the babies struggled together within her. She cried out “If it is to be this way, why do I live?” God’s response to her was that she will be the mother of two nations and these infants born of you shall be divided with one stronger than the other and the elder shall serve the younger. So Rebekah knew what would happen between her children and future generations before they were born. They are not identical twins by any means as their colour at birth defines them. Esau is red with a hairy body and Jacob is the one who was holding on to Esau’s ankle at birth. They do share a strong bond but they also struggle.

The boys grow older and their parents love them both but we learn that Isaac favours Esau because he is a skilful hunter and a man of the field and he enjoyed eating wild game. Rebekah favours Jacob because he is a quiet person and lives closer to home. Just by our knowing that favouritism of the parents exists, we know it will play a key role in this story.

One day Esau returns home and is famished and exhausted from hunting, as he smells Jacob's stew. Jacob makes a deal with Esau that he could have stew for his birthright. This was a significant matter because they knew Isaac was getting older and by rights of the firstborn son, Esau would inherit everything. So Jacob demands the selling of this right for a plate of stew. Esau agrees because he is at the point of death himself. So he agrees and eats the bread and lentil stew. He finishes the food and walks away having lost his birthright. Why would Jacob want this? Because he thought Esau would inherit everything and leave him with nothing and Jacob just wanted what his brother would have. But the rivalry between the brothers does not stop there.

The stolen blessing plays a key role in the lives of Esau and Jacob as well as Isaac and Rebekah. Isaac is old and unable to see and his death is imminent but he wants to bless Esau as his firstborn and make a special moment of it. Was Isaac made aware of the birthright deal the sons had made? That Jacob received the birthright from Esau over a plate of food? Was this Isaac's way of making it up to Esau- by blessing him in a special way?

Isaac asks Esau to go out and hunt and prepare a special meal. The son will feed the father and the father will bless the son. Isaac wants the blessing to be full, heartfelt and thorough. But who is listening? Rebekah! She is eavesdropping and was persuaded that she needed to act quickly. She remembered God's words to her when she was pregnant – that her sons will be divided by strength and power. So she tells Jacob what to do so that he can inherit the blessing. Preparing a special meal and then making himself be hairy like Esau. Jacob's fear was not that he was going to get his father's blessing, but that his father might touch him and realize who he was and be cursed or dishonoured. Rebekah tells him not be concerned about this because she was prepared to bear it herself. Jacob listened to his mother and prepared the food. Rebekah brought Esau's clothes to Jacob to wear and then covered his neck and hands with animal skins.

Jacob again is holding food and ready to deceive the one who will eat it. This time he offers it to Isaac his father to receive the blessing. Isaac asked, "Which one of my two sons are you?" He answers, "Esau. Please sit and eat what I hunted so that you can give me your blessing." Isaac was amazed about how quickly he was able to hunt the food that he was going to eat. Jacob's answer was simple, "Because God helped me." Yet, Isaac was not convinced. The boy's voice did not sound right and so he touched Jacob covered with camouflage and the smell of Esau's clothes convinced him.

Isaac then shared the blessing in three parts “May God give you of the dew of heaven and the fat of the earth, abundance of new grain and wine.” This meant that Jacob would not have to work hard in his livelihood. He would receive the fruit of the earth and be rich. The second part: “Let peoples serve you and nations bow to you; be master over your brother and let your mother’s sons bow to you.” Jacob will have enormous power and authority. The nations around Jacob will pay homage to his rule. The third part of this stolen blessing: “Cursed be they who curse you and blessed be everyone who blesses you.”

Esau soon returns from the hunting trip and prepares the food for his father. He learns of the deception by Jacob and Rebekah and cries out to his father Isaac, “Bless me also, father. Have you not reserved a blessing for me? Not only has he taken my birthright he has now taken my blessing!” Esau wept. And then he became angry and hatred for his brother grew. Once his father died he would kill his brother. But again Rebekah intervened by sending Jacob away to her brother Laban’s place. This may not seem what the blessing was to reveal but Jacob’s struggles were not really over, but changing. Jacob appears weaker by leaving his home and as he prepares to leave, Isaac tells him to go. He also offers these words “May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and numerous that you may become a company of peoples.” This blessing is very different from the other one Jacob received while deceiving his brother. It does not focus on wealth and power but on the covenant of Abraham with many descendants and the land.

So Jacob leaves home even though the birthright is his; and he starts a new life with his uncle Laban’s family. Deception continues to be a part of his story but instead of it being his act of deception, it is Laban who disguises Leah his eldest daughter when Jacob marries. Instead of the one Jacob loves, he is now married to Leah. But Jacob loves Rachel and serves Laban for another 7 years to marry her. When he does, he prospers in wealth and family. If one continues to read Jacob’s story we learn that he becomes wealthy and has 12 sons between Leah and her maidservant Zilpah and Rachel and Bilhah, her maidservant. Jacob prospers at Laban’s expense yet there is still no contentment in his life. There is something struggling within him even though he maintains his faith in God he is wealthy and has a large family. It is when Jacob wrestles with another that he comes to know himself. For we must remember that before he was born Jacob was wrestling his brother. And yet as we learn in Ch.32 Jacob was alone when a man wrestled with him. The man struck Jacob and dislocated his hip. The man asks Jacob to let him go. But Jacob still is in need. He asks this man for a blessing. The man asks him what is your name? Jacob responds and then this man tells him. You shall no longer be called Jacob

but Israel for you have striven with God and with people and have prevailed. Jacob asks the man who he is. Jacob is blessed because he realizes that he has seen God face to face.

There is a lot packed into Jacob and Esau's story- wrestling in the womb which leads to a rivalry throughout their lives. There is also wrestling within each one as deception and power exudes throughout. The deal of the birthright and loss of the firstborn's blessing. But Jacob is the one who deceives and eventually is also the one who has to work harder because of the deception of others. This story of sibling rivalry is the not the first in the Bible but reminds us of the need for families to communicate effectively and to listen to the concerns of each other. Was it wrong for Rebekah and Isaac to pick their favourite son and enable that one son to become wealth and powerful? How was the blessing of the firstborn realized, if at all Jacob after he deceived his father the second time? With Isaac sending Jacob away he did not inherit the land where he grew up but he did become wealthy elsewhere in both family and land.

What is interesting is that Jacob and Esau's stories tell us that every family has its problems. Isaac's mother Sarah could not conceive for the longest time. Isaac's half brother Ishmael is sent away to start a new life. And it is through Ishmael's family that Esau finds a wife and has a family. Rebekah is unable to have children at first until they earnestly pray and they end up having twins which were so different in nature and so competitive for the attention of their parents that problems and division arise again and again. But what does this mean for us?

Despite all what Jacob has done, God still blessed him. Jacob yields everything to God when he offers his name to be changed. God does not let Jacob's past define him but instead forgives and renames him Israel which means God fights. In the history of the nation of Israel the Lord fought with and for his people. Jacob's new name hints at the future and because he prevailed in his struggle with God, he is blessed.

We too wrestle with God when we are tempted or face trouble. Jacob could have just left things be with Esau receiving the birthright and his father's blessing, but he did not because he was connected with his brother from birth. There was rivalry which could not be stopped by their parents who played into it—after all they had been blessed with these sons when they could not have any children. They let them be.

For many of us however, this would be an excuse. Yet Jacob and Esau both prosper in spite or despite the blessing and the birthright but they do so in different areas of land and with different groups of people. The descendants of Abraham continue to spread and this continues to fill the covenant of God to Abraham and Isaac and this promise continues through Jacob. In

the promise, God will still be with him and protect him and Jacob and his family will return to the land God intended for them. But Jacob must be patient to see God's plan for his life to continue to unfold.

We too must be patient and hold on to our faith. This covid19 pandemic put the world on hold with some countries slowly and cautiously opening up and emerging to become something different. So it is with Canada and its provinces. We have heard news reports of new cases and the need to be vigilant in social distancing. We also know locally in Windsor Essex there are still several people being diagnosed as new cases through the migrant worker and farm communities. We are not to complain that it's not fair that we cannot move forward as a county but we are to be patient and pray that resolutions and healing will take place soon. But we hear people looking for someone to blame because they think that there have been wrong doings, deceptions and poor decisions which were made by leaders as to why this virus was able to spread around the world in the first place. There are theories as to who carried the virus and who was responsible just seemed to walk away. But we are human and looking at how to live together and share information is still new to many countries and leaders. So we are to be patient and know that God is protecting, guiding and leading us into something new. And we must have faith.

Esau and Jacob were sibling rivals even unto adulthood. When Isaac died however, they buried their father and although estranged they still cared. Jacob settles into the land of Canaan with his family and his family continues to prosper. Esau's family settled in the hill country of Seir and his family were known as Edomites. Each lives with God's guidance and love, with blessings of traditions, home and family and they please God.

As we experience Summer 2020 we must reflect upon our lives and what is important in it. As we look to the future and the new world that will emerge, how are we sharing with others in our family? Is there truth, deception, withholding of information important to all, or are we loving others by sharing what is real and important even though it may cause various kinds of emotions. Is there hope and truth? When we think about this we must pray that these values are the means for communication that must also be present in the workplace, in government and wherever people gather with common ideas to support advancement. What is it that you strive for? Remember Jacob as he struggled in his life to do what God intended for him to the best of his ability. This is what we are called to do as we reach out to others, as we spiritually grow and as we seek God's love for each of us. Let us give thanks to God.

Let us pray:

Holy God of grace and love we thank you for Jacob and Esau's story and how their faith in you did not fade even they acted against your ways in deception causing hurt and pain. We pray O God that their story will help us to know who we are in you and what we might do in similar situations. Bless us and may your Spirit guide us always. Amen.