

What Would You Do for a Klondike Bar?

SERMON BACKGROUND STUDY

July 12 & 13, 2008

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Genesis 25:19-34 (The Message)

This is the family tree of Isaac son of Abraham: Abraham had Isaac. Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan Aram. She was the sister of Laban the Aramean.

Isaac prayed hard to GOD for his wife because she was barren. GOD answered his prayer and Rebekah became pregnant. But the children tumbled and kicked inside her so much that she said, "If this is the way it's going to be, why go on living?" She went to GOD to find out what was going on. GOD told her,

Two nations are in your womb,
two peoples butting heads while still in your body.
One people will overpower the other,
and the older will serve the younger.

When her time to give birth came, sure enough, there were twins in her womb. The first came out reddish, as if snugly wrapped in a hairy blanket; they named him Esau (Hairy). His brother followed, his fist clutched tight to Esau's heel; they named him Jacob (Heel). Isaac was sixty years old when they were born.

The boys grew up. Esau became an expert hunter, an outdoorsman. Jacob was a quiet man preferring life indoors among the tents. Isaac loved Esau because he loved his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

One day Jacob was cooking a stew. Esau came in from the field, starved. Esau said to Jacob, "Give me some of that red stew—I'm starved!" That's how he came to be called Edom (Red).

Jacob said, "Make me a trade: my stew for your rights as the firstborn."

Esau said, "I'm starving! What good is a birthright if I'm dead?"

Jacob said, "First, swear to me." And he did it. On oath Esau traded away his rights as the firstborn. Jacob gave him bread and the stew of lentils. He ate and drank, got up and left. That's how Esau shrugged off his rights as the firstborn.

Psalms 119:105-112 (NRSV)

¹⁰⁵Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path.

¹⁰⁶I have sworn an oath and confirmed it,
to observe your righteous
ordinances.

¹⁰⁷I am severely afflicted;
give me life, O LORD, according to
your word.

¹⁰⁸Accept my offerings of praise, O LORD,
and teach me your ordinances.

¹⁰⁹I hold my life in my hand continually,
but I do not forget your law.

¹¹⁰The wicked have laid a snare for me,
but I do not stray from your
precepts.

¹¹¹Your decrees are my heritage forever;
they are the joy of my heart.

¹¹²I incline my heart to perform your
statutes
forever, to the end.

Impulse control is something we learn, as is appreciating what really matters. In today's story, we meet Esau, the first-born son of Isaac and Rebekah, who has failed to learn either. And we meet Jacob, who stands ever-ready to seize an opportunity, or even create one.

So here's the question: what *would* you do for a Klondike bar? Perhaps sing a song or dance a dance? Would you hand over your car or maybe your house? Even more? Esau does just that for a bowl of stew. What does it reveal to us about Esau? And about Jacob?

Isaac and Rebekah

Isaac, Abraham's son, had been a bachelor for a long time when he married Rebekah. A servant had gone to the ancestral family home to fetch a wife. The servant brought back Rebekah, who was the granddaughter of his uncle; i.e. a cousin. She had left her home and family to come to Isaac, who came to love her. Isaac was forty when he married Rebekah. (For more on the story of Isaac and Rebekah see the page three textbox.)

Isaac was the son of the promise, the one through whom the covenant with the LORD God must pass. But there was a problem, Isaac and Rebekah had trouble conceiving. A lot of trouble. Nineteen years passed and no baby, no child to whom the covenant would pass.

Isaac needed an heir, so he prayed and he prayed hard. And finally, God granted Isaac's request. Rebekah conceived. She might have been childless before, but she would soon find out that she was overflowing with blessings.

Why Jacob and Not Esau?

This question comes up each time I teach this passage. Why Jacob? Why does God make the choice before they are even born? Granted, God knows the men these twins will grow to become, but it becomes quite clear that Jacob has nothing to commend him either. Indeed, merit doesn't seem to be part of this at all.

Ok . . . so why Jacob and not Esau? Paul comes to this question in his letter to the Romans. He is talking about God's choice of the Israelites and who actually is an Israelite, that is a child of the covenant. Paul's point is simple, God chooses whom God chooses. Period. End of story. That's as far as we can go. God chose Jacob. Paul quotes from Exodus 33:19: "God will mercy on whom he has mercy and compassion on whom he has compassion" (see Romans 9).

Walter Brueggemann asks us to consider that perhaps this isn't about God preferring one twin over another, but simply another instance of God upsetting expectations, turning upside the world's normal social conventions. Primogeniture (preference to the first-born son) was well established by this time. Perhaps God is simply signaling again that in God's kingdom, things work differently than they do in the kingdoms of this world. The first will be last and the last first.

In the end, the question is always, "Can God be trusted." I've learned that the answer is a resounding YES.

To Rebekah, the pregnancy mustn't have felt much like a blessing. It was hard and troubled. She got no peace. Her womb seemed at war with her body. So she too went to God, to find out what was going on inside her.

God revealed to Rebekah that she wasn't carrying one child but two. Indeed, not just two children but two nations. They would be more than sibling rivals, the twins would be the ancestors of two great but rival nations. Further, God told her that the younger child would have power over the older, for even twins are not born in the same instant.

They named the older twin Esau, for he was covered in red hair. The second-born twin they named Jacob.¹ Esau grew up to be a man's man, the outdoors type, rough and ready, a skilled hunter; the joy of his father, Isaac. Jacob on the other hand was the quiet, contemplative type, who enjoyed hanging around the tents.

Isaac loved Esau because he seemed to be everything a real man was supposed to be, a skilled hunter and the rest. We're not told why Rebekah loved Jacob. Perhaps she likes the stay-at-home type. Perhaps it is because of what God told her about the twins. We are never told that she revealed to Isaac God's message about the twins.

But already, just in these few sentences, we see the beginnings of family divisions that will soon come to full flower.

How hungry can he be?

One day, Esau comes rushing in the door. He is famished. He is so starved that he'll do anything to get something to eat. Jacob has been busy in the kitchen preparing what must be a deliciously smelling red stew². Esau demands some of it.

Jacob is revealed to be an opportunist, as he tests his brother's desire, demanding in turn a trade. A bowl of stew for Esau's birthright, i.e., the rights and privileges that belong to the firstborn son. This would include not only the leadership of the family but a double-share of the inheritance, which in this case is a lot of money, for Isaac is wealthy, having been given all that was Abraham's.

Esau doesn't seem to give it a second thought. What good is the birthright if Esau is dead from starvation? Seems rather over-dramatic doesn't it . . . and stupid . . . and impulsive. Jacob adds some legal protections to the transaction by making his brother swear to the transaction . . . and it is a done deal.

Trade one's birthright for a bowl of stew? How hungry could you be? What kind of brother would pounce on such weakness? Neither twin comes off well in this story. In a way, it only

¹The name "Jacob" doesn't mean "heel" per se, but it sounds like Hebrew for "heel." Even on the way out of the womb, Jacob was grasping Esau by the heel.

²The Hebrew word for "red" is "edom" and this will be the name taken by Esau's descendants. They will be called Edomites and will settle in the land south and east of Canaan.

sets the stage for what comes next. For some time later, Jacob will conspire with his mother, Rebekah, to steal the promise of the covenant that Isaac intends to pass on to Esau.

It is the stories such as this one that remind me that God is able to use us all to accomplish his purposes. We may not understand or even recognize God at work in our lives, but still God moves us forward toward the kingdom which he promised long ago to Abraham.

The Story of Isaac and Rebekah

After Sarah's death, Abraham knows that the time has come for Isaac to marry, as the covenant must be passed from generation to generation. After all, Isaac is forty! Abraham wants Isaac to marry from among Abraham's people, his extended family. So he sends a trusted servant northward to Haran to find a suitable wife. When the servant arrives, he prays that God will give him a sign that he has found the right girl.

At a well, the servant meets a young woman. She is Rebekah, who is kind, generous, and hard working. Rebekah takes the servant to meet her family, who quickly concludes that it is God's wish that Rebekah return to marry Isaac. The servant is ready to leave immediately, but the family asks for ten days to say their good-byes. Then comes the surprising part, at least to me. The family asks Rebekah if she is willing to go to a new land and marry a stranger. She is. Rebekah will continue the faithful response of Abraham by leaving her home and heading out. When the servant and Rebekah arrive, we are told, Isaac made her his wife and loved her, finding in Rebekah comfort for the loss of his mother.

Asking

The story of Rebekah tells us something important about the cultivation of our relationships with those we love. Simply put, it is important to ask. In a patriarchal culture quite foreign to our own, the family respects and loves Rebekah enough to ask her whether she wants to go. They even believe that this is all God's doing. But still, they ask. No demands. No assumptions. Given that Rebekah is unmarried, it is very likely that she is quite young, a teenager. Yet they ask her. They would not take her for granted.

One would think this is how we would treat all those we love. But sadly, we too often treat those we love in ways that we would never treat a casual acquaintance. We take our spouses for granted. We assume we know what our teenagers or parents want and care about. Mack Brown, the football coach at UT, said that things began to turn around for him at Texas when he decided "to spend more time asking kids about kids." Who'd guess so much could come from just asking.

Loving

Their story also reminds us that love is something we do, not just something we feel. Rebekah is delivered to Isaac and he marries her. No romance. No courtship. He marries her and he loves her. Scripture doesn't give us many insights into their marriage. We know that it took twenty years for Rebekah to conceive, twenty years of waiting for an heir to the covenant. We know that Isaac stayed with Rebekah even after she conspired with Jacob to steal the blessing that Isaac intended for Esau.

The story reminds us that our loving relationships cannot be measured only by feelings. Even if we don't feel about our spouse the way we once did or the way we'd like to, will we still care for and about our spouse? Will we still forgive? Will we still ask, rather than demand? One of the things I think I've figured out about marriage and other important relationships is this. Doing the things I'd do if I felt the way I want to feel often leads to the feelings I seek. Yes . . . we can learn and re-learn love.

READING WITH HEART & MIND

Next week, Jacob has to flee his home to escape the wrath of Esau. One night, on the trail, he has a famous encounter with God, angels, and a ladder that stretches from the earth to the heavens.

Monday, Genesis 26:1-35 Stories of Isaac in the prime of his life.

Tuesday, Genesis 27:1-29 Isaac intends to bless Esau but is tricked into blessing Jacob.

Wednesday, Genesis 27:30-40 Esau comes in and discovers his blessing has been stolen.

Thursday, Genesis 27:41-28:5 Jacob has to flee to escape Esau's fury.

Friday, Genesis 28:6-9 We learn that Esau has left Canaan and marries Ishmael's daughter.

Saturday, Genesis 28:10-17 & John 1:43-51 What do you think Jesus means by linking himself to Jacob and the ladder?

Sermon Notes

Growing Up Jesus

A look at the lives, beliefs, and practices of Jews in Jesus' day

A new Something Else series that begins next Sunday: July 20

What was it like to grow up in Jesus' world? Learning to be better readers of the Bible means learning it to read in full, living color. And that means coming to Scripture with a better appreciation of the historical and cultural context. In the case of the gospels, we need a better handle of what it was like to be a Jew in Jesus' day. In this series, we'll look at a full range of questions that swirl around the lives, beliefs, and practices of first-century Jews. You'll be surprised at how much your understanding of the gospels will be deepened. There will be plenty of surprises along the way!

Taught by Scott Engle at 11:00 in Festival Hall on Sunday morning

St. Andrew Author Series

Rev. Michael Dowd: *Thank God for Evolution*

This Thursday evening, July 17, at 7pm in Wesley Hall

This promises to be an interesting and perhaps controversial evening. Michael Dowd is an ordained Church of Christ minister and has written a successful book, *Thank God for Evolution*. His website states: "[he is] exploring the reasons why it is now possible to view evolution as a spiritual process; how current science shows that evolution is not meaningless blind chance; and practical methods for using evolutionary insights to achieve greater personal fulfillment." As a Christian minister, Dowd especially tries to address "the concerns that Christians have about evolution, but this book contains insights that will appeal to all people of faith and of no faith."

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

The theme of rivalry that began with Cain and Abel, continued with Sarah and Hagar, even Isaac and Ishmael, now presses forward with the rival twins, Esau and Jacob. What do we really make of this episode, much less the next, when Jacob deceives his father to get Esau's blessing (Genesis 27:1-29). Could God's purposes really move forward through such weakness, exploitation, and deceit? Does God really *need* these people to accomplish his rescue plan? And what does this whole business of God choosing one person over another (before birth!) say to us about God? Many people find these stories of choosing one and not another ("election") morally troublesome. To them, it just doesn't seem befitting of a good and loving God. Does God really love some people more than others? Is that even what election is about?

You might use today's story to talk about these questions. What portrait of God does this story, and this story alone, paint. If we add Paul's thoughts on the story in Romans 9, does the portrait of God change. Interestingly, the overarching theme of Paul's letter to the Romans is a spirited defense of God's righteousness – that God has done, is doing, and will do the right thing. Now add your thoughts about Jesus to the mix. How could the Gospel portraits of Jesus shed light on God's character and this business of choosing? After all, Jesus is the full and complete revelation of God!