

Sara Anne Berger, First Presbyterian Church, Natchitoches, 10.28.18, Genesis 27:1-28:5

Sermon Resources:

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0101745/>

<https://www.facebook.com/humansofnewyork/>

This is one of my least favorite stories in scripture. I know, we're not supposed to say that, and certainly there are far more horrific stories, and that's why I added the caveat "one of". It's one of my least favorites. But when I'm thinking of the most familiar stories I recall from scripture, and which one I don't like, this one pops up first.

Well, then, why did I pick it, you may wonder? After all, we have been off of the lectionary all year, I could have just skipped it. Well, first of all, because it is good to be challenged, and this story, with all my dislike, is a challenge for me. As it says in 2 Timothy, "All scripture is useful for training in righteousness". What training is there in it for me, for us, even if I don't like it?

And secondly, because we're beginning a series on Jacob, and Jacob, paradoxically, is one of the people in scripture I find to be the most interesting, and if we're going to know his complete story, how he saw the ladder to the heavens and wrestled with an emissary of the Lord and how he ended up renamed as Israel, the famous ancestor of God's people, then we have to see how it was before.

But how it was before is one of my least favorite stories. And not without reason. First, of all, I just think it's terribly unfair. Jacob and his mother deceive an old man, going to great lengths to do so, to steal a blessing. Esau was the eldest, and that blessing had been promised to him. He had gladly gone and done his father's bidding, and doesn't get what he's due, but Jacob does, and it is unfair.

Secondly, it just makes me sad. Esau's question of "Have you not reserved a blessing for me?" breaks my heart. It's incredibly sad. A brokenhearted father, de-

ceived by his own wife and child, a brokenhearted son, supplanted, again, by his own brother, and his mother, too. The story makes me sad.

Third, this is really a terrible family to hear about. Nobody comes off really well here, maybe Isaac, but still he was planning to give this whole full blessing to Esau, with no thought of Jacob, and he, too, has chosen Esau as his favorite. Rebekah is scheming, and Esau is kind of petulant and then murderous, and Jacob, even though he protests at first, eventually he agrees to the plan. This is not a happy family to hear about. Each parent has chosen a favorite child, and is working only for that child's interest, no communication between the spouses, between the difference sides, brothers and family members divided from each other. This is not a happy situation.

A lot of that family division and scheming and heartbreak, comes from a prophecy. When Rebekah and Isaac conceive, it says, the children wrestle in her womb, and when they consult the Lord about it, they learn that not only are they children, they are the forerunners of two nations, and that the elder will serve the younger. That kind of thing will throw a wrench into any family dynamic. But, evidently, Isaac assumes the prophecy will unfold on its own, and intends to hold to the custom of blessing the eldest son, Esau, and Rebekah, evidently, remembers that prophecy and intends to make it happen on her own, by helping Jacob get that blessing. Everyone in this family knows that words have great power—prophetic words, blessings, curses, all of it isn't just perception, it's power. But these words, lead to loyalties and actions, which lead to consequences, they effect real people's lives. Because of that prophecy, that blessing, these words and the actions taken, Esau loses out, and Jacob gets what he wants.

And we're gonna hear more about what happens to Jacob in the weeks to come. Here we leave him running off from his father's sorrow, his mother's fear,

his brother's anger. And he has other gains and losses ahead. But, here, today, he gets what he wants, and Esau doesn't.

I said this isn't one of my favorite stories, but that it's a good challenge, and part of the challenge is to see what's in it for us, what we could take from this story, even with its sadness and its difficulty. And what we see in the story is that even though there's a grand over-arching plan to Jacob's life, a prophecy which unfolds and later looks like inevitability, there's also the day to day reality of a challenging family, a very different set of brothers, and how this effects their individual lives with real consequences.

Esau doesn't get what he wants. He's the eldest, and by tradition, the blessing should be his. He's his father's favorite, too, and able to honestly go and fulfill his father's request, no scheming required. And yet, he doesn't get what he wants. He doesn't get the blessing of an eldest, he gets a secondary one, a blessing with promises, but also restrictions. His brother got exactly what he wanted, but Esau does not.

Jacob gets what he wants. The prophecy said he would come out on top, and already he's managed to get Esau's birthright in an earlier encounter, and now he's managed to get his father's full blessing, without having to do much of anything. He gets what he wants.

And in our day to day lives, in our own complicated family dynamics, in our time here on earth, we can be Jacobs and Esaus. Sometimes, we are Esau, and maybe we feel acutely the unfairness of this story, the fact that Jacob receives a prophecy at birth already decreeing he'll come out on top, why does he also get to demand birthrights and take blessings that aren't his? Maybe we have looked around at other people's lives, and have asked is there no blessing for me? Is there nothing reserved for me? I bet other people's words and actions have effected us,

have had power in our lives, I'd bet that sometimes we have not gotten what we wanted.

But, on the flip side, often we are Jacob, and sometimes we don't always realize it. We don't always recognize the privileges we bear, the ease with which we have taken from other people, the way our loyalties, perceptions, words and actions have effected other people's lives. We have sometimes floated through parts of our lives not realizing just how easy we were having it, just how well things were going, how differently they could have gone. As we've talked about the last three weeks, as people of faith, in Jesus Christ, we have received what we did not deserve or earn, and some might see that unfairly earned. But even in day to day life, I would bet that we've gotten what we wanted, and not through hardship or merit, and we got it just the same. I bet we have been blessed even without deserving it.

The thing is, that Esau doesn't get what he wants, and he has to reckon with not getting what he wants, but maybe that had to happen. Maybe him not getting what he wanted, what he felt he deserved, what seemed like his due, was what had to happen. God has already prophesied that the elder will serve the younger, but the prophecy also said that Esau, too, would be the leader of a nation. He does still receive a blessing, the end of which is that he will one day throw off his brother's yoke. And Esau's story goes on from here, as we'll learn in coming weeks. He doesn't get what he wants, but clearly God still has plans for him. So the question, when we are faced with an Esau situation, when we have not gotten what we wanted, when we are frustrated and angry and grieving and wondering, the question is are we prepared to be faithful to God and God's greater plan even if we don't get what we want, right here and now?

Similarly, Jacob gets exactly what he wants, but that's not the end of his story. His victory of getting the full blessing from his unknowing father is quickly overshadowed by his brother's plan to murder him, the efforts to send him some-

where safe from Esau's revenge. He gets his blessing, but then immediately has to leave his family, as a result. He gets a blessing, but then he has new people and new places ahead of him. That blessing leads to years and years of adventures, of ups and downs, gains and losses, triumph and heartbreak ahead of him. So, the question for us when we have gotten what we wanted, when we have been blessed by the Lord, is are we prepared to take that blessing and follow God to the unknown, the unfamiliar, the uncomfortable? Are we prepared to take the burden with the blessing?

Esau doesn't get what he wants, and sometimes we don't get what we want, but God still has plans for us—plans, perhaps, that we have only seen a smidgen of, or have no idea how they will unfold, how they will give us things we never thought to ask for. But, first we'll have to confront our anger, our grief, over not getting what we wanted. We'll have to face our sense of fairness and unfairness, we'll have to let down our defensiveness and bitterness over what could have been, so we can see what other things God might have in store for us, instead.

It reminds me of movie from the 1980's called "Doc Hollywood", where Michael J. Fox plays an up and coming doctor, Dr. Benjamin Stone, who is driving from the East Coast to Hollywood where he will have a cushy and easy job as a plastic surgeon to the stars, he'll be set for life, everything he wants is there. But along the way, he impatiently leaves the backed-up interstate, and ends up flying through a small town at breakneck speed, and then wrecks his car trying to avoid a cow. Being a tiny town, the mechanical work on his car will take weeks, and for his speeding fine, the judge is able to set a unique punishment: to be allowed to go on his way, he'll have to volunteer time at the local doctor's office, helping their overwhelmed staff treat patients. He is livid about this, ready to get to Hollywood, to his cushy and well-paying job, but there's no way around it—his car won't be fixed for a while, and this is the punishment required for him to be on his way. So,

he stays. And given that this is a romantic comedy, I bet you can already guess where it goes—he realizes he loves the town, the people, the work he does there, he meets his love interest, and when the car is ready and his chance to go on to Hollywood, to what he thought he wanted, arrives, he realizes what he never expected is the best thing for him instead.

We may not get what we've wanted, and how it happens may not be fair, but it doesn't mean the Lord is done with us, it doesn't mean no blessing is reserved for us. Once we have grieved and processed our anger and frustration, we may find that what we never thought to want is very good, too.

Jacob gets what he wanted, but it takes him off further than he ever expected, to people he has never known. Sometimes we haven't gotten what we've wanted, but other times, we have, and in Jesus Christ, the Lord has blessed us with so much. But that blessing comes with requirements. Jesus says in his parables, to the one who has been given much, much will be required. We won't be blessed, we won't get what we want, and be able to rest on our laurels, our story won't stop there. If we would be blessed, then we'll have to go where the Lord takes us, even to the unknown, the unfamiliar, the uncomfortable.

I've been following the page "Humans of New York" for several years now, and have been avidly reading the stories on it this week, from Rwanda, because they are heartbreaking and riveting. But, this blessing with responsibility reminds me of that site: and if you don't know, Humans of New York, was started by a man named Brandon Stanton—who, actually, was working and took photographs as a hobby, but after he lost his job, he decided to pursue the hobby as a career. At first, he was barely getting by, and his little Facebook page: Humans of New York, where he photographed and interviewed every day people on the streets of New York, wasn't very lucrative. Until it was. Over time its popularity grew, the interest in his photographs and interviews increased, and is one of the most popular pages

on Facebook, and he has released a best-selling book to accompany it. But the other thing he's done is branch out—he has traveled all over the world, doing photographs and interviews with everyday people in places like Syria, Mexico, Ukraine, currently, Rwanda, and more. He has used his platform to amplify the voices of people all over the world, to tell their stories. He has used his fame to connect readers to programs they can support in other countries, ways they can help individual people, and simply made connections and created awareness of other people's lives around the world. He was greatly blessed, he got what he wanted, and yet it didn't stop there. He followed it out into the world, to other people, to other lives, to share his blessing.

In the ways that we have been blessed, that we have gotten what we wanted, much will be expected of us. Much will be expected of what we are given. We'll need to use whatever God blesses us with to connect to other people, to reach out beyond where we are familiar, to go outside of where we are comfortable.

When we don't get what we want, are we able to be faithful to God's greater plan? Are we able to live through our anger and let go of our defensiveness, to realize what's being offered instead? Are we able to hear more than just our own frustration and sense of fairness? Can we admit that we did not get what we wanted, while also looking for what God is doing instead?

And when we do get what we want, are we able to recognize the blessing? Are we prepared to have more demanded of us? Are we prepared to go where God leads us with what God has given us?

Let's make peace with the fact that in our lives we will be both Jacob and Esau. Let's remember that sometimes we will not get what we wanted, and sometimes we will. Let's not forget, in either moment, God's broader plan. Let's face the anger and grief and confusion when we don't get what we wanted, and let's move forward from it to see what else God will do. Let's not settle when we do we get

what want, and let's not keep our blessings to ourselves. In our heartache, and in our blessings, let's follow the Lord and see what God will do with our lives. Amen.