

## JACOB AND ESAU

Genesis 25:19-28

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, July 16, 2017 the Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia, as part of a preaching theme for multiple Sundays entitled "In the Beginning."*

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*These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean. Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. The children struggled together within her; and she said,*

*'If it is to be this way, why do I live?'*

*So she went to inquire of the Lord. And the Lord said to her,*

*'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.'*

*When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. Afterwards his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.*

*When the boys grew up, Esau was a skilful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob.*

*Prayer: Lord, we live in the "meanwhile," that interval between the dawning of the new order of life and the period in which the temporary and material has not yet been transformed into the spiritual. The words I speak in this sermon are part of that "meanwhile." May they nevertheless be acceptable to you and edifying for your people, as they seek to point to the new order of life to come, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

### I.

Either I wasn't much exposed to them or most of them didn't register with me, but I have little memory of nursery rhymes. Whenever they come up in a family gathering, a blank look comes over my face, as if someone is speaking of nuclear physics. By now family members know to fill me in on the literary reference just made, so I am not completely left out of the conversation.

Having admitted this deficiency, I do, however, remember Jack and Jill (though I had to Google it to get the right words!).

Jack and Jill  
Went up the hill  
To fetch a pail of water,  
Jack fell down  
And broke his crown  
And Jill came tumbling after.

Up Jack got  
And home did trot  
As fast as he could caper,  
Went to bed  
To mend his head  
With vinegar and brown paper.<sup>1</sup>

If we stop and think about it, this is a *cheery* rhyme about a *dreary* subject: two children on a “free-range” mission together, fall down, one injured, the condition of the other unknown. The poet Stephen Dunn, has a haunting follow up to this rhyme called “After.”

Jack and Jill at home together after their fall,  
the bucket spilled, her knees badly scraped,  
and Jack with not even an aspirin for what's broken.  
We can see the arduous evenings ahead of them.  
And the need now to pay a boy to fetch the water.  
Our mistake was trying to do something together,  
Jill sighs. Jack says, If you'd have let go for once  
you wouldn't have come tumbling after.  
He's in a wheelchair, but she's still an item--  
for the rest of their existence confined  
to a little, rhyming story...

Dunn then cogitates on the appeal of this story.

...We tell it to our children,  
who laugh, already accustomed to disaster.  
We'd like to teach them the secrets  
of knowing how to go too far,  
but Jack is banging with his soup spoon,  
Jill is pulling out her hair. Out of decency  
we turn away, as if it were possible to escape  
the drift of *our* lives, the fundamental business  
of making do with what's been left *us*.<sup>2</sup>

## II.

“Making do with what’s been left us” is an apt description of much of the book of Genesis, on which we are spending sermon time this summer. As you have heard me say before, after the beauty of creation in Genesis 1 and 2, comes Genesis 3, the Fall of the human race, in which the woman and man exceed the bounds that God has set for them as they eat the fruit of the tree from which God has forbidden them to eat. The Narrator depicts their reasons as both noble and understandable: “the tree was good for food...a delight to the eyes, and...desired to make one wise.”<sup>3</sup>

Yet though their motives are good, Adam and Eve reveal a human tendency *to seek to exceed the limits* for which God has created us, what Dunn calls “the secrets of knowing how to go too far.” Jack and Jill seek to

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<sup>1</sup> Available at <https://www.scrapbook.com/poems/doc/2721.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Dunn, “After,” in *Different Hours* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002). Italics added.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 3:6.

climb a hill for which they are not quite ready. Adam and Eve seek knowledge beyond their purview. As a result of such human over-reach, history itself is marked by the aftermath of the Fall, which unfolds in the next few chapters of Genesis:

- Fracture between humanity and nature<sup>4</sup>
- Tension between male and female<sup>5</sup>
- Difficulty in work<sup>6</sup> and childbearing<sup>7</sup>
- Division of labor<sup>8</sup> and differences in language<sup>9</sup> and religion.

The latter comes to the fore for us when we realize that the first murder, a fratricide, domestic violence, occurs when Cain kills Abel *before the altar* in an argument over whose offering – an act of *worship* – is superior after God chooses Abel's offering over Cain's without specifying a reason.<sup>10</sup>

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Among the most pronounced divisions which unfold in Genesis is that between brother and brother. In addition to Cain versus Abel, there is

- Isaac versus Ishmael
- Jacob versus Esau
- And Joseph versus his brothers.

One of the deepest expressions of this sibling rivalry comes in our text for today:

- The Narrator introduces us to Jacob and Esau, saying: “The children *struggled together* within [their mother Rebekah's womb]”
- Next, God addresses *Rebekah*: “Two *nations* are in your womb, and two *peoples* born of you shall be *divided*.”
- The Narrator then describes the actual birth: “The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle...Afterward, his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel.”
- Then later: “When the boys grew up, Esau was a skilful *hunter*, a man of the *field*, while Jacob was a *quiet* man, living in *tents*.”
- And perhaps most importantly, the Narrator concludes the introduction to these two brothers by saying: “*Isaac* loved Esau...but *Rebekah* loved Jacob.”

Rooted in the Fall of Adam and Eve, traced back through Cain and Abel, the prenatal conflict between Jacob and Esau plays out through the eleven chapters in which they appear in the central part of Genesis, with precious few instances of peace between them.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Genesis 3:15.

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 3:16b.

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 3:17-19.

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 3:16a.

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 3:20-21.

<sup>9</sup> Genesis 11:1-9.

<sup>10</sup> Genesis 4:1-16.

<sup>11</sup> Genesis 25:19-36:43.

“Jack...banging with his soup spoon”

“Jill... pulling out her hair.”

But rather than “out of decency...turn[ing] away,” might we leave our Bibles open a little longer, read their story, and see if, even in our text today which introduces their warring saga, there might be something we can find that offers us *hope* if not for reconciliation, at least for *containment* of difference, division, conflict? Is there a word of hope in this story, or, like Jack and Jill, are Jacob and Esau trapped forever in the downward spiral of the Fall?

### III.

There are two human actions that point in the direction of hope in this passage.

#### (a)

Several of these characters display an ability to wait, to be *patient*.

- We saw last week in Chapter 24 that Isaac waits forty years until his father’s servant finds Rebekah, and she slides off her camel, wraps herself in her veil, joins him in marriage in the tent of his late mother Sarah. After the trauma of his near sacrifice at the hands and knife of his father and after the subsequent death of his mother, Isaac waits, and eventually, Rebekah emerges. *Isaac waits*.
- Once they are married, Isaac and Rebekah wait twenty more years to conceive a child. Isaac and Rebekah *wait*.
- In Chapters 29 and 30, which are upcoming, one of their sons Jacob works seven years to marry Rachel, the cousin he believes he is to marry, only to be find that her father Laban has slid into the wedding bed at the last minute her older sister Leah; Jacob then works seven more years to marry Rachel; and then works six more years before he is freed from working under Laban. Twenty years total. Jacob *waits*.
- And in Chapters 32 and 33, it is Esau, as an adult, who waits twenty years for Jacob to come to him and seek to reconcile after Jacob has stolen both his birthright and blessing; the same twenty years it takes Jacob to muster the courage, faith, and grace to seek such reconciliation. Both Jack and Esau *wait*.

It is said that “time heals all wounds.” In and of itself, time doesn’t. But time offers us the opportunity to grow, to change, to gain perspective, to become wiser, and all of those are elements that can help us find peace and reconciliation. Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, Esau, all *wait*. All have *patience*. It is the first element in this narrative toward reconciliation and peace.

#### (b)

A second element is *prayer*.

As you know, there are many types of prayer throughout the scriptures.

“Lord, I believe; help my unbelief.”<sup>12</sup>

“I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go unto the house of the Lord’”!<sup>13</sup>

“Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.”<sup>14</sup>

“Not my will, but thine be done.”<sup>15</sup>

“Our Father, who art in heaven...”<sup>16</sup>

“Let everything that breathes praise the Lord.”<sup>17</sup>

There are all kinds of prayers throughout the scriptures.

One prayer in our text comes from Isaac: The Narrator says:

“Isaac *prayed* to the Lord for his wife, because she was barren.”

Twenty years of infertility, and Isaac is still praying. And the narrator says:

“The Lord *granted* his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived.”

Not all prayers are answered directly, even after two decades. But some are. Isaac’s prayer was answered in the way, though not likely on the timetable, he wanted it answered. Sometimes it happens that way. Sometimes not.

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A second prayer in our text comes from Rebekah, *after* she conceives, when “the children struggle together within her.” Rebekah says to herself if not to others:

“If it is to be this way, *why* do I live?”

Having brought to words the most profound anguish she experiences, Rebecca then “goes to inquire of the Lord.” We can imagine that she joins Elijah and Jeremiah and Job and Jonah in cursing the day she was born.<sup>18</sup>

“If it is to be this way, why do I live?”

Rebekah receives an answer that is an *explanation* of her circumstances but not a promise of *change* within them:

Two nations are in your womb,  
and two peoples born of you shall be divided;

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<sup>12</sup> Mark 9:24.

<sup>13</sup> Psalm 122:1.

<sup>14</sup> Luke 18:13.

<sup>15</sup> Luke 22:42.

<sup>16</sup> Matthew 6:9.

<sup>17</sup> Psalm 150:6.

<sup>18</sup> See Jeremiah 20:14-18; I Kings 19:1-14; Job 3:11-19; Jonah 4:1-5.

one shall be stronger than the other,  
the elder shall serve the younger.

This is not the answer for which Rebekah had hoped, but the experience appears sufficient to give her the strength to carry on. She gives birth to her sons and is involved in their tumultuous lives until she dies, which Jewish midrash calculates to be at either 120 or 134 years old.<sup>19</sup>

Prayer – even when anguished and angry – can be a step toward healing, toward peace, toward reconciliation. It was for Isaac. It was for Rebekah.

#### IV.

So in this story of pre-natal conflict, rooted in family history, rooted in the Fall of the human race, patience and prayer point the way to at least *containment* of conflict if not, ultimately, reconciliation.

Up Jack got  
And home did trot  
As fast as he could caper,  
Went to bed  
And *bowed* his head  
*Waited*  
For vinegar and brown paper.

Amen.

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<sup>19</sup> See <http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Rebekah>. Her death is not explicitly recorded in the Bible.