

“God’s House”
Genesis 27:1-23
Genesis 28:10-22
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Genesis 27:1-23

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.’

Now Rebekah was listening when Isaac spoke to his son Esau. So when Esau went to the field to hunt for game and bring it, Rebekah said to her son Jacob, ‘I heard your father say to your brother Esau, “Bring me game, and prepare for me savory food to eat, that I may bless you before the LORD before I die.” Now therefore, my son, obey my word as I command you. Go to the flock, and get me two choice kids, so that I may prepare from them savory food for your father, such as he likes; and you shall take it to your father to eat, so that he may bless you before he dies.’ But Jacob said to his mother Rebekah, ‘Look, my brother Esau is a hairy man, and I am a man of smooth skin. Perhaps my father will feel me, and I shall seem to be mocking him, and bring a curse on myself and not a blessing.’

His mother said to him, ‘Let your curse be on me, my son; only obey my word, and go, get them for me.’ So he went and got them and brought them to his mother; and his mother prepared savory food, such as his father loved. 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.

What a twisted family we come from. If you think “Real Housewives” or “Survivor” is lurid, competitive, and ugly, you ain’t seen nothin’ yet. If you didn’t catch our last episode of “Keeping up with Genesis,” let me catch you up. Abraham and Sarah finally have a son after a l-o-o-o-o-n-g, nail-biting wait. Isaac inherits the family trust– which includes God’s promise of land, protection, and a very special covenant that God will use to bless the world. Now Isaac is old, and he’s ready to pass on the family trust. It will, of course, go to the firstborn son. That’s just how it is. I should know, by the way, because my very Middle-Eastern family still functions that way. That’s why my oldest brother Marty will get the Oriental rug from our Dad, the rug from the old country that was handed down from Dad’s parents. It isn’t unfair. It’s just the order of things.

But sometimes ... sometimes things don't go the way they're supposed to, do they? Sometimes, things go seriously out-of-order.

So back to the story. Isaac and his wife Rebekah have two sons, fraternal twins: Esau came first, followed by Jacob. They're very different men. Esau is an outdoorsman, a hunter; we even learn that he is hairy. Esau is Isaac's favorite child. Jacob, on the other hand, is a thinker, a man of letters; we learn that he is smooth. And this smooth-dude is his mother Rebekah's favorite child. This will not end well.

We just heard what happens next. Rebekah and Jacob conspire to fool Isaac and rob Esau of his birthright. They hatch an elaborate plot to disguise Jacob in Esau's clothing and even cover him with fur. Against all odds, it works ... Isaac bestows the irrevocable trust to Jacob, and Esau ... well, Esau is out of luck.

What happens next is predicable. Esau is enraged, as well he should be. Their mother Rebekah grabs Jacob and ships him off to her father's house where he'll be safe. So Jacob runs away. He flees his brother's wrath. But here's the thing: we can run away from home all we want, but we can never run away from God. It's a pattern we will see again and again: we can run, but we can't hide ... we can never hide from God.

As you listen to the next part of the story, I invite you to imagine how it felt for Jacob on the run. And though it may be painful, I gently ask you to remember a time in your life when you had been less than honest ... when you conspired with others ... when you overreached what was rightfully yours. I

invite you to remember when you felt compelled to run away from the mess you'd made. Now, hear God's Word again for you:

Genesis 28:10-22

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went towards 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.' So he named the place Bethel, which in Hebrew means, "God's house."

*This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.***

After all these years, it still stuns me: even when Jacob is deceitful, even when Jacob robs his brother and dishonors his father, even when Jacob runs away like a scared little bunny rabbit, God seeks him out and finds him – not to punish him, not to disown him, not to harm him, not to shame him ... but to reclaim him. To restore him. To revive him. And above all, to bring him

home: to bring him not to the old family home, but to invite him to find shelter in God's own house.

I've come to believe that this is exactly what God does for us too, not just when we're at our best, but even when we're at our worst. It is what God does for us too, not just for the "chosen" ones, the "privileged" ones, but for all of us. God seeks us out and finds us, and welcomes us home. But what's really crucial is that God doesn't just try to haul us back to where we were. Instead, God creates a place for us in God's own house. A house unlike the messy ones some of us know all too well: where people fail and betray each other ... or where the favorites are protected and the rest are on their own. No, God invites us home to God's house where each of us, no matter who we are or what we've done, is beloved. Not because we've done anything to deserve it, but because that's who God is. God is the trustworthy one. The promise-keeping one. The welcoming one. For each of us, for all of us. And I wonder if you can remember a time like that, when you felt utterly safe, totally beloved, sought and found and treasured and cherished. That's what Jacob discovers at Bethel, at God's house. And it's what I pray that's what every one of us finds here – for this is God's house too.

Does Jacob's story end there, all happily-ever-after? Of course not. None of our stories end in the Magic Kingdom – not in this life, anyway - because that's not the way this world is. God doesn't protect us from reality – and God didn't protect Jacob from the world either.

What happens next in Jacob's story is classic. After he wakes up from his dream, he hustles off to Uncle Laban. There he meets the love of his life, his cousin Rachel, who loves him back. They're smitten. Laban promises to give Rachel in marriage – all Jacob has to do is work for seven years on the family

farm. But all those years don't bother him, because, as Scripture tells us, "they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for Rachel" (Gen. 29:20). Finally, Jacob gets to the altar ... but then, what goes around comes around. Good old Uncle Laban – Rebekah's brother – pulls the family trick. He disguises his older daughter Leah to look like Rachel – sound familiar? and – bam, Jacob makes his marriage vows with Leah. But there's a happy ending, for Jacob and Rachel, anyway. In those days, marriage, unlike the family trust, could go to more than one person. In exchange for seven more years of labor, Jacob gets to marry Rachel too.

And bit by bit, life unfolds. Leah has children; and Rachel too, eventually. Jacob is wildly successful in his father-in-law's business. And finally, God decides it's time for Jacob to go back to his own family homestead, with assurances that things will work out with Esau.

But on the way home, Jacob has one more dream. This time, an angel comes and wrestles with him, and in the course of the night, the angel calls him "Israel," which is destined to be the name of his people from that night to eternity. Jacob is renamed Israel; and his twelve sons will become the Twelve Tribes of Israel, destined to be in covenant with God forever ... destined to be blessed to be a blessing to the world ... destined, eventually, through Jesus Christ, to open God's house to all people.

Isn't that what Jesus promises when he tells us, "In my Father's house there are many mansions, many rooms, and I go to prepare a place for you"? That every single one of God's children is welcomed home with open arms. That each refugee from Syria might find a home. That each hungry child in North Chicago might be fed. That each broken, lonely spirit might belong.

That each one of us sinners might be welcomed home ... welcomed to the table of grace ... welcomed home to Bethel, God's own house.

“O God of Bethel”

(Hymn Text by Philip Doddridge, 1736)

O God of Bethel, by whose hand
thy people still are fed;
who through this earthly pilgrimage
hast all our fathers led:

Through each perplexing path of life
our wandering footsteps guide;
give us each day our daily bread,
and raiment fit provide.

O spread thy covering wings around,
till all our wanderings cease,
and at our Father's loved abode
our souls arrive in peace!