

Genesis 25 - 50

Jacob: The Price of Maturity

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The Congregational Church of Needham

As we look at the ancient stories of faith we dig into the layers of our own tradition and tunnel through the sediment of time. We excavate the characters that shaped our shared Jewish and Christian and Muslim traditions. The process of exploring the past unearths stories that help us to imagine what life was like for our ancestors in faith. We have a chance to consider the striking differences and stunning similarities between the people in the Bible and ourselves. As we hold these shards of plot or anecdote up to the light we see the affections and jealousy, the fear and temptations that mark the human condition. We see family dynamics with their fierce gravitational fields that drive us apart and put us back together.

Last week we learned about Abraham, a prosperous man living in Ur during the Bronze Age, 1700 or 1800 years before Jesus lived. He left home and travelled north to Haran where his brother decided to settle. But God called Abraham west on a long 500 mile trek that ended eventually in modern day Israel. There were trade routes for caravans but a journey like that on foot took years. Abraham and Sarah had a son named Isaac and when it was time for him to wed they sent their steward back to Mesopotamia to find a suitable mate from among their kinfolk.

The steward arranged for a cousin named Rebekah to marry Isaac and he brought this young girl all the way to Palestine. As Rebekah prepared to meet the man to whom she was betrothed it was a journey of discovery far from home. But when Isaac beheld his bride and shy Rebekah lifted her eyes to catch his gaze the spark between betrayed a deep and lasting affection.

They had twin boys, one was red-headed and ruddy like his father, the other was darker and quiet like his mother. Even when she was pregnant, Rebekah could feel her sons wrestling in her womb. God warned Rebekah that Esau and Jacob would father two separate nations but the elder one would serve the younger. So at their birth Jacob was born grasping at his brother's heel, a sign of things to come.

As children, Esau thrived outdoors. A skilled hunter, he snared wild game easily. Isaac was drawn to Esau and full of special pride when he saw his eldest. Jacob had other gifts; he tended the livestock, stayed close to his mother's tent and learned to plant the crops and manage the harvest. Jacob was steady where Esau was impulsive. Like many boys they loved to wrestle. Esau took his strength for granted while younger Jacob shrewdly sized up his brother's weaknesses. One day Jacob was home cooking a savory lentil soup when Esau arrived famished, after a failed hunting expedition. When Esau smelled the food he asked his brother for a meal but Jacob insisted that Esau swear his younger brother fealty, in exchange for the meal. Hungry, impulsive Esau dismissed Jacob's ambitions and sold his birthright for a good meal.

Esau still expected to receive his father's blessing and inheritance. Old Isaac was growing blind and his failing eyesight began to handicap him more and more. He arranged to give Esau the blessing while he could still enjoy the experience. Isaac sent Esau out into the fields to snare some meat for the occasion, but Rebekah overheard their plans and plotted to have Jacob steal the birthright. She convinced Jacob to kill a goat from their flocks and beat his brother to Isaac's tent. Though she loved her husband she was not above deceiving him. Instructing Jacob to bathe and put on Esau's clothes along with goat skins to make his arms hairy like Esau's, Rebekah told Jacob to lie to his father. The blessing could only be given once and when Jacob entered the tent Isaac was suspicious. The voice sounded like Jacob but the hairy arms seemed like Esau, but Isaac was fooled and he bestowed the honor on Jacob.

Before long Esau returned to prepare for his blessing. When he went to his father they both realized Jacob's deception; Isaac was hurt and Esau was heart-broken. They were both robbed of something they never should have lost. In time Esau's sorrow gave way to fury and he plotted revenge. Rebekah was frightened for Jacob and urged him to go to the safest place she knew, her home in Haran, where Jacob could live with her brother, his uncle Laban in Mesopotamia.

Jacob walked alone, re-tracing the steps his grandparents and mother had taken 500 miles east. Sometimes he was frightened but he feared Esau more than the strangers on the route so he pushed on. At night God came to him. The first night Jacob lay on the ground and rested his head on a rock and dreamed a ladder joined heaven and earth and angels went up and down. God said, "I am the Lord the God of Abraham and Isaac. I will give this land to you and your descendants. Your offspring will be numerous as the dust of the earth. All the nations will be blessed through you and I will protect you wherever you may be. I will not abandon you." Jacob had not been a religious boy and he woke full of awe.

When Jacob finally arrived in Haran he went to the well and the first person he met there was Rachel, his cousin. As they spoke, he realized who she was and she took him to his uncle Laban. Jacob worked managing Laban's flocks of sheep and goats and he matured on his own. Jacob demonstrated his skill and prowess in husbandry and they all prospered. In time Jacob asked for Rachel's hand in marriage and Laban told him he could marry Rachel after working seven more years. At the end of seven years they planned the wedding and Laban plied Jacob with plenty of wine because he planned to switch his daughters and give Jacob his elder daughter, Leah. Jacob woke the next morning to find Leah beside him in bed. He was furious and demanded his uncle make amends. After a huge argument Laban allowed Jacob to marry Rachel too, if he agreed to work another seven years for her.

Jacob's family grew during this time and he had 12 sons and one daughter. His sons became the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel. In the meantime Esau had married his cousin on the other side- the daughter of Ishmael. Esau's descendants became the people of Islam, while Jacob's children formed the tribes of Israel. After two decades passed Jacob had prospered but he became eager to return home. He took Leah and Rachel, their 13 children and all their servants and livestock. Though he had grown up, and made a success of his life he carried in his heart his boyhood regret for deceiving his father and his young fears of his brother's rage. He wondered if he would be forgiven.

As they approached Palestine, Jacob sent generous gifts of livestock to Esau as peace offerings. He sent servants with his pleas for reconciliation. The night before he arrived home Jacob was praying by a river when a stranger came in the darkness and the two wrestled all night long. Jacob dislocated his hip that night and limped the rest of his life but he experienced this night as a profound encounter with God.

At dawn Jacob saw Esau approaching, and bowed low, but Esau ran into his brother's arms. They fell on each other's necks weeping for joy and sadness too. The journey had taxed Rachel and she died in Bethlehem, but old Isaac kept himself alive until Jacob returned and then passed away. What can we learn from this story for our lives?

In the first place, there is purpose to your journey. Jacob crisscrossed the Middle East, tricking his father, fleeing from his brother, contending with his uncle, falling in love and marrying her sister too. He knew abundance, and poverty in turns. He knew seasons of family security and periods of isolation, days of feeling lost and nights when he felt so close to God it was as though he could see right into heaven. This crazy jumbled journey of his life all had a purpose in the end.

These travelers in the Bible are no different from us. They take bad advice from family members, and have to live with their bad decisions. They leave town and grow up and learn to reconcile.

Yet there is a holy purpose in it all. Every setback teaches new resolve. Every disappointment is a cloud sewn with the lessons that lead to wisdom. UCC minister Yvette Flunder, founder of the City of Refuge Church in San Francisco, tells about her grandmother who often declared. "I thank God for my life and I would not take nothing for my journey." What she meant was that her life was not easy but it was all precious.

Every hard decision made her that much wiser. Every disappointment deepened her compassion for others. Jacob might have said "If only I had not listened to mom. If only I had not tricked dad. If only I had checked to see who I married that night." We all have a list of regrets. If only I had not made those mistakes early on. We all wish we could have some do overs. But life is not about getting it right; it is about keeping in the game. The Bible says it is all good. "If only I had done things differently. If only I had not listened to that bad advice." It is such a waste of time. Jacob teaches us that God can use it all.

Secondly, Reconciliation takes time. Distance can heal. Sometimes you have to pull yourself away from home, whatever home means for you, in order to find yourself, to reach your potential, or even to find faith. Jacob's family was enmeshed, and he was not able to differentiate until he left them. The story of Jacob says that as soon as he ventured out on his own God came to him. I imagine God was trying to reach Jacob but God could not get a word in edgewise in that tight family. Until we make our home in God we wander, subject to the winds of bad advice, and the temptations of others.

Finally, God is dreaming a dream through you and me. Jacob was a shrewd man and a hard worker. He was no different from other capable people in the middle of the Bronze Age. What made him a great man was God's dream for his life. What propelled him into history was God's dream. The story says that God has a dream for your life and for mine. What we need to do is often to clear some space so God can whisper this bold dream into our sleep consciousness.

Your journey has a purpose. Find your home- your true home in God. Listen to the dreams that God has for your life. This advice in the Bible won't make your life easy all the time, but it will give you a peace that passes all human understanding.