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Sermon
Trinity Church Boston
Year A, Proper 10
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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together always be acceptable in your sight, O God our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Who doesn't love a story about sibling drama? We have a few choice examples of this coming up in our lectionary, and if you are scripturally minded, you might recall that from the beginning of the book of Genesis, there was some genial unpleasantness between the first set of siblings, Cain and Abel, and onward it continues. Perhaps it was meant to speak to the realities of the human family, especially where inheritance is concerned. But perhaps it also speaks to the human condition, or even religion in general—the deeply seated notion that a parent's love, preference, blessing, always seems falls in one direction more than the other.

This morning we continue with this epic family saga of the matriarchs and patriarchs of Israel—seeing the promise of God's election, covenant, passed down through generations of a family who work out just what it means to be bearers of it all. Isaac has married Rebekah, as was in our scripture last week—she, too, had trouble conceiving a child. God's promise is always at risk, even through God's chosen people, somehow. But at age sixty, she conceives the twins, Esau and Jacob. Far from the peaceful pregnancy she might have hoped for, there was warring in her body from the beginning.

The next generation emerges—one clutching the heel of the other. Esau, the outdoorsman and hunter, the hairy, red man, who exists in later writings as a kind of yeti-boogeyman due to his seemingly uncouth and uncaring ways, exchanging his birthright for a hastily slurped bowl of lentils. Jacob, the smooth-skinned 'quiet' man, the one who stayed with the women in the tents, a conniver and trickster, who later obtains both the birthright and blessing of his first born brother through lies and deception (of both his brother and his esteemed father, Isaac).

It is through these people, friends, that God redeems the world.

This is where our approach to scripture, if we settle ourselves too firmly, too snugly, in the assumption that these stories are clean cut morality tales, can be challenging. I recall teaching 9th and 10th graders both Old Testament and New Testament years ago. Our Old Testament class was tiny—made up of only 6 or 7 kids. But we had a grand old time, exploring these texts freely, engaging the humanity of brokenness and hope among God's people of Israel. The next semester, my full class of New Testament students refused to say aught about anything that might be construed as levity or difficulty about the texts. They were convinced that piety, holiness, the writings of faithful communities from ages ago, were not to be taken with a grain of salt or engaged with an eye to the human condition. They were too scared of allowing the disciples and

followers of Jesus the benefit of humanity, convinced that there was a moral high and low ground clearly set out. If one were to nudge towards the gospel reading today, these former students—and perhaps us too at times—probably believed that soil was unable to change or have seasons of life and barrenness and rocks and weeds and fallow times. Good was always good and bad was always bad, and obviously the gospel would echo this dichotomy.

But such is not the case in the human condition. Think back to your week. Were you objectively “good” this week? Were you objectively “bad”? No. God’s presence isn’t binary, and no clearer is this made than in the midst of Esau and Jacob’s battle between themselves for the vague notion of what it meant to be the bearer of God’s promise and covenant.

Martin Luther once wrote that the immoralities of the patriarchs are more encouraging than the story of their virtues. In these stories, we hear all the tidbits of the human condition that we regularly hide and diminish so that we can appear to be as virtuous as we care to be in public. This week we find ourselves torn between Team Esau and Team Jacob—the one who is careless with something precious, and the one who uses trickery to obtain what he wants. There are no winners here, friends, no matter how much we want to claim a winning side.

And it is through these brothers that God is made known.

It is through this complicated, scarred, divided family that God’s promise is indeed carried out. And you know what? We don’t know why this is the way God works, again and again. But we do know that the promise remained and was retained. We do know that God still opts for this feet-first method of intrusion and descent into our lives.

I’m going to offer a spoiler here. The rift between Jacob and Esau was not forever. It was for a while, but unlike Cain and Abel or other scriptural siblings, God’s promise does not end in schism. Years later, Esau and Jacob reconcile in their own way—they meet one another with their families—Jacob filled with fear for the retribution due him by his brother. Instead of the vengeance appropriately due Jacob, Esau comes in peace, telling Jacob to keep what he has, such as Esau’s original birthright and the blessing, for himself—that he has enough. “Truly,” Esau adds to Jacob as they weep in each other’s arms in Genesis 33, “to see your face is like seeing the face of God.”

And that, somehow, is the story of God here and now. God works through all kinds: the kinds who are broken and sinful; the kinds who mess up intentionally and those who are simply careless with the graces they assume are theirs only and not gifts from God and precious in the sight of others. God works through the division with an eye to unity—perhaps not unity right now, or unity as we might imagine, but rather unity as reconciliation. Indeed, all of scripture seems to have this as its foundation—at the heart of every good sibling drama, there is a way of moving closer and forward and deeper into the mystery of love, fidelity and faithfulness. In the story of a meal gone horribly wrong, we do get a taste of communion and holy meal when the two brothers reconcile.

God's promise is again and again placed in the hands of people, us, who are unlikely candidates for such responsibilities. It does not mean we get special privileges or that we are higher than others. Indeed, God's promise always seems to come with an additional level of stress and responsibility. Brene Brown, in her book, 'Daring Greatly', describes leadership not as a position above and power over people—but as one who seeks to encourage processes and people to examine their own gifts and use them appropriately for good. Leaders in scripture, in our faith, do not have leadership based on their own perfection, but rather their willingness to discover the grace in the middle of brokenness and fallibility, trusting that God can work through the worst messes, in the midst of the deepest pits, and according to God's mysterious love.

God is working in and through you, friends. You may not be birthright stealers. You may not be disdainful inheritors. You may not be God's gift. But you are a gift to God. And God will make good use of you in this world. Amen.