

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
Lent Series 2012: *Stunning Sins and Vast Forgivenesses*
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Jacob Deceives His Poor Old Father, Genesis 27:1-41

PRAYER OF THE DAY (Lent 3)

P Eternal Lord, your kingdom has broken into our troubled world through the life, death, and resurrection of your Son. Help us to hear your Word and obey it, so that we become instruments of your redeeming love; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

HOLY SCRIPTUREGenesis 27:1-41, RSV

¹When Isaac was old and his eyes were dim so that he could not see, he called Esau his older son, and said to him, “My son”; and he answered, “Here I am.” ²He said, “Behold, I am old; I do not know the day of my death. ³Now then, take your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field, and hunt game for me, ⁴and prepare for me savory food, such as I love, and bring it to me that I may eat; that I may bless you before I die.”

⁵Now Rebekah was listening when Isaac spoke to his son Esau. So when Esau went to the field to hunt for game and bring it, ⁶Rebekah said to her son Jacob, “I heard your father speak to your brother Esau, ⁷Bring me game, and prepare for me savory food, that I may eat it, and bless you before the LORD before I die.”

⁸Now therefore, my son, obey my word as I command you. ⁹Go to the flock, and fetch me two good kids, that I may prepare from them savory food for your father, such as he loves; ¹⁰and you shall bring it to your father to eat, so that he may bless you before he dies.” ¹¹But Jacob said to Rebekah his mother, “Behold, my brother Esau is a hairy man, and I am a smooth man. ¹²Perhaps my father will feel me, and I shall seem to be mocking him, and bring a curse upon myself and not a blessing.” ¹³His mother said to him, “Upon me be your curse, my son; only obey my word, and go, fetch them to me.” ¹⁴So he went and took them and brought them to his mother; and his mother prepared savory food, such as his father loved.

¹⁵Then Rebekah took the best garments of Esau her older son, which were with her in the house, and put them on Jacob her younger son; ¹⁶and the skins of the kids she put upon his hands and upon the smooth part of his neck; ¹⁷and she gave the savory food and the bread, which she had prepared, into the hand of her son Jacob.

¹⁸So he went in to his father, and said, “My father”; and he said, “Here I am; who are you, my son?” ¹⁹Jacob said to his father, “I am Esau your first-born. I have done as you told me; now sit up and eat of my game, that you may bless me.”

²⁰But 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.” ²¹Then Isaac said to Jacob, “Come near, that I may feel you, my son, to know whether you are really my son Esau or not.” ²²So Jacob went near to Isaac his father, who felt him

and said, “The voice is Jacob’s voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau.”²³ And he did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau’s hands; so he blessed him.²⁴ He said, “Are you really my son Esau?” He answered, “I am.”²⁵ Then he said, “Bring it to me, that I may eat of my son’s game and bless you.” So he brought it to him, and he ate; and he brought him wine, and he drank.²⁶ Then his father Isaac said to him, “Come near and kiss me, my son.”²⁷ So he came near and kissed him; and he smelled the smell of his garments, and blessed him, and said,

“See, the smell of my son is as the smell of a field which the LORD has blessed!²⁸ May God give you of the dew of heaven, and of the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine.²⁹ Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother’s sons bow down to you. Cursed be every one who curses you, and blessed be every one who blesses you!”

³⁰As soon as Isaac had finished blessing Jacob, when Jacob had scarcely gone out from the presence of Isaac his father, Esau his brother came in from his hunting.³¹ He also prepared savory food, and brought it to his father. And he said to his father, “Let my father arise, and eat of his son’s game, that you may bless me.”³² His father Isaac said to him, “Who are you?” He answered, “I am your son, your first-born, Esau.”³³ Then Isaac trembled violently, and said, “Who was it then that hunted game and brought it to me, and I ate it all before you came, and I have blessed him? -- yes, and he shall be blessed.”³⁴ When Esau heard the words of his father, he cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry, and said to his father, “Bless me, even me also, O my father!”³⁵ But he said, “Your brother came with guile, and he has taken away your blessing.”³⁶ Esau said, “Is he not rightly named Jacob? For he has supplanted me these two times. He took away my birthright; and behold, now he has taken away my blessing.” Then he said, “Have you not reserved a blessing for me?”³⁷ Isaac answered Esau, “Behold, I have made him your lord, and all his brothers I have given to him for servants, and with grain and wine I have sustained him. What then can I do for you, my son?”³⁸ Esau said to his father, “Have you but one blessing, my father? Bless me, even me also, O my father.” And Esau lifted up his voice and wept.

³⁹Then Isaac his father answered him:

“Behold, away from the fatness of the earth shall your dwelling be, and away from the dew of heaven on high.⁴⁰ By your sword you shall live, and you shall serve your brother; but when you break loose you shall break his yoke from your neck.”

⁴¹Now Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him, and Esau said to himself, “The days of mourning for my father are approaching; then I will kill my brother Jacob.”

HYMN, LBW 370, "Blest Be the Tie That Binds"

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

²²So Jacob went near to Isaac his father, who felt him and said, "The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau." ²³And he did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau's hands; so he blessed him. ²⁴He said, "Are you really my son Esau?" He answered, "I am." (Genesis 27:22-24, RSV)

Now, I know that fathers are often nothing special in this world -- unimpressive and hard to be proud of. Still, you would think old Isaac would deserve better than this. His son, his very own son, deceives him. Yes, and deceives him in an important matter: a father's blessing on a son. In those ancient Biblical days, it was thought that once a blessing was spoken, it could not be taken back. So, Jacob had deceived his father in way that could not be fixed. Jacob had gotten what he wanted, only he had gotten it in an unfair way.

Again, you would have thought the old man deserved better than this. After all, even unimpressive fathers have often tried to do good in the lives of their children. Back when they were young, Isaac might have walked many an hour around the house, for example, carrying his baby sons, trying to calm them and let them fall asleep, trying to instill in them from the beginning of life a fundamental conviction that things are okay, that life is not out of control, that they had a father to take care of them. Isaac might have prayed for them, read them stories at bedtime, taught them what he happened to know, what life had taught him. As they grew and became rambunctious, he might have tried to caution them to be careful and put Band-Aids on them when they fell. And as they grew older still, smoldering with testosterone and drawn toward sin, the old man might have lost many an hour of sleep at night praying and fretting for his sons. He deserved better. That's what I think.

THIS STORY IS A TANGLED MESS

Now, this story is a tangled mess. For one thing, who would you say is the hero of the story? At first glance, your heart probably goes out to Isaac, the father, and perhaps to Esau, who lost his blessing through his brother's deceit. But I am not absolutely sure the Bible sees it that way. And I am quite sure that Martin Luther does not see it that way. Luther wrote an awful lot about this story, and I haven't managed to read it all, but what I have read leads me to think that Luther discounts Isaac as a weak man and probably unfaithful to the Lord as well. Luther doesn't much care for Esau either, for reasons I mean to soon tell you about. If there is a hero in the story, I think Luther would point to Rebekah as that good one, which at first seems entirely strange. But adding it all up, none of the characters in this

story is especially saintly. This, however, does not discourage Luther. In fact, he rather delights to think that the great patriarchs of our faith were flawed human beings like you and me.

WHY REBEKAH?

Now, why in the world would Luther like Rebekah? She seems to be the great schemer in this story. It wasn't Jacob's idea to trick his blind father, but his mother's idea. And when Jacob hesitated for fear that he would be discovered and cursed by his father, Rebekah urges him onwards:

¹³His mother said to him, "Upon *me* be your curse, my son; only obey my word, and go..." (Genesis 27:13, RSV)

As it turns out, Rebekah does suffer a curse, enough to nearly break her mother's heart: At the end of this story, Esau is so filled with rage toward his brother that he swears he will kill him. Rebekah believes he will, and so she sends her beloved son, Jacob, away. This was not a world of telephones or email or Skype. She lost her son for the next twenty years. But for all that, if she had it to do all over again, she probably would have done it again. Faith in the Lord moved her to it.

THE PARENTS HAD FAVORITES

Isaac and Rebekah had favorites. Isaac liked his outdoorsman son, Esau. Rebekah preferred her quieter, stay-at-home son, Jacob:

²⁷When the boys grew up, Esau was a skilful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents. ²⁸Isaac loved Esau, because he ate of his game; but Rebekah loved Jacob. (Genesis 25:19-28, RSV)

So, these two boys, twins, sons of the same mother and father, were different from the beginning. But for Luther, it was not the difference in temperament between the two boys that led Rebekah to manipulate the tricking of her old husband, Isaac. The difference that mattered was not an emotional preference, but faithfulness to the word of God.

For you see, Rebekah had waited long and sorrowfully to have a son. She was barren for such a long time she must have supposed she was running out of time. We do not know her age, but if she was of the same generation as Isaac, then she was getting older, for Isaac was sixty years old when his sons were born.

By the time of this evening's story, many years have passed. But one thing from those earlier days seems to have remained in Rebekah's mind: The Lord who had granted her children in old age had also made a promise concerning those children. He had promised that "the elder shall serve the younger":

²³And the LORD said to her, “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples, born of you, shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger.” (Genesis 25:23, RSV)

That meant that Esau should serve Jacob. They were twins, but Esau had been born first. By the law of primogeniture common in the ancient world, Jacob should have served Esau. But by the Lord’s reckoning, things were to be reversed. Esau should serve Jacob, and Rebekah bears this in mind.

ESAU’S BIRTHRIGHT

Luther gets especially annoyed with Esau when it comes to the matter of his birthright. You might recall that Esau sold his birthright to his brother, Jacob, for a supper of stew:

³⁴Then Jacob gave Esau bread and pottage of lentils, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright. (Genesis 25:34, RSV)

Luther views this as sheer cynicism on Esau’s part. Esau doesn’t sell his birthright to Jacob because Esau wants to be obedient to the Lord’s rule that he should serve his brother. No, he sells it simply because he is hungry. Luther even suggests that Esau thought he was tricking Jacob: he was so confident in the universal agreement on primogeniture that he figured he could not sell his birthright, that no one would recognize such a transaction, and therefore he would get a free supper of soup in the process.

ISAAC

As for Isaac, either he is so incompetent that in thirty-some years of marriage he had not learned from his wife what the Lord had said Esau serving Jacob, or, worse, he had learned that truth, but was rebelling against it.

One way or the other, Rebekah would not let his blessing go to the wrong child, and she took her extraordinary steps to make sure her family cohered with the word of the Lord.

TWO LESSONS

So, Luther and perhaps the Bible too take a fairly calm stance toward the manipulations of Rebekah and Jacob. Still, there is something unsatisfying about this story. Maybe we can draw some lessons from it which I think fit the rest of the Bible.

First, it would have been better if this family had been open and honest with one another. I mean, it seems to be that if Rebekah overheard her husband

planning to give his blessing to Esau, she could gone to him privately and said, “Dear husband, have you forgotten the word of our Lord. We cannot do what you propose. I appeal to you, then, forsake this plan of yours.”

And if she had failed in thirty-some years of marriage to tell her husband about the word of the Lord, well, sooner late, than never at all. It was time to start talking.

Likewise, Isaac seems to have made his plan to bless Esau independently of his wife. She would not have known except that she happened to overhear the conversation. Or was she spying on her husband? Either way, it would have been better if they had worked at better communication in the family.

TWO WRONGS DO NOT MAKE A RIGHT

This is a family in which no one seems content to “be still, and know that I am God.” (Psalm 46:10, RSV) This is a family in which no one is willing to rest content with godliness and to entrust salvation to the Lord. They were unwilling to do what Moses would later counsel the people to do when they faced the Sea with Pharaoh and his horsemen bearing down on them:

¹³And Moses said unto the people, Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will shew to you to day: for the Egyptians whom ye have seen to day, ye shall see them again no more for ever. ¹⁴The LORD shall fight for you, and ye shall hold your peace. (Exodus 14:9-14, KJV)

Rebekah and Jacob seemed to think that the Lord’s plan of salvation was up to them and that therefore all paths were authorized to them, including the path of deception. To such thinking the old rule still holds: Two wrongs do not make a right. Do not march into sin for the sake of saving the world, for God is the one who saves the world, not us.

OLDER BROTHERS

I close with this simple thought: older brothers are not so bad. Esau was displaced by Jacob, the older brother by the younger brother. Still, older brothers are not so bad. After all, you and I have an older Brother. He is Jesus Christ our Lord. *To* him have great blessings been granted, but *through* him great blessing are granted to you and me too, through the grace and merits of our older Brother Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.