

Gracious Promise
Genesis 28:10-19a
August 13, 2023
Pastor Sarah Wiles

Our story last week was the story of Jacob and Esau's birth. They were twins. Esau was born first, so he stood to inherit everything. But God had other plans. God blessed Jacob before he was born and chose him to carry on Abraham and Isaac's line—even though he was the younger brother.

As time passes, the boys grow and are as different as siblings can be, they are as different as night and day. Esau loves the outdoors. He loves to hunt. He is big and strong and hairy. Jacob did not go to the gym. He did not roam the wilderness and bring home meat. He was an indoor kid. He liked staying home and cooking with his mom. Esau was his father's pride and joy. Jacob was always second-best in his father's eyes. But his mother loved him fiercely.

More than anything else Jacob longed for his father's blessing. But at the time a father's blessing could only pass to one son. It couldn't be shared. And it always went to the older son. Esau seemed to have everything—Isaac's approval and pride, as well as the official blessing.

But Jacob longed for that blessing something awful. It was his deepest desire. So, he and his mother hatched a plan. One day while Esau was out hunting, Jacob would dress up like Esau. His father was blind, so if he wore Esau's clothes, he'd smell like him. Jacob would even put the fur of an animal on his arms so that his smooth arms would feel like Esau's hairy arms. Then he'd go in and get that blessing from his father. It worked. Jacob got the blessing.

Then it all fell apart. His father was horrified to have given the blessing to the wrong son. Esau was livid. Rebekah made Jacob flee so that Esau wouldn't murder him. That's where we pick up in our story today.

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Genesis 28:10-19a

¹⁰ Jacob left Beer-sheba and set out for Haran. ¹¹ He reached a certain place and spent the night there. When the sun had set, he took one of the stones at that place and put it near his head. Then he lay down there. ¹² He dreamed and saw a raised staircase, its foundation on earth and its top touching the sky, and God's messengers were ascending and descending on it. ¹³ Suddenly the Lord was standing on it and saying, "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. ¹⁴ Your descendants will become like the dust of the earth; you will spread out to the west, east, north, and south. Every family of earth will be blessed because of you and your descendants. ¹⁵ I am with you

now, I will protect you everywhere you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done everything that I have promised you.”

¹⁶ When Jacob woke from his sleep, he thought to himself, The Lord is definitely in this place, but I didn't know it. ¹⁷ He was terrified and thought, this sacred place is awesome. It's none other than God's house and the entrance to heaven. ¹⁸ After Jacob got up early in the morning, he took the stone that he had put near his head, set it up as a sacred pillar, and poured oil on the top of it. ¹⁹ He named that sacred place Bethel.

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When I was just out of college, my family went to a state park in eastern Oklahoma for a family reunion. We drove from North Carolina, which is a 16hr drive. When we got there, I was stiff and cranky and decided to go for a run. About two miles into the woods, an enormous thunderstorm broke. In an instant the sky was black. Rain was pouring down, turning the clay to mud, filling dry creek beds with rushing streams. Then the lightening started. It was the first time I'd ever been truly outside in a thunderstorm, with no car to run to, no tent to hunker down in, no protection from the elements. When lightening hit a tree not six feet away, and I felt my own hair crackle with the static electricity, I nearly lost it. I have never felt so alone, so vulnerable, so helpless. I wonder if Jacob felt like that, sleeping all by himself outside that night.

He is totally alone in the world. He's lost his mother, his father, his brother, and I think he even loses himself for a while.

Twins are a common motif in classic mythology. They are often in competition. And they frequently represent two sides of one person: the ideal side and the shadow side. Note to any twins here today: this is not how it works in real life. Esau is strong, a successful hunter, his father's favorite. Jacob is weak, not impressive, and definitely not the favorite.

As the pastor Craig Barnes pointed out, we all have our own personal Esau¹—the person who seems to effortlessly have what we want, who succeeds where we fail, who is better, seemingly without trying. Esau can be the kid who was always surrounded by friends in the cafeteria, the student the teacher always favored, the colleague who seems to get all the breaks.

Esau exists even more powerfully in our own head. Esau is every unrealistic standard we have for ourselves. Esau is the sense that if I could just be some other kind of way instead of the way I am, then, at last, things would be better. We're all Jacob feeling like we've got to trick our way into Esau's place. The truth is that Jacob was blessed before he was born, but he spends the first half of his life unable to receive that original blessing because he's so busy trying to get what Esau has. At the end, he even tries to become Esau, trying to live in Esau's skin rather than his own. He loses himself.

¹ https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002698/the_allamerican_dreamer

He tricks his way into getting what he thought he wanted. But he never receives the genuine acceptance he craves. Jacob may get the blessing, but his dad still likes his brother better.

So, he finds himself alone, divorced from all steadying sources of security. He falls asleep with nothing to his name but an empty blessing and a stone for a pillow.

But then, in the vulnerability of sleep, when everything he's chased after has turned to dust, something happens. The heavens open up, and he's connected with God in a whole new way. The space between himself and the Divine becomes thinner than it's ever been. And at last, he receives a freely given blessing.

It's an eight-part blessing, with promises of land and children and prosperity. But here's the key part; God promises I am with you; I will care for you; I will bring you home. It's everything he's ever wanted, and he didn't have to grab or steal or trick his way into it. He receives freely what he's spent his entire life trying to achieve. He doesn't have to do anything for this blessing. It's sheer gift.

God tells him he is worthy. He's enough. He is unconditionally accepted. He receives the blessing we all crave, especially from parental figures.

I have had to be reminded over and over again that there is no such thing as a perfect mother. The most I can hope to be is good enough. Our families of origin cannot give us everything we need. It's not possible. Even when Jacob finally gets his father's blessing, it's not enough.

And the truth is, no one can give us the blessing, the acceptance, the approval we crave. We look for that approval from our mentors, our children, our friends, our bosses, even just strangers out in the world. We want to be liked, thought well of, respected, approved of. We want other people's blessing. But here's the thing: the approval we spend our precious days chasing will never be enough.

What Jacob needs and longs for has to come from somewhere bigger, somewhere deeper. It has to come from the Divine Source. That's the only place our worth can come from—not from any external factor or face. God's the only one who can bless us with true security and acceptance.

That blessing is available to each of us and all of us. It is already given. We don't have to earn it. We can't. We don't need to steal it or trick someone to get it. In fact, all those efforts to achieve it just get in the way. It's when we lay it all down, give up, fail, hit rock bottom, that we are finally open enough to receive what's been given all along.

And here's the amazing part—when we open ourselves to that blessing, when we accept it and begin to put down roots in it, then we're able to genuinely bless others. See, the blessing in Jacob's household was zero-sum. If one person got it, no one else could. That may be how the world's math works, but that is not God's math.

~ Sarah W. Wiles, 2023

The blessing God gives Jacob doesn't stop with Jacob. The blessing flows through him and over the brim. It's exponential. Like the flame of one candle lighting another, lighting another, lighting another, it can be shared infinitely and only grows, never diminishes.

When we accept the genuine acceptance of God, when we root down deep in that original blessing, then we're able to love freely in a way that genuinely blesses others.

Here's the truth: You are blessed, from the top of your head to the tips of your toes. You are loved. You are accepted. And nothing can ever take that away from you. It's sheer grace.