

A Lectionary 15 7.16.23

Genesis 25:19-34; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Focus Statement: God sticks with God's people, no matter what.

This morning we're meeting the third generation of God's promise to Abraham. And since I'm not preaching the next two Sundays, I hope you'll permit me to wander forward in the readings and give a few spoilers for the weeks to come. Because more than anyone in Genesis, more even than Abraham, Jacob is the character that Israel relates to. Which you start to see today, and you'll really see throughout the next several weeks, is a pretty impressive level of self-critical reflection. Israel did not see itself descending from some Eden-like perfect being, but from Jacob, a very real human with both good and bad qualities. Jacob is stubborn and determined as all get out, he is faithful and trusting of God and God's word, and he's a conniving trickster who will stoop to any level to get his way. In the "who to emulate" camp of biblical heroes, Jesus is the better model but Jacob the more realistic.

Of course, in this story, we don't know that Jacob is God's chosen one yet. I mean, we know because we have a passing knowledge of the rest of Genesis, but this story doesn't spell that out. In fact, one of the things that makes Jacob being God's chosen especially amazing is that by the end of this reading, it's unclear why God would have chosen either of these two brothers. We are sort of once again left wondering if God went wrong when God made a promise with their grandfather that through him all the people of the earth would be blessed. Neither Jacob nor Esau seem like much in the blessed to be a blessing department.

Last week I mentioned one of the impressive things about Isaac is that despite his rough family life, he grew up to be different than his family. This story is one of the best examples of this. Like Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah struggled to have children. But unlike his parents, who tried all sorts of maneuvers, and hurt people in the process, to attempt to control God's promise, Isaac prayed. He "prayed to the Lord for his wife," and Rebekah conceived. A prayer it seems Rebekah later questioned, as she conceived not one child but two, who from jump did not like each other. This is an impressive level of sibling rivalry, these two fought before they were even born. It got so bad that Rebekah too prayed to God. For what, the text doesn't specify, it just says that she "went to inquire of the Lord." And here's one of the amazing parts of this story, the Lord answered her. This is amazing because this is a patriarchal society. If anyone should be receiving insight in this culture, it would be Isaac. But it wasn't Isaac God spoke to, it was Rebekah. Rebekah who unknowingly followed in the footsteps of her soon-to-be father-in-law and set out on a journey to the place God would show her, so that her descendants could be part of the promise of God's blessing of the whole world, that Rebekah is who God reveals part of God's divine plan to, that of the two nations doing battle in her womb, God would bless both sons, but the younger would be the bearer of God's promise. In God's words to Rebekah we see yet another example of God bucking the cultural expectations to give wisdom, power, promise, to those society would not have chosen.

Of course, like I mentioned earlier, then we meet the twins and God's preference for this family seems even more a poor decision. Esau grew up to be "a skillful hunter, a man of the field," whereas Jacob was "a quiet man, living in tents." Nothing wrong there, until the day

Esau came in from the field and melodramatically declared himself to be absolutely dying of hunger. To which Jacob agreed to sell him a bowl of stew, in exchange for his birthright. A deal Esau took because he was “about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?” If Esau sounds like a drama llama in this scene, he’s meant to. The narrator is making it clear to the reader that both of these guys were flawed characters. Esau was short-sighted and weak-willed, willing to trade his future for immediate gratification. Jacob, on the other hand, was callous and conniving. He knew his brother’s weakness and he capitalized on it. A far cry from his grandfather Abraham and great uncle Lot, both known for their generosity and hospitality. Tricking his brother out of his birthright is not the worst thing Jacob will do to get what he wants. We’ll skip stories of him tricking his father out of Esau’s blessing, tricking his father-in-law out of the best of his flock, and trying to buy back his brother’s affections. We will hear about him getting tricked, the deceiver gets deceived, and wrestling an angel of God to a standstill, refusing to let go without a blessing. We will also twice hear God confirm God’s promise to commit to Jacob, that Jacob is the continuation of God’s promise to Abraham, a promise God continues to fill out throughout the course of the generations. Despite all this families foils and foibles, God’s commitment to them gets stronger, not less.

And that, dear people of God, is what the Jacob story, what all these patriarch stories, are meant to do for us. They are meant to show us a picture of people who look very much like us. People who are capable of great faith, hospitality, love and care, and who are at the same time capable of trickery, short-sightedness, selfishness, greed, and violence, and show God making and keeping promises to those people. Not just for a time, or even for a

lifetime, but for generations upon generations of lifetimes. The story of Abraham, that becomes the story of Isaac, that becomes the story of Jacob, that will become the story of Joseph, and on and on and on through generations of telling, is the story of a God who speaks promises, brings blessings, and accompanies God's chosen along their journey not because of who they are or what they do, in fact often despite who they are and what they do, but because sticking with God's people regardless of their actions, being the sort of God who keeps promises is who God is. These stories let us hear them and think, yeah, I have family conflict, but I didn't fight my sibling to a standstill in the womb, and if God can be with them, God can certainly be with me. Yes I've doubted and questioned and challenged God's promise, but not to the level of these people, and if God can be with them, God can certainly be with me. Yes I've hurt people, caused harm, not behaved in the ways I should, but I've never cast anyone into the wilderness to die, and if God can be with them, God can certainly be with me. These ancestor stories are meant to assure us that if God can commit so fully to this family of imperfect people, then God can and certainly has and will be that committed to you.

Which leads us, kind of amazingly naturally, to the Gospel reading and the parable of the sower. And I think it's important to note that no less than Jesus himself titles this the parable of the sower. Because when we hear the parable, the question it seems logical to ask ourselves is "what kind of soil am I?" But this isn't the parable of the types of soil, it's the parable of the sower. A sower who went out to sow, and who at the appointed time brought in a harvest of grain, "some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty." This even though fully three quarters of the seed didn't produce anything at all. The point of this

parable isn't "be good soil." Although, ironically, as soon as I get done preaching we are going to be singing a song with that exact message, and I picked the hymns this week. So, I guess let me be clear, be good soil is a good takeaway. Jesus' explanation invites the hearers to see ourselves in the different types of soil, to recognize that we are sometimes shallow, sometimes overly eager, sometimes greedy, and to strive to be different. We are invited in Jesus' explanation to contemplate the sort of harvest we are preparing to cultivate and ask how we can create space for God's word to flourish.

We are invited to consider all that, and in the end rest in the fact that the sower doesn't wait until we have the soil right to start committing to us. This is a parable about how the kingdom of God takes root and grows, no matter what opposition stands in its way. Things may look like they are not going well, three quarters—or more—of the effort may well end up eaten by birds. But did you know that some types of seed literally do not sprout unless and until they have been eaten, and subsequently pooped by a bird? Ask Joyce about birds, she has a great story about this.

Dear people of God, God's choice of Jacob and the abundant casting of the sower are reminders to us, promises to us, that God is committed to the project of humanity, and God always follows through on God's commitments. The line between sowing and harvesting is not straight. Sometimes because we screw up, sometimes because the world is just bid and hard and complicated, but in the end the kingdom of God is assured. Thanks be to God.  
Amen.