

Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church, February 7, 2021

Hymns: 84 – I Joyed When To The House of God; 656 – Jesus, Friend of All the Children;
496 – Thy Word is a Lamp; 648 – I’m gonna live so God can use me

Scripture: Genesis 25:19-28; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 5:27-31

Sermon Title: “So he was named Jacob”

Genesis 25:19-28 NRSV

These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham’s son: Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean. Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. The children struggled together within her; and she said, “If it is to be this way, why do I live?” So she went to inquire of the LORD.

And 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.”

When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau’s heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them. When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob.

1 Timothy 1:12-17 NRSV

I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the foremost.

But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory forever and ever. Amen.

Luke 5:27-31 NIV

After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. “Follow me,” Jesus said to him, and Levi got up, left everything and followed him.

Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?”

Jesus answered them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”

I'm often asked where my beautiful granddaughter Aoife got her name, let alone how to spell it. It's because her dad is of Irish stock, and Aoife is named after an Irish princess of old - the name means "beauty." I think you'll agree it is the right name for her!

In contrast, I've seldom been asked why Dana and I chose the name "Jacob" when our son was born, 25 years ago. Perhaps that's because it is easier to spell and pronounce than Aoife, and more common as well (unless you're in Ireland). But while Aoife means "beauty," Jacob means - well, you'd better hear the story.

The original Jacob was the grandson of Abraham, born to Isaac and Rebekah, who found she was with twins, and even while in the womb, the problems started (Genesis 25:22): "*The children struggled together within Rebekah,*" it says, "*and she said, 'If it is to be this way, why do I bother to live?'"*" A feeling many who have experienced difficult pregnancies - let alone twins - can identify with, I am sure. Rebekah prayed to God for an answer, and God told her that if she thought the boys weren't getting along now, just wait. The time came for the twins to be born, and the first, red and covered with hair, they called Esau, or "Hairy." The second child came clutching his brother's heel, so they called him "Jacob," which means "grasper," "cheat," or "deceiver." Good name, eh? Who would give their kid a name like that? It may be better than "Hairy," but only just.

The Bible tells us that they grew up as different as twins could be. Esau, whose testosterone levels were through the roof, became a man's man, "*a skillful hunter,*" it says, "*a man of the open country.*" As for Jacob, we read that "*he was a quiet man, staying among the tents.*" And then, what always leads to trouble (Genesis 25:28): "*Isaac loved Esau because he hunted the wild animals that Isaac enjoyed eating. But Rebekah loved Jacob.*" Uh- oh.

As you might expect, while Esau worked on his physique, the better to surprise and bludgeon the gentle creatures of the woods, Jacob worked on his brains, the better to surprise and take advantage of shallow thinkers like his brother. The moment finally came.

Esau plods into the house, reeking of the fields and roaring out his hunger. He had been pursuing Biblical creatures through the open country, tracking the elusive hoopoe, eviscerating unwary rock badgers, running after roebuck. He spies Jacob, who is just putting the finishing touches on the evening stew.

"Gimme some of that stew, and quick, before I drop on the spot," bellows Esau, heaving and flexing. Jacob, who knows that his hairy, giant brother could and would inhale the whole pot, ladle and all, pausing only to wipe it clean with his beard, narrows his eyes.

"First," says Jacob, delicately sipping from the tasting spoon, "sell me your birthright."

"Birthright? What good is my birthright when I'm dying from hunger? Gimme that pot." At which Esau makes a grab at the pot, fire and all. But Jacob whisks it aside.

“First swear to me that your birthright is mine,” says the cunning Jacob, “and then the pot is yours. Along with the stew. And some bread even. Nice and fresh.”

Esau pauses a moment, absently scratching while trying to encourage his brain to think. When nothing happens but a renewed rumble of hunger, he swears an oath, scrawling a hairy “X” on the “party-of-the-first-part” style contract Jacob produces from nowhere. And while Esau roots and snuffles his way through the mess of pottage, Jacob grins his Jacobite grin, having just secured his future with a few lentils and bit of leftover matzoh. Jacob, living up to his name: Jacob the grasper; Jacob the con-man; Jacob the cheat.

The years pass. Esau marries a couple of Hittite girls, who become a source of unending grief to Isaac and Rebekah (you know what those “girls from away” are like). Isaac grows older, and is burdened with cataracts through which he can barely see the sun. He feels his strength failing with the light, and he calls Esau, his beloved son, in to see him. And, the Bible tells us (Genesis 27:2-4): *Isaac said to Esau, “I am old and don’t know when I might die. So take your bow and arrows and go hunting in the field for an animal for me to eat. When you prepare the tasty food that I love, bring it to me, and I will eat. Then I will bless you before I die.”*

Apparently, Isaac had never heard the selling-of-the-birthright story. But Rebekah had, and she also heard Isaac send Esau out to the fields. She has a cunning plan. She sends Jacob out to fetch two young goats, which she will cook just the way the old man likes it. Jacob will bring in the food, and old Isaac in his blindness will bless him instead.

However, Jacob panics. He says, (Genesis 27:11-12): *“Look, my brother Esau is a hairy man, and I am a man of smooth skin. Perhaps my father will feel me, and I shall seem to be mocking him, and bring a curse on myself and not a blessing.”*

“Details, details,” says Rebekah. *“Let his curse fall on me. Now go do what I tell you.”*

As Esau scours the far-away fields for an ibex to bash, and Isaac sits in his tent smacking his lips at the thought of the meal to come, dear sweet mum Rebekah slaughters and cooks the goats, while Jacob wrings his hands and paces the floor. The cooking complete, she instructs Jacob to dress in Esau’s clothes, and then for good measure wraps his arms and neck with the fresh goatskins, which smell just the way you might expect fresh goatskins to smell.

In fact, they smell just like Esau, and they feel just like Esau too, so when Jacob brings Isaac the supper, the old man is completely fooled, despite suspicions raised by the gentle nature of Jacob’s voice. Wary, the old fellow calls him over, feels his goat-skin covered arms and kisses his goat-skin covered neck, and breathes deeply of dirt, manure, sweat, and blood.

“Ah,” says Isaac, “(Genesis 27:27) *“Ah, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field that the LORD has blessed,”* (a phrase I often used when our own Jacob needed changing). And so

Isaac blesses Jacob with Esau's blessing, a blessing which could never be revoked. When Esau returns from the hunt, and hears of the deceit, he roars and weeps and bellows curses upon the hiding Jacob, making it clear that as soon as the old man breathes his last, Jacob the grasper, Jacob the con-man, Jacob the cheat, won't be far behind.

Jacob, wisely, flees. And dreams a dream of heaven. He dreams a dream of a ladder, a ladder made of stone, a ladder reaching from the earth to the heavens and back again, angels going up, and angels going down. He dreams he stands and watches, and he dreams that beside him stands the LORD (Genesis 28:10-17):

"I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

It was the dream his father Isaac had dreamed when he was young, it was the dream first dreamed by Abraham; they were the words God had given them, and had now given Jacob. "God was in this place," said Jacob, "and I, I did not know!"

This is the essence of the Jacob story, which carries on for the better part of the Book of Genesis. Again and again, he thinks, he schemes, he runs for his life, and in the end, God bails him out, gives him a blessing, makes him the father of nations. Oh, yes, he would be paid back, once by a father-in-law moderately better at the old shell game than Jacob, once by eleven of his sons who decide that Jacob's favorite son Joseph with his Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat is just too much to take, once by Joseph himself. But perhaps the truest and most revealing of moments is near the end of his life, when he meets the Pharaoh of Egypt, more or less the king of the known world back then. Jacob is old, as old as Isaac was when Jacob cheated him of the blessing, and his eyesight is just about as bad. Here is how the meeting with Pharaoh went (Genesis 47:7-10):

Then Joseph brought in his father Jacob, and presented him before Pharaoh, and Jacob blessed Pharaoh. Pharaoh said to Jacob, "How many are the years of your life?" Jacob said to Pharaoh, "The years of my earthly sojourn are one hundred thirty; few and hard have been the years of my life. They do not compare with the years of the life of my ancestors during their long sojourn." Then Jacob blessed Pharaoh, and went out from the presence of Pharaoh.

In summing up his life, at the end of which he is unspeakably wealthy; blessed with twelve sons, one of whom is second in command of the greatest nation on earth; an uncertain but goodly number of daughters; a total of sixty-six children and grandchildren in all; a life the length of which was an astonishing one hundred and thirty years; a life which ended in peace; in

summing up his life, all Jacob can think of to do is complain: “*Few and hard have been the years of my life,*” he says. And in saying that, he unites himself with us all.

For who among us, surrounded by the blessings of life, has not complained? Who among us can look back upon our lives and not find moments when we were less, or acted less, than we know to be the right way? Who among us has not been surprised that in the face of what poor material we may be to work with, God chooses to use us for his purpose anyway?

In his strengths and his weakness, in his trials and tribulations, in his difficulties with his parents, his disappointments in love, his frustrations with his children, in his expectation that life should hold just a little bit more satisfaction, that the days are hard and few: in all of this, Jacob is, of all the Old Testament characters, perhaps even in all the Bible, the most human. It is in the mirror of Jacob - Jacob the grasper; Jacob the con-man; Jacob the cheat - in which we might see ourselves and our condition most clearly.

Abraham, with his fierce and uncompromising love for God, is a bit intimidating. His wife Sarah is a bit too nonchalant about childbearing in her nineties. David, although cursed with feet of clay, particularly in the romance department, is a bit too much the Superman for us to reach out and relate to, and Bathsheba a bit too risqué for most Presbyterian congregations. The Prophets are all way too weird, and only Charlton Heston seems able to identify completely with Moses. In the New Testament, Mary seems untouchably devout, and none of the other women are given enough attention for us to figure them out. Of the disciples, only Peter seems uncertain and impetuous enough, and although we may recognize his ability to say the wrong thing as a talent of ours, his unquestioning faith in walking on the water is beyond our level of trust. Perhaps Thomas the Doubter is more our speed, but remember he was willing and ready to die with and for Jesus when the going got tough. Jacob, after some 130 years, was unwilling to die for even himself. You would think that after 130 years, you might be ready for a little peace and quiet. But not Jacob. No way.

If Jacob is, for us, the most openly and brazenly human, suffused with questionable decisions and motivated almost exclusively by self-interest, then his story is for us perhaps the most hopeful one as well. For God, early on, was determined to make use of Jacob, faults and all. God even used Jacob’s unlimited resources of cunning, guile, avarice and keen sense of self-preservation to accomplish the divine purpose. Despite being voted “Least Likely To Be Of Any Use To God Whatsoever,” Class of 1600 B.C., particularly by those who knew and loved him most, Jacob played a part in the plan of God almost beyond imagining. From him (and his four ever-patient and long-suffering wives) came the sons out of whom the Twelve Tribes of Israel would arise, out of whom would be born Moses and Miriam and Joshua and Deborah and Gideon and Samuel and David and Solomon and Isaiah and Esther and Jeremiah and Daniel and Joseph and Mary and Martha and Peter and Mary Magdalene and Paul; all those about whom we read, all those whose lives have linked together to bring us the Gospel, to bring us the Good News. Out of Jacob’s life - Jacob the grasper; Jacob the con-man; Jacob the cheat - has come the Christ, has come Jesus, the Saviour, the hope of the world.

The story of Jacob is our story. It is our story. It is the story of how God uses what God gets, even if the best God gets is us. The Apostle Paul was keenly aware of his many shortcomings, and how God used him nonetheless. As he said, (1 Timothy 1:12-17):

I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence... The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life.

We may not exactly be the chief of sinners, but God knows the patience God has generously expended in dealing with each of us and our endless self-concern. And as with Paul, by the grace of God, we are appointed to the service of God. It is our calling; it is our life.

Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. "Follow me," Jesus said to him, and Levi got up, left everything and followed him.

Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"

Jesus answered them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

Has God called you? Yes, God has. Can God use us in spite of our many failings? Yes, God can and does. Do each of us have a role to play in the plan of God? Yes, we do. Is what you do on behalf of God important? Yes, as much as what you do not do is keenly missed.

I thank God for the Jacob of the Bible, and for the merciless honesty with which his story has been preserved throughout the centuries, a story of the most human of men, but used by God in a mighty way. Which is why we named our son, "Jacob." It is not a bad name after all; it really should mean "hope." Hope for us all.

To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory forever and ever. Amen.