

“Power of Prayer”
Sunday, July 16th, 2017
6th Sunday after Pentecost

#1 of 4: Jacob: God’s Unlikely Choice

 **Genesis 25:19-34 (NRSV)**

The Birth and Youth of Esau and Jacob

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.

Esau Sells His Birthright

Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. Esau said to Jacob, “Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!” (Therefore, he was called Edom.)

Jacob said, “First sell me your birthright.”

Esau said, “I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?”

Jacob said, “Swear to me first.”

So, he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus, Esau despised his birthright.

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks, be to God.

[2ND Service: *Affirmation of Faith*]

[MESSAGE]

Our VBS starts tonight and it's all about Bible heroes.

So, I thought it might be fun to look at one Bible hero who may seem to be an unlikely choice.

Over the next few weeks we're going to walk through Jacob's story and see how this unlikely hero was used by God in powerful ways.

Let us pray... Lord, we pray that you will guide us in our study today and help us to see how you can use us as prayer warriors. In Jesus' name, amen.

Christianity is one of three faiths tracing their origins to Abraham; Judaism and Islam also claim Abraham as the father of their faith.

Isaac was Abraham's favorite son, and his only "legitimate" off-spring.

Even so, Abraham was willing to sacrifice Isaac in the name of God; fortunately, the angel intervened and Isaac lived to be Jacob's father.

Abraham's other famous son, **Ishmael**, was also father to twelve tribes who, many scholars believe, gave rise to the religion of Islam.

Our text today begins with a very short reference to the fact that Isaac's wife, Rebecca, was barren.

There is an obvious link here to the Abraham and Sarah narrative.

We also notice that Isaac was 40 when he married Rebecca and 60 when Jacob was born.

This was 20 years of failure and shame that left the couple feeling frustrated and hopeless.

And so, they prayed.

It is worth noting that they probably prayed throughout those 20 years.

We can imagine years of unanswered prayers before Rebecca finally conceived.

I wonder why God made this so frustrating for them.

It was God's plan to use Abraham's family for this purpose; God planned for Isaac's sons to become great nations.

But, as with so many stories in the Old Testament, God proved his faithfulness only after humans demonstrated their faithfulness to God.

This story carries the theme of God's promise fulfilled.

It considers the concept of barrenness and makes a powerful statement with regard to the power of God to bestow the unexpected gift of life in situations of barrenness and despair.

It reminds us that God is at work in the world and that God really does listen to prayer.

It also reminds us that God's timing is very different from our own.

Each element of God's plan for Abraham and his descendants is carefully calculated to occur at the exact right time.

Ishmael was Abraham's first-born son, but he was not the one chosen to start the nation of Israel; God another plan for him.

Isaac was born at the right time to prove God's promise to Abraham and Sarah in their old age.

Isaac's story of growing up and the difficulties he faced in building his own family offer stories of perseverance and relying on God's promises.

Now, we hear the story of Jacob and Esau, their difficult birth, and their ongoing rivalry.

Throughout this story we will again watch as God expects faithfulness and rewards it with promises fulfilled.

It is remarkable, however, to notice that these stories often cast the unlikeliest character as the hero.

Something else we notice in this story is that God's answer to prayer is not always what we expect. Isaac and Rebecca desperately want a child; God sends them twins.

Now, we might see that as a double blessing, but what happens is that God's answer destines the two brothers to a life of conflict.

The two boys begin fighting in the womb and Rebecca has a difficult pregnancy because of their struggle.

Rebecca prayed again and God told 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.”*

She could not know then what was to come for her two sons, but God had a plan all along.

In this story, we are introduced to Jacob as the second-born twin who is delivered while grabbing hold of his older brother's heel.

Our knowledge of anatomy leads us to think this may be a slight exaggeration, but the point is clear: Jacob is “*all about me*”.

As the two grow, Esau proves to be Dad’s favorite, while Jacob is more of a mama’s boy.

What happens at the end of this passage is significant.

We need to understand what it meant for Esau to give up his birthright.

The “*right of the firstborn*” was the privilege of receiving a double portion of inheritance.

When Esau gives this to Jacob, he retains his position in the family, but he forfeits a significant amount of wealth and power when his father dies.

This episode paints Jacob as cold and calculating, while showing Esau to be short-sighted and interested in immediate gratification.

There is plenty of evidence to suggest that this portrayal of Esau in such a negative light may be a little over-the-top.

Esau becomes the father of the Edomites who are enemies of the Israelites.

The prophets Obadiah and Malachi continue this narrative; “*Yet I have loved Jacob, but have hated Esau.*” (Malachi 1:2c-3a)

We need to keep in mind that these narratives are told from a pro-Jacob/pro-Israel perspective.

God renames Jacob, Israel; he is the father of the Twelve Tribes.

This makes him a hero – “*a person who is admired or idealized for courage, outstanding achievements, or noble qualities.*”

Here God is portrayed as the one who sides with the powerless, the weak, the younger brother, the barren woman.

This is a view of God that shows us how Israel sees itself as a tiny, powerless people who lived in the midst of stronger nations.

This is the origin of the perception that becomes reality as Israel is thrown into exile by superpowers who could crush them.

I wonder if that might be part of God's plan too.

These stories of underdogs and unlikely heroes who manage to fulfill God's plan through their own faithfulness to God inspire us.

Over and over, we see proof that God is listening and paying attention to what we're doing.

Over and over, God makes it possible for us to get through problems and succeed, in spite of ourselves.

It is obvious that this story does not cast the best light on Jacob either.

Despite his hero status, the writer characterizes Jacob as a bit of a scoundrel.

He is depicted as “grabbing” his brother's firstborn right.

This continues as we see Jacob's tricky ways will mark his subsequent life story.

After Esau, Jacob will also trick his father Isaac and outwit his Uncle Laban.

A case could be made that Jacob is not to be trusted.

Understanding this makes his selection by God even more remarkable.

There is nothing in Jacob's behavior that deserves God's favor; the fact is, God's favor comes to Jacob in spite of his actions.

Now, this is starting to sound familiar.

Isn't this what we talk about when we consider God's grace in our own lives?

What have we done to deserve God's favor?
Not much, I fear.

John Wesley gave us the term "prevenient grace" to talk about how God coaxes us even before we recognize our need for God.

In this story, we see a God who is already involved with people in their mother's womb.

This is God who gets deeply involved in the messiness and conflict of human relationships.

// The power of prayer is not about asking for and getting what we want from God.

The power of prayer is that it demonstrates our faithfulness to God and our reliance on God's providence.

Prayer is responding to God's coaxing us to him.

It is opening ourselves to letting God become involved in our mess.

Prayer has the power to enable God to use us – the most unlikely of heroes – to be the people God has always intended us to become.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**