

## **Jacob's Alternative Facts Genesis 25:19-36:43**

Genesis 27:1-40 by Patty Friesen

Once again we have family drama in the patriarchs and matriarchs of faith. Jacob's family created the definition of dysfunctional family and at the heart of it is Jacob's alternative facts. But the New Interpreter's Commentary tells us to resist the temptation of reducing the Jacob story to one that addresses dysfunctional family systems, and to resist the temptation to reduce to discussion to moral issues, regarding the ethical behavior of the characters. As important as these matters are, the story's theological power comes from this family's relationship to God and to God's purposes in the world through them. God's choosing them and speaking to them propels this story.

Jacob's story begins with conflict in the womb and shapes his whole life. Rebekah has trouble conceiving paralleling Sarah's story and Isaac prays for her and they get a double-double: twins, which turn out to be double-trouble. Fighting in the womb, Rebekah asked God what was going on and God told her there were two divided nations in her womb with the elder serving the younger. And so Esau was born first, with Jacob literally on his heel, grabbing it and so named Supplanter or Deceiver. And they had very different personalities: Esau was a skilled hunter, a man of the field, scripture says, while Jacob was a homebody and chef, living in tents. And Isaac loved Esau because he was fond of wild meat but Rebekah loved Jacob. And herein the problems begin with parental favoritism.

Once, when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field and he was famished and said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished." It's like when Patrick and I come home hungry, we say, "I'm starvin' Marvin." Jacob says,

First sell me your birthright. Esau replies: I'm ready to die of hunger, what use is a birthright to me? Jacob made him swear away his birthright then Jacob gave Esau bread and the red stuff, which was vegetarian lentil stew that Esau probably didn't recognize since he was a carnivore.

Then we come to today's scripture, which involves another meal and another deception. Rebekah steps in as supporting actress to this drama of Jacob wearing a lambskin to feel and smell like Esau as he sneaks in to Isaac's blessing ritual. The blessing ritual involved eating together, a symbolic communion, a kiss to seal the blessing and a pronouncement – kind of like a wedding ritual. Isaac's repeated questions and ritual delays reveal that he pursues his deep suspicions carefully. He uses all the senses available to him, sound, touch, taste and smell to discern the truth. But it's the smell that's most important and the smell of a fertile field moves the blessing to fertility. Isaac calls upon God the Creator, who blesses the agricultural sphere, to be active in the life of Jacob.

Isaac initially reacts strongly to the deception but then doesn't even chide Jacob but reiterates the blessing as if to reassure himself that he made the right choice. We have the heart breaking scene of Esau begging Isaac for some leftover blessing that he too will be fruitful in land and progeny and eventual freedom from Jacob whom he vows to kill. Rebekah again steps in and sends Jacob off to marry from her brother's family as Esau's choice of Hittite wives have caused she and Isaac grief, as Hagar caused Sarah and Abraham grief. This story was used in my growing up to encourage us to marry within the Mennonite faith. But as we see next week, Joseph marries an Egyptian with no criticism, so the example of interfaith marrying doesn't hold.

Irregardless of the moralizing, this story has long been a favorite of Bible readers. It is well told and filled with intrigue. It tells of a cheat and a rascal who nonetheless remains the chosen of God. Why would God choose such a character. If God includes Jacob, who can be excluded?

On the run for his life, reaping the consequences of his duplicity, the future doesn't look very bright for Jacob and at a moment of deep vulnerability, sleeping on a stone pillow, God appears to him on the stairway to heaven. We may compare this stairway to heaven to the many excavated ziggurats or temple towers in Mesopotamia which were built to be ladders between earth and heaven and the temple priests went up and down them communicating between the two worlds. But God speaks directly to Jacob without a priest and confirms Jacob's blessing and relationship with God.

Jacob recognizes this is the house of God, a holy site, a thin place between heaven and earth where his grandfather Abraham had built an altar also in chapter 12. Jacob sets up the ordinary stone pillow as a sacred symbol for his experience with God. Such standing stones are often set up at Israelite sanctuaries and at other places of historical import, hence our theme for this series, Old Testament Rocks. Jacob's stone has no become recognizable for use by others who may pass this way. The anointing with oil consecrates or sets the stone apart from others. The oil also stains the stone so that it can be properly identified by those who follow. The stone becomes an integral part of a worship center and it becomes a public witness to Jacob's relationship with God.

God's promises were unconditional but Jacob makes a conditional vow, "if God takes care of me on this journey and I return safely to my father's house, then God will be

my God, and the stone will be a pillar in God's house and I will give God a tenth of my wealth." From this point on, Jacob's journeys are filled with a new sense of vocation.

Paralleling Isaac meeting Rebekah at the well, Jacob meets his true love Rachel at the well and Genesis 29-31 are about Laban's alternative facts about which daughter Jacob had actually worked 7 years to earn. The deceiver gets deceived on a drunken wedding night switch with Leah and Jacob ends up working another 7 years for Rachel plus another 7 for his flocks and has plenty of family drama with more infertility and maids becoming surrogate mothers in a fertility race in which Jacob ends up with 12 sons and some daughters.

The role of Rachel and Leah is important in this part of the story. The text recognizes their abuse by their father and that they give this abuse public voice. Their sharp critique of their father and renunciation of his authority in their lives witnesses to a possible avenue of approach to abusive situations. Their renunciation takes not only verbal form, but also courageous, concrete action in Rachel's theft of the household gods and her defiance of her father when he comes looking for them. When Leah also voices her abuse at the hands of her husband, Jacob, she adds a courageous dimension to the way in which these women confront tragic situations in their lives.

In addition, the use of God language by the women, both in connection with the birth of their children and with Jacob testifies not only to their personal faith, but also their ability to engage in theological formulation and discussion. The women have relationship with God, not on the basis of dreams or stairways to heaven but on the deep down links they see between their lived experience and what they know their God to be about in the world.

The tension with Laban leads Jacob, Leah and Rachel to return home to face tension with Esau, which requires an elaborate preparation of wives, concubines, children and animals and prayer. God appears to Jacob on his way to encounter Esau's anger, even as God appeared to him when he left it. In both cases, Jacob is deeply vulnerable and alone, in need of divine care. Yet God ambushes him here in a surprise attack. Jacob may well have thought it was Esau! God and Jacob struggle for a long time and when God sees that daybreak is near and that he has not been able to prevail, God strikes Jacob in the hip. It looks like a low blow and what kind of God beats up the ones he loves? But Jacob will not let God go unless he is blessed. God blesses Jacob and gives him a new name, Israel meaning God strives, or God the wrestler, affirming that God is not a passive presence in Jacob's life but an active wrestling one; a fascinating image of God. There could be a whole sermon on this story alone.

After wrestling with God, Esau's a piece of cake. The encounter with God appears to have stayed Jacob's fear of Esau and eliminated his fear-based strategies. Jacob makes himself vulnerable by moving toward Esau alone, unaccompanied by any wives, children or animals. Jacob is submissive but does not grovel, seeking to demonstrate through word and deed that he has changed. Esau takes initiative also, running to Jacob, embracing him and weeping in way that foreshadows Joseph's reconciliation with his brothers and the prodigal son's reconciliation with his father and indeed, God's own reconciliation with us. God's wrestling with Jacob has made this reconciliation possible. Even so, Jacob and Esau do not move back in together, they part ways only to come back together again at Isaac's funeral. But their reconciliation makes that possible.

We are so fortunate as a community of faith to have a God who does not insist on perfection before choosing to work in and through us. God blesses this family in the very midst of its conflicts, making life possible even within a dysfunctional system. God does not work in isolation, but within a complex context to bring about reconciliations, the births of children and enable goodness to emerge. God's promises are given on behalf of families. God's most fundamental objective is the blessing of this crazy family so that all families may be blessed. It reveals God's fundamental character of God's presence with all generations past and future, including our own, whether or not we're even in church.

Let us pray...