

**Sermon: Usurpers and Scoundrels Genesis 27:1-38 - August 23, 2020 Rev. Steve Clifton
Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa ON**



Over the summer we have invited people to stump the preacher- to submit Biblical readings and stories that bewilder or confuse or make you wonder, and you have forwarded an eclectic mix of stories. We have looked at faith versus works in the Epistle of James, the story of Balaam and his donkey, demons and exorcism, Paul's instruction that women keep silent, Jesus words about hating mother and father, the story of the great flood, the call of the first disciples...

And today Katie has invited us to look at the story of Jacob and Esau.



Remember how this story unfolds. Go back a bit. Abraham and Sarah are called in their old age to go far from home, to travel from Babylon to a new land where they will begin a new nation.

And the first generation of that new nation is Isaac, the child of that promise, amazingly born to Sarah and Abraham in their old age.

Nation building begins slowly. Isaac, the child of promise has 2 sons. Esau, first born, is a rugged outdoorsman fond of hunting and he is Isaac's favorite. And Jacob is more of a bookish stay at home type, favored son of his mother Rebecca.



The tradition for families in that day was that the first-born son inherited his father's position and title when the father passed away. And it seems that this inheritance was conferred by an act of blessing.

While Esau is away, Rebecca and Jacob conspire to steal the first born's birthright. Isaac is blind so they make Jacob feel like and smell like Esau and trick the elderly man into conferring Esau's rightful inheritance onto Jacob.

There is a story in Irish history of Brigid of Kildare. When an aging bishop uses the wrong words of blessing and accidentally makes her a bishop, it was decided that the blessing given could not be taken away. So, Brigid becomes the first female Bishop of the Celtic church.

Something similar happens in the Biblical story. Isaac's blessing was given to the wrong son and what is given cannot be taken away.

Jacob inherits Isaac's position and that is not just a family matter. Jacob follows Isaac who follows Abraham and Sarah. The promise of God, the founding of a new people, that now rests with Jacob too.

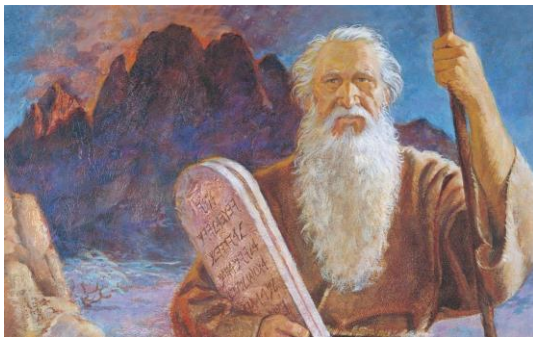


And here is the problem. Jacob is the inheritor of the promise of God. He wrestles with an angel and is renamed Israel, a name that means one who contends with God. He will have 12 sons, who will be the founders of Israel's 12 tribes. And as Katie points out in her request that we look at this story, all of this is based on deceit.

Jacob is a founding patriarch of the people of God, but he gets his position through trickery. He steals his place in the story.

The Biblical narrative is very upfront with this. Jacob's name means to supplant; the name Jacob means usurper. He is a patriarch; a father of a people and Jacob is a trickster.

And this trickster who steal his brother's birthright is beloved of God.

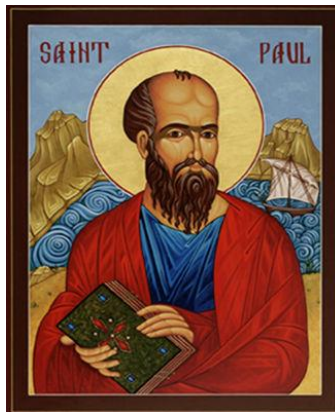


The Biblical story is full of scoundrels who God calls and loves.

Moses. He was a prince of Egypt. He is the law giver, the great liberator. But he also committed murder. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave and in anger he killed the Egyptian and so he had to flee into the wilderness, a fugitive from justice. That's where he found a burning bush from which he was called by God.



David was Israel's greatest King. He made Israel great among the nations. He wrote sacred songs and danced before the altar of the Lord. He was God's beloved... And he had a good and loyal man, Uriah, killed in battle so that he could then sleep with the man's wife Bathsheba. Confronted by the prophet Nathan, David knows shame and seeks forgiveness for the terrible thing he did.



Paul was a Pharisee. He belonged to a school of teachers renowned for their zeal for the law and for Israel's faith. He became the apostle to the Gentiles, carried the Gospel to Asia Minor, Greece, and Rome. The New Testament has 13 of 27 books penned in his name. But he spent years persecuting Jesus followers, hunting them down, having them imprisoned for their faith. He watched while Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was stoned to death outside Jerusalem's gates. An encounter with the Risen Christ set Paul on a new path.

Jacob, in today's reading, gets his place in the faith story through theft of a birthright. Jacob joins with some other pretty significant Biblical figures who have sketchy back stories too.



Do you remember the Russian monk Rasputin? There was pop song written about him in the 70s. Rasputin was popular in the courts of the Russian Czar. He was a confidant of the Russian queen. He was killed just before the Russian revolution. His murder is part of the lore around this charismatic holy man. He was shot, strangled, and stabbed and then thrown into river. He died of drowning.

And Rasputin promoted a peculiar theology. Be bad. Sin a lot. That way God could forgive you more. God could be generous. Forgiveness is a gift so earn as much as you can. The more you sin the more of God's love you will use.

Antinomianism is the official name of this old heresy; it suggests that God's grace is freely given so you can just sin all you like. Fortunately, this idea has never found a big following.

The Biblical narrative is full of scoundrels that God loves but we wouldn't want to take that as far as Rasputin did. Being bad is not a good thing.



But being perfect is not a requirement in the Biblical narrative either. Another ancient heresy is Donatism. Donatists believed that Jesus followers had to be perfect. They took this as far as having people who were baptized by “flawed” clergy rebaptised, because the sacrament so performed was seen as invalid. Donatism flourished briefly around the 4th Century, but the idea that church people must be perfect still lingers. How many times have I heard someone say that if they entered a church the roof would cave in, as if they were not good enough to enter the house of God? What groups or categories of people have been excluded or turned away because they didn’t measure up to some standard. Who has felt that they didn’t measure up, weren’t good enough, fall irredeemably short of the graces of God?



In my neighborhood there is a L`Arche home. The L`Arche movement creates community which includes people with physical and mental challenges, all living together for the mutual benefit of all.

L`Arche is a beautiful, spirit filled initiative, founded by Jean Vanier. Recently, we learned that Vanier was a deeply flawed person. He abused spiritual power and did harm to others.

L`Arche was founded and shaped by a person who betrayed his own community. And yet God is still in L`Arche. The community is still an inspired initiative.

So, despite our brokenness God may be at work.

In the story of Jacob and Esau, a usurper gets ahead through deceit and stills play a big part in the sacred story.

Maybe then, even with our flaws and failures, God may be at work. There is hope for all of us.
Amen