

## I

As many of you know, my wife Amy and I are the parents of three boys. When it came time to pick names for our sons, we both knew we wanted them to have biblical names. I personally wanted to name one of the boys Melchizedek, because I think Melchizedek Baer sounds like a great name for a linebacker, but alas, I was overruled.

There are over 3,000 names in the bible, so we had plenty of choices. But there was one biblical name that I was dead set against - Jacob.

Now, if your name is Jacob, or someone you know and love is a Jacob, hear me very clearly - it is a fine name, and there are and have been many fine people named Jacob.

But for me, I just don't find much to like about the biblical Jacob, and as we turn to our story from Genesis this morning, I think you'll agree.

## II

This fall, we're reading and preaching our way through some of the major stories of the Hebrew Scriptures, also commonly called the Old Testament, and we're continuing our journey this morning with another reading from Genesis.

Genesis literally means "beginning," Genesis is the first of the 66

books that make up the bible. Two weeks ago we read the first chapter, wherein God creates all that is, seen and unseen, simply by speaking it into being, and God calls it good.

But now, the narrative focus of Genesis has shifted dramatically from grand, cosmic events down to this one particular family.

Someone once said that every family tree has it's share of squirrels and nuts within its branches. And if you don't think that's true about your own family, that probably means that you're the squirrel or the nut.

Every human family has its share of drama, but the family we read about in Genesis is like something out of a soap opera.

It starts with a 75-year-old man named Abraham and his wife Sarah, who had never been able to have children. Yet one day, for reasons passing my understanding, God calls to them and tells them to leave their country and their kindred and to go to a land that God will show them, and God promises that God will not just give them a child, but God will make their descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky.

Now, when Sarah heard this preposterous news, she laughed out loud, so when God eventually came through on God's promise, she named her son Isaac, which means "laughter."

Last week, Carol walked us through a truly terrifying story wherein God decided to test Abraham, and young Isaac ended up tied up in knots.

Isaac eventually grew up and married a woman named Rebekah, and Isaac and Rebekah became the parents of twin boys, Esau and Jacob.

And Jacob is the focus of our story today, the second son of Isaac and Rebekah and the grandson of Abraham and Sarah.

In Hebrew, the name Jacob literally means “came after” or “followed after,” but it also means, “heel,” as in the heel of the foot. That’s because when Jacob’s poor mother Rebekah was pregnant with her twin boys, the boys wrestled and jostled in her womb something fierce, and when Esau, the eldest, was delivered, Jacob came out right after him clutching his older brother by the heel.

Even though they were twins, Esau was the dutiful eldest son, a man’s man, his wild hair flowing everywhere, a skilled outdoorsman and happy to hunt wild game and prepare it for their father Isaac. But Jacob was a trickster, something of a Tom Sawyer type, always finding a way to play pranks and talk his way out of sticky situations, always working the angles, always plotting a scheme, always looking for the edge, especially when it came to his twin brother Esau.

In fact, just before our story for today, Jacob managed to talk his brother Esau out of his birthright. And as we come to our story for today, Jacob is up to even more tricks.

And that brings us to the first part of today’s text. So I invite you now to listen for a Word from God from Genesis 27:1-3 and 15-23.

*27:1 When Isaac was old and his eyes were dim so that he could not see, he called his elder son Esau and said to him, "My son"; and he answered, "Here I am." 2 He said, "See, I am old; I do not know the day of my death. 3 Now then, take your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field, and hunt game for me.*

*27:15 Then Rebekah took the best garments of her elder son Esau, which were with her in the house, and put them on her younger son Jacob; 16 and she put the skins of the kids on his hands and on the smooth part of his neck. 17 Then she handed the savory food, and the bread that she had prepared, to her son Jacob. 18 So he went in to his father, and said, "My father"; and he said, "Here I am; who are you, my son?" 19 Jacob said to his father, "I am Esau your firstborn. I have done as you told me; now sit up and eat of my game, so that you may bless me." 20 But Isaac said to his son, "How is it that you have found it so quickly, my son?" He answered, "Because the Lord your God granted me*

success." 21 Then Isaac said to Jacob, "Come near, that I may feel you, my son, to know whether you are really my son Esau or not." 22 So Jacob went up to his father Isaac, who felt him and said, "The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau." 23 He did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau's hands; so he blessed him.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Not only his Jacob conniving and deceitful, but he's also blasphemous. For when Isaac asks how the boy was able to return so quickly from the hunt, Jacob lies through his teeth and falsely claims that God provided for a successful hunt.

And so Isaac, as he's nearing death, confers his blessing on Jacob the trickster, the liar, the heel, the blasphemer, rather than Esau, the dutiful son. Jacob has already tricked his brother out of his birthright, and now he's flat out stolen his brother's blessing.

And when Esau returns to discover what has happened, he's enraged. And he's armed. And Jacob knows it, and so he hightails it. He runs and runs and runs until he can run no more. He's completely alone in the desert. He has no provisions, no supplies, not even a pillow on which to rest his head. And he's being pursued by a brother who is justifiably homicidal.

But he's out of gas. He can't go another step. And so he lays his head on a rock and goes to sleep.

And that brings us to the second portion of our reading this morning. So once again, listen for a Word from God from Genesis 28:10-17

*28:10 Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. 11 He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. 12 And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. 13 And the Lord stood beside him and said, "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; 14 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. 15 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." 16 Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!" 17 And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and*

*this is the gate of heaven."*

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

Jacob is a liar, a thief, a cheat, a blasphemer. He has sinned against father and brother and been forced to flee his home to save his own neck. He's deserving of whatever might be coming to him.

But then he has this really odd dream. There's this ladder, this connection between heaven and earth, and angels are going up and down.

But in the dream, *God is standing in the wrong place*. Because we would expect God to be at the top of the ladder, directing all of the angel traffic.

We expect God to be high up in the heavens, far removed from all of the messiness and brokenness of human life. In our minds, that's where God lives, that's where God operates, that's where God stands, somewhere up there.

But not the God of Abraham and Isaac. Not the God of Jacob. No, God stands on the earth, *next to Jacob*.

And God is not standing there next to Jacob armed with a lightning bolt ready to zap Jacob for his sins, of which there are many. Instead, God stands next to the exhausted, fearful Jacob and remind him of the promises that God has made, the promises that still stand for Jacob, despite the giant

mess he's made of things. God stands next to Jacob and does not deal with him according to his sins, but according to the boundless measure of his steadfast love.

### III

So I think I know why I don't like Jacob so much. Because he reminds me too much of myself. I don't intend to stand up here and use this as a time for my own personal confession, but I'd be lying if I didn't tell you that I've told a lie a time or two. I've been known to work the angles to seek an advantage an edge over someone else. I've been known a time or two to declare that something that happened was God's doing when the evidence for such was sketchy at best, just because it would work to my advantage.

Some might want to call that street smarts or charm or living by the wits. Some might say that the end always justifies the means. Some might say that it's only illegal or immoral if you get caught.

But the biblical word for it is sin. And I don't like Jacob because he reminds me of my own sin and brokenness. He represents me.

And I suspect that Jacob represents you, too, my friend. Jacob has messed up big time, and he knows it. He's running for his life, completely exhausted, out of resources, he can't go another step, and all he can bring

himself to do is lay down his weary head on a rock.

But the surprise in this story is that God doesn't strike Jacob down with a lightning bolt or cause fire ants to come up and eat him alive. That's what we would expect – just punishment for Jacob's many sins.

But God has made a promise. God has promised Jacob's grandfather Abraham that his descendants would number more than the stars in the sky, and that in this one family, all the families of the earth will be blessed. God told Jacob's mother Rebekah that of the twin boys she was carrying in her womb, the elder would serve the younger. I have no idea why God set things up this way, but that's how God chose to go.

And so now Jacob is an heir of that promise. And one thing I can tell you about God's promises - I have searched the scriptures from Genesis to Revelation and back again, and I cannot find a single instance when God has not fulfilled God's promise. And so despite Jacob's lies, despite Jacob's cheating, despite his blasphemy, despite his broken relationships with his family, despite his sin, God is irrevocably bound by God's own promises to Jacob.

And so there in the dead of night, with Jacob on his last leg, God stands not over and above Jacob at the top of the ladder, but right there beside him, reminding him of all that God has

promised, and of the role that Jacob and his descendants still have to play in the ultimate goal of the blessing of all the families of the earth.

When Jacob awakes, he's still the same man. He's still all alone, and Esau is still out there, ready to chase him down. Jacob's sin has consequences, and Jacob will soon have to face Esau and come to terms with what he has done. But when he wakes, he knows that God's promises are stronger than human sin, and that makes all the difference.

Now, this is fast-forwarding the story a little bit, but Jacob will eventually have many generations of descendants. One will be named Joseph, whose wife will be named Mary, and their first-born son they will name Jesus, which means, "he saves his people from their sin."

He will also be known as "Emmanuel," which means, "God with us." It will take some time, but eventually people will come to understand that in Jesus, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob stands not far off in heaven, directing angels to and fro, but right here beside us, right here in our darkest moments of sin, fear, and brokenness, reminding us of all that God has promised us.

It will take some time, but eventually, people will come to understand that when they are baptized in Jesus' name, it's a formal adoption,

wherein this family's story, with all of its ups and downs and twists and turns, becomes our family story, and we have a part to play in it, too, as we continue to work toward God's ultimate goal of the blessing of all the families of the earth through this family.

If you're feeling like Jacob today, my friend, if you've sinned and you know it, if you've lied and cheated and blasphemed and broken the trust of those closest to you, and you're running for your life and at the end of your rope, welcome. You've come to the right place, for this is the house of God. There is grace here. There is love here. There is hope here.

Make no mistake. There are consequences for sin that must be faced. It won't be easy, and it won't be pretty. But there is grace in the cross of Jesus. There is hope in the cross of Jesus. There is love in the cross of Jesus, because God's promises are always stronger than human sin, and in the cross and empty tomb of Jesus, we trust that the worst thing is never the final thing.

#### IV

These are not easy times in which to be the church. We live in a world that is broken, a world that is weary, a world that seems full of tricks and injustice and rage.

But let us not forget, friends, that we worship and serve a God who does not stand over and against us, but next

to us. We worship and serve a God who does not deal with us according to the measure of our sins, but according to the boundless measure of his steadfast love. We worship and serve a God who promises us, "I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

Thanks be to God!

Amen.