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Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Scandalous Beginnings

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Genesis 25:19–34

¹⁹These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham was the father of Isaac, ²⁰and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean. ²¹Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. ²²The 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. ²³And 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." ²⁴When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. ²⁵The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. ²⁶Afterward 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. ²⁷When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. ²⁸Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob. ²⁹Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. ³⁰Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!" (Therefore he was called Edom.) ³¹Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." ³²Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" ³³Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. ³⁴Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

1 Corinthians 1:27–29

²⁷But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, ²⁹so that no one might boast in the presence of God.

“Scandalous Beginning”
Genesis 25:19–34; 1 Corinthians 1:27–29

In the year 1493, a publication called the *Nuremberg Chronicle* revealed a depressed and despairing Europe. On the one hand, the *Chronicle* contained beautiful engraved descriptions of major European cities. On the other hand, the civilization it described was one with little vision or hope. The publishers actually left the last several pages blank, inviting readers to record on these pages, quote, “the rest of these events until the end of the world.”

The society from which the *Chronicle* emerged existed on a knife’s edge of tension. Europe boasted glorious cathedrals, artists, and universities, but was also a society that had suffered plagues, the breakdown of the feudal order, and a hypocritical and corrupt church that was growing increasingly irrelevant. But right around the time the *Chronicle* was published, something happened that changed everything. For the next fifty years, more innovation occurred in every field of human endeavor – art, medicine, astronomy, communication, and religion – than has happened before or since, with the possible exception of the time in which we live.

Historians widely attribute the rebirth of human spirit now known as the Renaissance to a renewed interest in learning and an overall increase in human knowledge. But others propose that the actual cause was something else: the imagination and courage of the great navigators who set out from the shores of Europe and eventually discovered the so-called New World, a discovery that completely reoriented and transformed the way Europeans envisioned and understood the world and their place in it.¹

The series of stories in the book of Genesis about Jacob – the son of Isaac and Rebekah and grandson of Abraham and Sarah – are stories where individuals find their lives and their world completely reoriented and transformed, not by intellectual or geographical discoveries, but by the call of God. The Jacob stories take up nearly half of this book, following Jacob’s life

¹ Edwin Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in an Age of the Quick Fix*. Seabury Books, 2007, pp. 29-33.

from conception to death, and we come to know Jacob as well as nearly any other biblical character ...and like Europe at the end of the fifteenth century, Jacob is a mess of contradictions.

Frederick Buechner writes about Jacob, "The book of Genesis makes no attempt to conceal the fact that Jacob was, among other things, a crook. What's more, you get the feeling that whoever wrote up his seamy adventures got a real kick out of them."² Jacob's crooked ways are apparent from the beginning. Even in the womb, Jacob and his twin are at odds, so much so that their poor mother Rebekah hits her wits' end with their bickering before they are even born, much less old enough to talk! So Rebekah asks God what is going on.

God responds that these children will usher in an era of division and conflict, for the older will serve the younger. This pronouncement violated not just practice, but laws which dictated that the oldest child received the majority of the inheritance. This is why it is a big deal that Esau trades his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of stew. For Jacob to get the birthright means that he gets the family land, the family name, the family reputation. After Esau parts with his birthright, all that's left for Isaac to give his beloved firstborn son is a blessing, the same blessing that God gave Abraham and Abraham gave Isaac. But in the very next story about Jacob and Esau, Rebekah and Jacob scheme to ensure that, on his deathbed, Isaac pronounces God's blessing not on Esau, but on Jacob.

What makes Jacob such a scandalous figure is not just that he overturns laws and customs by getting birthright and blessing even though he is second born; it's that he does it through trickery and deception. Jacob is hardly a figure we would want our children to emulate. But, as Walter Brueggemann observes, "if Jacob is a scandalous challenge to his world, then that is because the God who calls him is also scandalous." From the very beginning – not just of Jacob's story, but of pretty much every story of our religious ancestors, God reveals a fundamentally scandalous nature. And this nature is woven into the people and the world God created.

We see it play out again and again. A British colony revolts, declaring its independence from the British monarch, and goes on to become a worldwide

² From the weekly sermon illustration published by the Frederick Buechner Center.
<http://www.frederickbuechner.com>

superpower. A young Baptist preacher becomes the voice of a movement that uses nonviolent resistance to fight for civil rights for people of color. A 15 year-old Muslim girl in Pakistan who claimed her right to education is shot in the head by the Taliban on her way to school one day. She survives and becomes the youngest ever winner of the Nobel Peace Prize.

Then, of course, there is the example of all that proves God's scandalous nature once and for all: Jesus of Nazareth, who came not as a great warrior to overthrow the oppressors of God's people, but who was born in the usual way to unmarried and uneducated teenagers. When Jesus began to preach and teach about God, he spent time with people who were not just ordinary but scandalous – tax collectors, prostitutes, sinners of all kinds. When Jesus' behavior got to be too much for those in charge, he was put to death by crucifixion, the lowest and most humiliating form of execution of his time. Yet our tradition proclaims the absurd and scandalous truth that it is here, where the God of heaven and earth hangs suffocating on the cross, that we most clearly see God's nature.

We can get behind a story like Jacob's, which shows how our God overturns cultural norms and subverts injustice. But let's be honest – we mostly like the idea of a God like that when we are on the wrong side of injustice. We look at Jacob and think of times we have been oppressed because of our race, age, gender, social status, sexuality – and we find ourselves rooting for him as the underdog who doesn't get a fair shake at life simply because he's born a few minutes after his twin brother. But as we follow Jacob's story beyond the scheming and deceiving, we find that he encounters the question we all must face in such circumstances: what to do once we recognize that God's blessing and promise is ours in spite of whatever our culture tells us.

Near the end of the first act of the musical *Hamilton* the colonists defeat the British in the Revolutionary War. The number called "The Battle of Yorktown," ends with the defeated British slinking away, singing over and over in disbelief, "The world turned upside-down." Particularly as an American, it is exciting and gratifying to see these upstart revolutionaries throwing off unjust British rule. But the brilliance of the musical is that, instead of ending first act there, King George returns to the stage, asking pointed questions of the newly independent colonists:

“What comes next?/You’ve been freed
Do you know how hard it is to lead?
You’re on your own/Awesome...wow.
Do you have a clue what happens now?
Oceans rise/Empires fall.
It’s much harder when it’s all your call.
All alone/Across the sea.
When your people say they hate you.
Don’t come crawling back to me.”

The people Paul addresses in his letter of First Corinthians were not involved in nation-building but church-building, which is just as complicated if not more so, given that the church is supposed to reflect the nature of the scandalous God we worship. Paul founded this particular church in the cosmopolitan port city of Corinth, which meant it was a wildly diverse community – as churches worshiping a scandalous God should be. But it didn’t take long for the Corinthian church to become mired in conflict, because even though the people had been taught that in God’s eyes they were all the same, they still looked at one another and classified each other the way they had learned to do outside the church.

Which is why it’s good to read First Corinthians alongside the stories of Jacob. Because although we like to see ourselves as Jacob, the underdog, Paul’s words to Corinth about the scandal of the cross remind us that we have to ask ourselves **how we are also like Esau**, set to receive birthright and blessing without question, not because we have done anything to earn or deserve it, but because through some accident of birth we have what our culture labels valuable: skin color, gender, education, social status, titles, not to mention all manner of material wealth.

First Corinthians reminds us that sometimes we are Esau, and sometimes Jacob, but all the time we are inheritors of a scandal, the same scandal that allowed Jacob, the younger brother, to take God’s promises and God’s blessing. But Jacob will quickly learn that this inheritance contains both gift and command. God’s original blessing to Jacob’s grandfather Abraham is this: I will bless you and you will be a blessing. The scandal of God’s blessing is that it calls us to bless others. *We are blessed to be a blessing.*

The journalist Anne Helen Peterson recently traveled to Dallas, Texas to report on a ministry engaging churches in supporting refugees. Near the end of her reporting, Peterson spoke with a local pastor about his church's involvement. "It's nice that you're doing a piece," he told her. "But we need to challenge our nation to do more than read. People in our communities are afraid. Their fear locks them up. But as a Christian, I am guided to live a life that is filled with sacrifice and adding value to others' lives. To do that, you have to open yourself up to God — and to the idea that God might be saying something that you don't want to hear. Because sometimes, when you're so assured of your own righteousness, it can be difficult to hear. So ask yourself: Are you prepared to see things differently?"

Samira Page, the founder of the ministry, is a refugee from Iran who converted to Christianity and became a minister. "I grew up during the war between Iran and Iraq, and experienced war in ways that no child should experience," she [said]. "I remember being young and just terrified. Because of the sanctions against Iran, there was no medicine. My uncle was a soldier at the front where Saddam Hussein used chemical bombs on the Iraqis and the Kurdish people, and he came home covered in blisters. He died a horrible death after nine months of suffering. So growing up, I hated Arabs, and I hated Iraqis in particular. And then I came here, and I became a Christian, and started [this ministry], and the first family that we had was a family from Iraq." ...

When that Iraqi family arrived at the airport...The mother immediately came up to Page, opened her arms, and said, "Hello, my sister." "In that moment, something broke inside me," Page recalls. "God just healed me, and all that hatred and anger just vanished. But I was really embarrassed! I said that I was a Christian, and that my first duty as a Christian was to love — and I hadn't been sure that I could do it."³

At the very beginning of the Bible, Genesis calls us to see things differently, to recognize that **God is not bound** by the cultural norms and divisions that so **bind** us. The scandal of Jacob's story is not just that God overturns cultural norms; it is that God transforms our understanding of *what it means to be blessed*. Jacob may have thought he was tricking everyone, including

³ https://www.buzzfeed.com/annehelenpetersen/the-hearts-of-texas?utm_term=.lv0q00yYx4#.ilnWbbVx96

God, when he stole the birthright and the blessing, but in the end, he learns there is no escaping the promise that **every single one of us belongs to God**. No matter what trickery and deception we employ – on ourselves and on others – we cannot deny that promise or escape the responsibility that comes with it.

We are blessed to *be a blessing*. Not because we are better or smarter or more capable, but because *God's blessing is the birthright of **all** God's children*. God has no interest or regard for our categories and rules about who gets what and how and why. God bestows grace on the best and worst among us and even on the best and worst within each of us. That is the good news of the gospel revealed on the cross. And **nothing** could be more scandalous.

Amen.