

# The Holy Family – God’s Elect?

From the sermon series: Once Upon A Time...

*Text: Genesis 27:1-4, 18-40; Romans 9:1-18*

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*Transcription of the handwritten sermon text*

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Laying out sermon series or setting down themes and texts for a 2 or 3-month period or for a season such as Advent or Lent is hard work. It is a creative process that cannot be coerced. Sometimes a couple of days of rather intense struggle leave me empty and, then again, a whole series may take shape in a moment after such struggle. And sometimes I can move methodically through the subjects set down and sometimes the series takes on a mind of its own and I find myself going where, in the setting down of the series, I never dreamed I would go.

Such is the case with the present series of sermons from Genesis.

Last Sunday you applauded as I ended the sermon suggesting we may need a moratorium from our respective ancient texts – the Jewish Scriptures, our Bible, the Koran of Islam – because the texts are being used in too many instances as justification for hatred, violence and war. Then I suggested we lay down our respective texts and look each other in the eye, meet heart to heart as human beings – Jew, Christian, Muslim, three peoples, three faith traditions, with one common ancestor, Abraham.

Do you know the first time ever a sermon of mine received an ovation? It was the last Sunday in October, 1992. I was asked to represent the Reformed Church at a conference at Brandeis University – a conference on congregational participation in Judaism, Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. All three were recognizing a falling off of congregational membership and involvement and the conference was called at Brandeis at the Jewish Center there to reflect on what was happening and to show models of some successes in the respective faiths.

It was Reformation Sunday. I had been asked to preach at the opening session on Sunday evening. On Sunday morning I concluded the sermon here by saying on that Reformation Sunday we should all go to Geneva and then on to Rome to pick up the Catholics, then to Constantinople to heal the breach between West and

East. Then to Medina where Mohammed received his revelation and then all of us together return to Jerusalem where we could be the one people of God.

You applauded. I was dumbstruck; it had never happened before. But I touched a nerve – and something in you said, “Yes.”

That happened last week too – and the appeal was the same: moving beyond the divisions that have proven so perilous and finding our common humanity before the face of the Mystery toward which we all grope and yearn.

Nancy said, “Now I suppose you’ll never retire, after getting an ovation.” I said, “Oh, yeah! How would you like to come back the next Sunday?”

I relate this because I became aware again of the intuitive sense of the people – in this case, you – but I wonder if it is not true of a good many people in any given congregation – the intuitive sense that religion should build community, should bond and heal, and that religion is being misused, abused, twisted when it is the stimulus to derision, hatred, violence and war.

And, as I said, sometimes a series takes on a life of its own and takes me where I did not intend to go. But here I am seeing what I did not intend to deal with, seeing what is not new to us but seeing it in a new and powerful way: seeing how religion is tribal and leads to tribalism and thus potentially to alienation, hatred, violence and war.

There would be no problem with tribal religion if it were recognized that that is what we have and if we could seek the Face of God through our respective stories, rituals and moral codes, but that has not been the case with the Abrahamic faith. There is a universalizing tendency, which is understandable because we claim to be speaking of God, the Creator, the ultimate, the One True God, and thus there has been a tendency to absolutize our vision, our understanding.

This doesn’t seem to be a problem in the East, and Judaism considered itself a light to the nations but without the need to proselytize. The universalizing tendency in Christianity has led to the idea that we are to evangelize the world, that the world will be saved through Jesus Christ alone and the rest are lost. This has been the Christian mission. And Islam – sometimes it seems to claim absolute status, sometimes not, in the course of its history.

In any case the danger comes from fundamentalism in each of the Abrahamic faiths, and this mentality is the same, whether Jewish, Christian or Islam.

And to come back to my suggestion last week that we take another look at the ancient texts – you understand I am not suggesting we forget our respective founding stories, but I am suggesting that we hear them but not absolutize them as if they were the Word of God, that we see them as human products containing

within themselves all the negative potential of human tribalism, of over-againstness of one group over another.

Let’s look at today’s lesson: Esau and Jacob. The story: Is this God’s idea? This is a story written to explore, to justify the existence of the Jewish people. Reaching back to Abraham, Jewish faith understands the Jewish people as God’s chosen, the Elect of God – elected to be light to the nations, to embody the rule of God on earth, to teach the nations Torah– God’s way of life.

In its positive statement this is a grand vision: not through conquest or domination, not even by effecting conversion to Judaism, but by its very being and by its Torah as a law or way of life, Israel would be the world’s teacher.

And its ancient past is some story: Sarah, Hagar, Isaac, Ishmael, bitterness, heartbreak... amazing that their dysfunction and human misery should be recorded as a peoples’ past. There is a self-critical awareness and honesty in the Hebrew Scripture. The Hebrew prophets, too, criticize the nation.

Today: Esau and Jacob. The story: the struggle in the womb, the elder shall serve the younger, father Isaac loving Esau; mother Rebekah loved Jacob. The deceit of Rebekah and Jacob in securing Isaac’s blessing for Jacob and Esau’s piteous cry, “Is there one blessing only, Father?”

What a set-up for discord. And, of course, this is explaining the situation of the time of the writer, written back into the past – the present explained in terms of the past – of God’s choice, God’s accomplishing God’s purposes through human deceit.

To think of it makes one’s head swim. This is the Holy Family? This is God’s Elect?

Well, let’s go again to St. Paul, this passionate Jew who has been converted to the conviction that Jesus was God’s Messiah, God’s promised anointed One, who would effect salvation for Jew and Gentile through his death and resurrection.

This Paul brings the message of the God of Israel acting through the Jewish Messiah, Jesus, to the Gentiles, the nations, and he meets with success. However, his own kinfolk are not convinced. Many are but it must have been obvious to Paul that the mass of his people did not share his conviction about Jesus and that is deeply troubling to him.

That is the problem he struggles with in Romans 9-11. If the Jews don’t turn to Jesus as Messiah they are missing out on God’s salvation. They are missing the boat. Well then, is God unfaithful to his promise to Abraham?

As we saw last week, Paul says, “No.” All of Abraham’s seed is not in the Elect line: through Isaac, not Ishmael. Now, today, we move along a generation to Esau

and Jacob. Paul is trying to defend God against the charge of failing to keep the promise to Abraham and to Israel. So his argument: God has always worked through the chosen, the elect. Not Ishmael, but Isaac; not Esau, but Jacob.

And why? No one can say. God has the prerogative of showing mercy where God will, having compassion where God will. The choice cannot be questioned. There is not a way behind the simple fact of the choice.

Brueggemann uses the best term – inscrutable: God's inscrutable will. Listen to Romans 9:11f:

*...for the children being not yet born, neither having done anything good or bad, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calls...*

Nothing to do with character/worth/morality.

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Then verse 13:

*...I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau.*

But what are we to say? Injustice?

*I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy... Period.*

Verse 18:

*So then he has mercy on whom he will and whom he will he hardens.*

Well, I've been tortured by that for years. It didn't seem fair. Finally, just yield to it! Who are you to question? And positively – Grace – not merit/work, lest anyone should boast and Election to service not privilege.

If one believes the Bible as the Word of God – an infallible, inspired word – what is one to do?

Well, I think it's time simply to recognize what is going on here: tribalism, over-againstness, rivalry.

Paul was a Jew. He was captivated by Jesus and believed God's plan for history was coming to its climax. He believed the God of Israel was God alone and now God was moving into history and beginning to bring all things to their consummation...and so he interpreted the present, his experience, in terms of Israel's history. – Why are all his countrymen not believing in Jesus? Well, all of Israel never *did* belong to the chosen line within the nation.

Is this fair?

God can do as God wills.

Malachi 1: 2-3 – Jacob loved and Esau hated. Obviously a present situation of threat, alienation and potential violence explained in terms of the ancient story which is imputed to God.

I simply do not believe it was some word of God that sent Hagar and Ishmael away. I do not believe God chose Isaac in the womb before the twins were born, nor that God was party to the deceit perpetrated by Rachel and Jacob on old blind Isaac.

Look at what literalizing them does. For example, the orthodox Rabbis who transmitted the tradition about the promise of the Land of Israel to Abraham the Patriarch such that a young student assassinates Rabin, who as a military hero was able to lead peace negotiations with Arafat.

Or the terrorists who on 911 flew those airplanes into the New York Trade Center and the Pentagon as acts of worship and martyrdom to Allah in the cause not of Islam in its total faith tradition but on the basis of selective interpretation, which places terror in the mind of God.

As I was contemplating all of this I was reminded of my friend Krister Stendahl. You remember him – thin as a pencil, thus appearing 7 feet tall – the Dean of Harvard Divinity School for 20 years and for 10 years Lutheran Bishop of Stockholm – a great New Testament scholar and a gracious man. He was my surrogate Bishop during the years of conflict. He preached for us one Sunday, and of course you remember the title – *Shepherds, Good and Bad* – but the weekend theme was “Good religion opens the mind and warms the heart. Bad religion closes the mind and hardens the heart.”

I took his study on Romans off the shelf. Krister loves the Scriptures and he is a marvelous interpreter and preacher. In regard to these chapters, Romans 9-11, he understands Paul as seeing the unbelief of the Jews in his time as the means by which the Gospel is taken to the Gentiles. But he interprets Paul as believing God will redeem Israel in God’s own time and manner.

And then I remembered that N. T. Wright, who preached here in May with Marcus Borg, had just completed his commentary on Romans published in the *New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*. It is a massive work and Tom Wright and the *Commentary on Romans* is indicative of the stature he holds in the academic world. He is, as we experienced, a gracious gentleman and a brilliant scholar. He is also a conservative evangelical several paces to the right of where I am and, as we experienced, also of Marcus Borg.

So I thought what does Tom Wright do with those chapters 9-11? Well I was not surprised. Tom Wright takes Paul as authoritative, writing under the Spirit’s inspiration. So God is involved in the Isaac/Ishmael issue and in the Jacob-Esau issue. And I was reminded of my early years when passages that seemed so contrary to my human experience had to be interpreted so as to put a good spin on what really seemed simply incredible.

Tom Wright is careful to guard against using Paul and these passages as justification for anti-Semitism, for attacks on the Jews for not believing Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah. Nonetheless Tom reads Paul in the traditioned fashion as seeing Israel’s story leading to Jesus as the Messiah and as the failure of the Jewish people to thus believe as leading to their exclusion from the Kingdom.

Whose reading of Paul is correct? Two brilliant interpreters; both taking the text seriously, both deeply committed Christian scholars: two interpretations, both can be argued.

One, Krister, includes Israel, and in the other the Christian Church supercedes Israel and those of Israel who do not come to God in faith through Christ are lost.

And as I wrestle with this I have no doubt where I stand – it is with Krister, even though Tom Wright’s interpretation is certainly there as well. But then I move beyond the impasse.

The whole conception of God needs overhauling.

The biblical God throughout is a God running the show: intervening, interposing, controlling, working out a plan in history with sovereign power. And that is the God of the ancient text. I want to hear the text. I want to know that whole tradition. I want to understand how the Christian faith inevitably claims things that are untrue. And frankly, I do.

And then I need to have the courage to argue with the text, to critique the text and to bring to the text everything else we know about the reality of which we are all a part. Then I want to bring our global consciousness to the text. I want to be able to think. I want to bring our knowledge of other faith traditions and of historical consciousness, realizing how these traditions developed.

I need to remember that the great civilizations of the East were not even in the purview of the three Abrahamic faiths. And I must add to the mix my understanding of religion and see it for what it is – tribal stories – with all the limitations and dangerous potential of tribal loyalty. And then, for many who have come to see the primitive tribalism of the religions, perhaps one would simply throw up one’s hands and be done with it.

But look where that would leave us – where vast multitudes are today, adrift without anchor on a sea of meaninglessness in a pitiless universe.

And so I return to the stories, not now as divine revelation, but as human stories of folk who have wondered about the meaning and purpose of life, about how to live, how to find comfort and joy and truth and security. And I can look to the stories that make up my story:

The story of Jesus – Paul wasn't interested in the historical Jesus. He saw a divine action in the cross and resurrection for the salvation of the world soon to be consummated. He was wrong about that.

But what about Jesus? What about Stephen who died like Jesus, praying for his killers and Paul standing by? What about what Jesus embodied? Is there still something there? Can you imagine Jesus in Jerusalem today? Can you imagine him a Jew turning away a Muslim?

Tribal religion has fueled the fire of violence and war. It has been exploited for ethnic advantage, for social control, for domination – and always there is an ancient text which is appealed to, a tribal story which is universalized, absolutized, used to bludgeon the other.

Do you really believe there was a family filled with intrigue, conspiring, deceit, treachery, hatred, and alienation that would be God's Chosen, God's elect? In spite of groveling in the dust saying I am nothing and all is of grace, pure grace is being chosen – and almost inevitably the chosen ones become proud of their election and absolutize their story.

Isn't it time to see those stories for what they are and to claim therefore not that God is not the Creator Spirit of the whole but that our gods have been too small – tribal gods made in our image. Must God – the Mystery of Being, the Infinite – be indeed the God of the Whole, of the whole creation, of the whole movement of history, of the whole human family – named variously, worshiped in many different ways, imaged in diverse manners, yet the Mystery beyond our limited tribal stories?