

Sermon: The Club That Would Have Us  
Texts: Genesis 27:1-17  
Genesis 27:18-29  
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*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.”*

Genesis 27:22

Way back in 1973, the brilliant writer -- and ordained Presbyterian minister, I might add -- Frederick Buechner, published a book called *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*.

It was reissued in paperback in 1993, with the slightly revised, more inviting title: *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC*.

By either title, the goal was the same. As Buecher himself said of the project, “I tried to shake a little dust off a lot of moth-eaten old religious words and put some color back in their cheeks” (*Peculiar Treasures*, pg. xi.)

And so, as the titles suggest, the books start with the letter A, with words like apostle and apocalypse, and then continues, right through baptism and Eucharist, and on to redemption and salvation, and so on.

In 1979, Buechner published a follow up book called, *Peculiar Treasures: a Biblical Who’s Who*.

The idea, as he said, was “to try the same stunt with a lot of the moth-eaten old saints, prophets, potentates, and assorted sinners who roam through the pages of the Bible” (*Peculiar Treasures*, xi).

The idea made perfect sense. The names Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Moses, David and Noah, Joseph, Mary and even Jesus -- they’ve all been around so long, and we’ve all grown so familiar with them, that for many people they’ve become sort of like religious wallpaper: just the thing that lines the walls of mind when we think about the Bible--a faded backdrop that we’re so familiar with we’ve stopped seeing what’s right before our eyes.

So the thought was, time to freshen things up. Apply a new coat of varnish over these old patterns, these old names. Bring them to life in new ways.

This would be a great service for people like us, who go to church regularly and think we know who these characters are, but who may not fully understand or appreciate them.

And an even greater service for a new and growing generation of people. People who've never met these characters before. People who don't go to church. People who don't know the stories.

So, it seemed like a good idea. Except it didn't turn out the way Buechner expected.

What he discovered was that trying to freshen up people like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and Sarah, Rebekeh and Rachel, too, was like trying to change the look of Mt. Rushmore.

When he revisited these characters, there were exactly who they were when he first read about them.

They were who they were then, exactly who they had always been. And they were likely going to remain exactly who they were as far into the future as Buechner cared to imagine.

And it's true. People like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are bedrock figures. They're monuments to faith whose value lies in the fact they don't change.

They do and say and believe the same things today that they did and said and believed when they first appeared on the page several thousand years ago.

They don't change. Instead, like all the great characters, in all the best stories, when we contemplate them, they ask us to change. Or at least they invite deeper consideration of what our own lives mean in light of theirs.

The Bible's characters can do this because they are so true to life. Contrary to popular belief -- and this may have been Buechner's point -- they are not idealized moral heroes or romanticized saints.

Instead, they populate stories about human life in all its rag tag imperfection and its huge range of impulses and experiences.

True, the characters themselves often show loyalty, bravery and faithfulness. But they also display jealousy, paranoia and betrayal, just to name a few of the darker human qualities they exhibit.

So, like mirrors held up to the human soul, we hold up these stories, and the characters in them, and we see ourselves. In their behaviors, we see truths about the life that goes on all around us. And in their struggles, we see truths about the life that goes on way down deep inside of us.

And we read one of the most true-to-life of all these stories today, a tale brimming with naked deceit and conniving ambition. (And if you don't like that language, I recommend that you not read the Old Testament, for it will likely offend you, possibly very badly.)

Today marks the end of our brief sermon series focused on exploring the question of just who is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Due to its length, we broke this particular narrative into two parts. But I wanted us to hear this story as a whole because it is one of only a few places in Genesis where Isaac and Jacob, father and son, appear together.

But their story -- and the story of the connection between mother and son, too, between Rebekah and Jacob -- starts many years before.

And it very nearly didn't happen at all. So let's rewind to the beginning to see how it started.

At sixty years old, Isaac sits alone outside his tent, carving a little toy camel for his young nephew. He would love to be able to give the toy to his own son but Yahweh did not favor him and Rebekah with children. Now, at sixty, it's clear that his longing to be a father will never be fulfilled.

And so he pauses to consider where to put his nephew's initials on the little wooden toy, ignoring the pain that they won't be his son's initials.

Suddenly his thoughts are interrupted.

"Isaac," he hears his wife call from inside their tent. In their two decades of married life together, he has heard Rebekah say his name maybe 10,000 times. But somehow this time it's different. He drops the toy camel and rushes inside.

“Yes?” he replies.

“You are not going to believe this.”

Rebekah is wrong. Without being told, Isaac knows the answer already. His wife is suddenly, inexplicably, miraculously, pregnant.

He doesn't know how this could be -- Rebekah passed the change in life more than a decade ago -- but he doesn't care how it happened. It is the happiest moment of their lives.

Rebekah weeps with joy. Isaac pops the cork on a clay jar of the finest plum wine he has been saving for years, for a special occasion, a jar he almost discarded last month, thinking all such occasions were over for him.

Their joy is boundless and fully justified. They are to be the miracle parents of a miracle child. But if the couple think that their struggles are behind them, they are badly mistaken.

The trouble starts early on. Even today pregnancy is rarely easy under the best of circumstances. But Rebekah is suffering and not just with the effects of morning sickness, or a sore back and swollen feet.

There's something else going on, a struggle developing deep down inside of her.

The discomfort gets so bad she feels like she can't take it any longer. "If it is to be this way, why do I live?" she complains to God.

What she doesn't know is that she's carrying twins. But not just any twins. These two will go on to be among history's greatest sibling rivals.

Esau is born first, but Jacob comes out grasping his heel. Judging by the way the rest of their lives play out, it's a gesture intended less to let his older brother help pull him into this life, and more a gesture intended to pull his brother back, so he, Jacob, can get out ahead of him and take his place as the firstborn son.

Bill Moyers has said that Jacob's story captivates us because it's the first story in Genesis that seems like it could be about us. Or at least it's the first story, in Moyers' view, that features a human character that seems like he could be from our world.

To this point, all of the characters in Genesis distinguish themselves by simply doing what God asks. Their motives might have been different, but the result is the same.

God instructs Adam and Eve to leave the garden. Haunted by shame, they quietly comply.

*Yes, God.*

God instructs Noah to build an ark, pointing out in the process that Noah will need this ark because the Creator of the universe is about to obliterate the rest of the human race. Noah meekly complies.

*Yes, God.*

With a promise to make him the father of many nations, Yahweh instructs Abraham to leave his country and head out for parts unknown. The promise and the call come with no additional explanation.

And so heeding this call requires Abram to take a wild leap of faith, a faith that will ultimately define him, but in the moment he just pulls up his tent stakes and goes.

*Yes, God.*

In Moyers' view, all of these legendary figures are but two-dimensional characters. Nothing complex about them.

Not so with Jacob. There is nothing simple, compliant, or even apparently good, about this guy. He comes out of the womb grasping, scheming for ways to advance his interests, and he really never stops.

In another major chapter in his life story, he cheats his brother out of his birthright. And here, in the story we read today, he conspires with his mother to impersonate his brother. And he goes on to deceive his elderly father, just to win the blessing that, per the culture of the day, properly belongs to Esau.

Which is to say, Jacob is the first truly three-dimensional character in scripture. He's like a real guy who does the kinds of things real people do. Admittedly, not good people. More like people who make a living selling magic eternal youth elixirs on late night television to unsuspecting senior citizens.

He is complicated and conflicted. He's cunning and shrewd. And here is the most surprising thing of all: Jacob is a patriarch. One of the forefathers of the Hebrew people.

And right there is at least a partial answer to our question: who is this God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob?

Yes, Jacob is a scoundrel. Yes, he's a schemer. But he's God's choice. God loves him not because of who Jacob is, necessarily, but because of who God is.

So, Jacob is not only the first truly and fully human figure in the book of Genesis. He is the first member of a club that includes all of us imperfect members.

So if like Groucho Marx you don't want to belong to a club that would have you as a member, you're in the wrong building.

Because the truth is there's a little bit of Jacob in all of us. Maybe you're not a schemer, but maybe you long to get ahead, and have been known to cut a corner or two to advance your cause.

Or maybe you long for a blessing from your father, or your mother, that has never come, and you ache for it so badly you'd be willing to do just about anything to get it.

Or you resent them for not freely giving what rightly belongs to you: their unconditional love, the one thing you truly deserve in virtue of being their son or daughter. And that resentment is burning a hole in your heart, like an emotional ulcer.

Or maybe you have a relationship with one or more of your siblings that is more complicated than it needs to be, and less healthy than you'd like it to be.

Which brings us back to Frederick Buechner. Because God is not done with Jacob.

In a legendary sermon called, *The Magnificent Defeat*, Buechner says that Jacob's story seems to suggest that honesty may not always be the best policy. That schemers often get ahead in life precisely because they scheme.

Except, of course, they don't. For one thing, nobody likes a schemer even if they do seem to get ahead. And for another, Jacob's particular scheme to cheat his brother and deceive his father into blessing him, not Esau, comes up short. It leaves him unfulfilled because it's fake.

With Esau now literally ready to kill him, Jacob heads out into the hills. He goes partly because he's in danger and also, surely, because he's searching for something he still has not found, a legitimate blessing, one that satisfies his deep longing to be loved.

Early on, he has a powerful dream one night of a stairway leading to heaven with angels moving up and down.

And at the top God is waiting for him, and essentially repeats the promise to Jacob that God originally made to Abram: to make him the father of many nations.

Emboldened by this promise, Jacob sets out to return home. But there's still one last matter, that bit about the blessing. One night, he finds himself alone on the banks of the Jabbok river. And there, a shadowy figure jumps him and the two of them wrestle until daybreak.

It turns out the figure is an angel, or maybe it's even an early incarnation of God. No one really knows. The text is very murky on this point.

What we know is that Jacob will not let this figure go until it blesses him.

Here's how the Bible tells it: "So [the man] said to him, 'What is your name?' And he said, 'Jacob.' Then the man said, 'You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.'

"And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peni-el, saying, 'For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved'" (from Genesis 32).

Who is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob?

A God who will track us down and will wrestle with us, as we work through our stuff, and will not rest, will not let us go, until he/she blesses us. Amen.