

Genesis 33:1-17, *The Five Books of Moses* (translated by Robert Alter)

And Jacob raised his eyes and saw and, look, Esau was coming, and with him were four hundred men. And he divided the children between Leah and Rachel, and between the two slavegirls. And he placed the slavegirls and their children first, and Leah and her children after them, and Rachel and Joseph last. And he passed before them and bowed to the ground seven times until he drew near his brother.

And Esau ran to meet him and embraced him and fell upon his neck and kissed him, and they wept. And he raised his eyes and saw the women and the children and he said, “Who are these with you?” And he said, “The children with whom God has favored your servant.” And the slavegirls drew near, they and their children, and they bowed down. And Leah, too, and her children drew near, and they bowed down, and then Joseph and Rachel drew near and bowed down. And he Esau said, “What do you mean by all this camp I have met?” And Jacob said, “To find favor in the eyes of my lord.” And Esau said, “I have much, my brother. Keep what you have.” And Jacob said, “O, no, pray, if I have found favor in your eyes, take this tribute from my hand, for have I not seen your face as one might see God’s face, and you received me in kindness? Pray, take my blessing that has been brought you, for God has favored me and I have everything.” And he pressed him, and Esau took it. And he said, “Let us journey onward and go, and let me go alongside you.” And Jacob said, “My lord knows that the children are tender, and the nursing sheep and cattle are my burden, and if they are whipped onward a single day, all the flocks will die. Pray, let my lord pass on before his servant, and I, let me drive along at my own easy pace, at the heels of the livestock before me and at the heels of the children, till I come to my lord in Seir.” And Esau said, “Pray, let me set aside for you some of the people who are with me.” And Jacob said, “Why should I find such favor in the eyes of my lord?” And Esau returned that day on his way to Seir, while Jacob journeyed on to Succoth. And he built himself a house, and for his cattle he made sheds—therefore is the name of the place called Succoth.¹

¹ Alter Robert, *The Five Books of Moses*, n.d.

Not Quite What It Seems

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Genesis 33:1-17

In the autumn of 1988 I had the chance to attend Steven Sondheim's Broadway hit musical "Into the Woods," when it played at the Colonial Theater in Boston on its first nationwide tour. What an enchanting show it was. Written and directed by James Lapine, the plot and Sondheim's music wove a lovely and imaginative fairytale narrative. Cinderella, Jack (of beanstalk fame), the baker and his wife, Rapunzel, Little Red Riding Hood, and, of course, the witch all get into troubles like the ones you know about, except that now their stories are all mixed together. Little Red Riding Hood buys bread from the baker, and the witch is Rapunzel's mother, for example. At the end of the first of the two acts, though, everything has been well-resolved. The heroes are all living happily ever after. The witch has lost her powers. Cinderella's stepsisters have gotten their comeuppance. Cinderella gets her prince. The Baker and his wife have a baby. And Rapunzel bears a set of twins. At the intermission I was smitten by the wondrous way that Lapine and Sondheim had braided the old tales into a beautiful story with such a satisfying ending.

Today's story of Jacob and Esau has a similar conclusion. Jacob and Esau have not seen each other since Jacob fled Esau's murderous rage. You will recall that Jacob cheated Esau out of both his birthright and his blessing. The text told us that Jacob was born hanging onto his older brother's heel—grabbing him, holding him back, trying to supplant him. But when Esau had had enough of Jacob's treachery, Jacob fled for his life.

Over those 20 years they were apart, there were a number of sub-plots, especially contests between Jacob and his uncle Laban over everything from marriages to livestock. But finally it has come time to resume the main thread of the ancient story. Finally it is time for Jacob to return to Canaan. As we saw last time, as Jacob approaches the Promised Land, his anxiety level goes sky high. Awaiting him, he knows, is the fateful meeting with his estranged brother. Jacob is fearful for himself and for his family.

And now, today, the long awaited meeting is to take place. Jacob leads a procession of family units and belongings. Jacob bows fully prostrate seven times as he approaches Esau. We know from ancient documents of the period that such bowing was the ritual reserved for when one approached a king. Jacob comes to Esau as a subject comes to a king.

Suddenly the tension in the story breaks into heartfelt joy. Esau runs and greets Jacob. He embraces him. He kisses him. Together they weep. In an instant they are reconciled. Bygones are bygones. Brotherly love fills the air.

And we get a poignant sense of all that they missed as they were apart for these last decades. Esau lifts his eyes and see's Jacob's entourage. It is a scene reminiscent of those summers when I was a child and we would visit my mother's family in Louisiana. After a year when their only contact was through letters, there would be great long embraces between my mother and her parents. And then Gramma Lucy would look at us children and pretend so much had changed that she no longer recognized us. She would in jest say, "Why for goodness sake,

who are these boys and girls that you have brought with you?" It was in jest, but it was also tinged with more than a little ache for a year gone by apart from her daughter and grandchildren.

Between Jacob and Esau the reunion love fest continues. Jacob has sent a vast array of gifts to Esau. Esau refuses them, saying that he already has plenty. But Jacob counters saying he has plenty, too. And then in a revealing remark he says something that most translators don't show. Jacob says, "Pray, take my blessing that has been brought you, for God has favored me and I have everything." Pray, take my blessing. Back before Jacob fled to Paddam Aram, when Esau discovered his brother's deceit, Esau cried in despair, "He has stolen my blessing." As Robert Alter says, in giving his blessing to Esau "Jacob is making restitution for his primal theft ... using language that confirms the act of restitution."² Here we see confession and restitution, forgiveness and reconciliation on lavish display.

Next comes a little back and forth about how they will travel now. Esau suggests they all travel together, but Jacob says the herds and the children could never withstand the speed of Esau's company. Esau sees the wisdom of Jacob's worry. Esau then offers to leave a few people to help. But again, Jacob says that Esau is too kind, and Jacob declines the offer. With that Esau goes on ahead, and Jacob leaves behind him at a slower pace.

After the intermission at "Into the Woods," I went back to my seat. As I waited for the curtain to open, I began to wonder what could be next. The plots and subplots of the musical seemed pretty well resolved. Everyone was happy. Maybe the second half would be another set of stories with different characters from some more of the old fairytales. It didn't seem plausible that the second half of the musical would just be about everyone getting along hunky dory. But as the second act began, that seemed to be exactly what we were headed for. Everyone seemed happy and fulfilled. But then cracks began to appear in the veneer. The characters still want more. "The Baker and his Wife have their precious baby boy, but wish for more room; Jack (of the beanstalk) and his mother are rich and well-fed, but Jack misses his kingdom in the sky; and Cinderella is living with her Prince Charming in the Palace, but she is getting bored."³

Suddenly, what was reasonably light, straightforward and fun in the first act becomes dark, complicated and dreadful in the second act. The characters are all drawn back into the woods for one reason or another. There the plot becomes hopelessly entangled and cruel. The characters' motivations become sinister and ruthless. The once happy lot is anything but. In an ending fit for a Shakespeare tragedy by the end only four characters survive, and even they are anything but unscathed. There is no happily ever after ending. There is no simple moral. Sondheim and Lapine leave us with an agonizing and convoluted reality that is more a mirror of life than a fairytale escape from it. I left the theater quite a little more unsettled than I had been at intermission.

Well, I haven't been very subtle in setting you up for what comes next. Needless to say, there's more than meets the eye in the story of the joyous reunion and reconciliation between Jacob and Esau, too. And like the musical "Into the Woods," part of what meets more than the eye mirrors some of baser realities of human existence.

As we've seen, Jacob approaches Esau as if Esau were a king. At this point in the story, Jacob isn't sure what his reception is going to be like. He suspects that Esau may make good on his long-ago threats. Notice how Jacob orders the procession. He goes first. No man with any self-respect could do otherwise in the ancient Near East. But then the procession goes in reverse

² Alter Robert, *The Five Books of Moses*

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Into_the_Woods#1988_US_tour accessed September 14, 2013

order of what Jacob most values. First the slaves and their children. Then Leah, his first wife, and her children. And then finally his favorite wife and son, Rachel and Joseph. From the very beginning Jacob's treatment of Leah has been blatantly contemptuous. Rachel is his prize, and her son Joseph her favorite child. It's hardly any wonder that Joseph's brothers will later come to resent him so much.

But back to today's story. Jacob and Esau meet and share a lovely reconciliation. But the scribes may actually have made an error that makes it look better than it is. Esau embraced Jacob, kissed him, and together they wept. Except that scholars think the original text says that only Esau wept. Jacob stood there impassively. That changes things, doesn't it?

Anyway, the two brothers enter a formalized negotiation about giving and receiving presents or blessing, and about travel plans.

Of the former, Esau says, "What do you mean by all this camp I have met?" And Jacob said, "To find favor in the eyes of my lord." And Esau said, "I have much, my brother. Keep what you have." And Jacob said, "O, no, pray, if I have found favor in your eyes, take this tribute from my hand, for have I not seen your face as one might see God's face, and you received me in kindness? Pray, take my blessing that has been brought you, for God has favored me and I have everything."

When Jacob wrestled on the banks of the Jabbok in last week's reading, he finally exclaimed with no little surprise, "I have seen God face to face and survived." Today he says to Esau, "Have I not seen your face as one might see God's face, and you received me in kindness? Jacob is dotting Is and crossing Ts here. He acknowledges that Esau might have killed him, just as God might have in a face to face meeting. Jacob immediately says, "Pray, take my blessing," thereby telling Esau that he is restoring what he took so long ago. Seems very nice.

But Jacob reveals more than he may have meant to. Esau, in at first declining the gifts, has said he has enough and that he doesn't need anything from Jacob. Jacob cannot help himself. He counters, "God has favored me and I have everything." Esau says he has enough. Jacob cannot resist going him one better—I have everything. And that reveals a second and more important point. Jacob is attempting to restore the blessing he stole from Esau, but in truth it's costing him very little to do it. Jacob is giving to Esau from his endless abundance. In my most jaded moments I look at the generous charity of such figures as Bill Gates or Andrew Carnegie and can't help but remark that their wealth was acquired on the backs of many others, not a few of whom were cheated, deceived and conned and left ruined in the process. Jacob wants to come off as magnanimous, but he can't help reminding us that he's more a big shot than he is a benefactor, and that his giving is a drop in the bucket.

Finally comes the end of the scene. Esau wants the two families to travel together, or at least leave some help for Jacob. But Jacob insists on going alone. He doesn't want to slow down Esau, he says, and he doesn't need the extra help. Jacob graciously insists that Esau and his entourage head south to Seir and that he will follow at his own pace. Very gracious, indeed. Except for one thing. After Esau turns around and heads south, Jacob turns around and heads north, in the opposite direction to Succoth, which means 'sheds' because there Jacob build temporary sheds for his livestock. [slide] Esau heads south expecting Jacob to follow. Indeed, Jacob, again echoing old wounds, tells Esau, "Let me drive along at my own easy pace, at the heels of the livestock before me and at the heels of the children, till I come to my lord in Seir." Jacob grabbed Esau by the heels as they were both born, and now he promises to be at Esau's heels as they both travel to Seir. This time, though, Jacob's treachery isn't grabbing the heel; it's letting it go. Jacob lets Esau leave believing Jacob will follow. But instead Jacob goes north to

Succoth and waits a bit. As we will see next time, once Esau has gone far enough that he won't notice Jacob's movements, Jacob heads west across the Jordan, into Canaan. At this point, Esau, who has magnanimously welcomed his brother home and hoped they would live together as a family, disappears into the mists of Biblical history. In a few chapters we hear only that the brothers both attended their father Isaac's funeral. Other than that, they will never lay eyes on one another again. Ultimately they will represent nations at enmity in the Middle East.

Like Sondheim and Lapine with the musical "Into the Woods," the Biblical writers of Genesis have left us with a vexing and complex narrative. It's not a neatly wrapped package of happily ever after. In large measure, I think, that's the price we pay for a faith in which God works in the world and calls us to do the same. One of the lessons that Sondheim's characters were to learn was that their actions had consequences, and very often those consequences were impossible or very hard to undo. They were to learn, also, that change in people comes slowly if at all, and even then with great effort. And they were to learn that some people, like the witch, are worse than others, like Cinderella.

So it is in our Biblical stories, and in none more than this morning's. Jacob—heel grabber, cheat, and usurper—hasn't yet been able to change his spots, at least not fully. Even after wrestling in the night on the banks of the Jabbok and being told he was no longer to be named heel grabber, he hasn't left his grabbing ways fully behind. He still shows favoritism in his family. He turns away from his brother's overtures of reconciliation, maybe because he was still afraid, maybe because he wanted to secure the Promised Land just for himself. On the other hand, Esau the hothead comes off the more openhanded. He seems to have forgiven all and to truly welcome his brother home. But it is not to be. And we are left with tension and no little sorrow at the conclusion. There has been a modicum of admission of guilt, acts of forgiveness, and rituals of reconciliation. But the consequences of long ago actions and deceits still hang like a cloud over Esau and Jacob. One cannot help but wish it could have ended differently.

Maybe, just maybe, like "Into the Woods," this is a cautionary tale for us. Actions have long-lasting consequences and undoing them is not as easy as wishing it so in a fairytale. God will never abandon Jacob, but God's heart will break time and again for what might have been. Amen.