

“Sibling Rivalry”

Genesis 25:19-34 and 27:1-6a, 9-19, 22-23, 41-44

the Rev. Michelle Slater September 18, 2011

When I was in university, I developed an addiction to soap operas, much to my then friend, and now husband's, disgust. Whenever he would shake his head at me and wonder why, I would tell him their appeal, to me, at least: the incredible, crazy things that happen in the storylines. The faked deaths and cases of amnesia; the twins taking each others' place in bed, and the babies secretly switched at birth; the lies, deception and betrayal, and the frequent natural disasters. Soap operas showcase the most dysfunctional families on earth, in all their glory.

I suppose I liked them because they made me feel normal, when I considered the ordinary and everyday difficulties that my life involved. And it was somehow, inspiring, to see all the things that happened to the characters, crises imposed on them and disasters of their own making, and how they found ways to survive and even to thrive. Villains were redeemed, and heroes fell, and life somehow continued, day by day, week by week.

Maybe that's why I love the Hebrew Scriptures so much, and especially, the book of Genesis. Because the family whose fortunes we're following this fall is worthy of a soap opera. There are the patriarch and matriarch, Abraham and Sarah, called by God to leave their home country and head out to the far land of Canaan, with the promise of numerous descendants, a land of their own, and a blessing. After decades of barrenness, son Isaac finally arrived so the promised prolific progeny was assured.

But Isaac was a late bloomer, still living in the basement of his father's tent at age 40, so Abraham sent his servant back to his homeland to find a wife for Isaac. Beautiful, generous, energetic and determined, Rebekah too was issued a call to leave her home and all that is familiar, to join with the family and life of a stranger. And she accepted, opening her heart and her life to the possibilities that a life with God would bring.

This week, we find Rebekah well settled into her new life as the next matriarch of God's family of blessing and promise. We follow the fortunes and futures of this family in three vignettes, three stories, this morning. First, once again, there is difficulty in conceiving. And once again, God's power for life is known and Rebekah is granted twins, a double blessing...at least at first. For it is a difficult pregnancy. “The children struggled together within her; and she cried out, ‘If it is to be this way, why do I live?’” Fed up with the discomfort and restlessness, the sleepless nights and the constant kicking from within her, Rebekah goes to ‘inquire of God’. And God responds, both describing what is to happening in her womb, and declaring the future of this family: “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.”

As is often the case in Scripture, a reversal is foretold; God is turning all expectations upside down, refusing to work through conventional wisdom and ways. And sure enough, the delivery is not complete before the reversal begins. The first baby came out red and hairy, so they named him

Esau, which means “rough.” Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau’s heel; so he was named Jacob, which means, “the grasper, the grabber, the supplanter.” In every way the boys are different. Esau is red, hairy, loves the outdoors and hunting, a man of the field and close to his father Isaac. Jacob, smooth skinned and smooth talking, stays inside the tent, close to his mother Rebekah: a “momma’s boy”. And “Isaac loved Esau...but Rebekah, loved Jacob.” From the beginning, the parents have their favourites.

In the second vignette, and in true soap opera fashion, the boys are suddenly all grown up. One day Esau comes in from the fields, and finds Jacob preparing a stew. “Give me some of that red stuff,” he demands, “I’m starving.” (I assume you’ve heard your kids crash the kitchen saying the same thing!) “Sure, you can have some stew,” says Jacob, “but only after you give me your birthright.”

His birthright. The birthright naturally belonged to the older son. The one who possessed it became leader of the clan when the father died, and would inherit twice as much as any of his brothers. No small matter, to try to obtain the birthright. No small dishonouring to give it up. Impatient, stomach rumbling, and frankly not too bright, Esau agrees.

As the years go by Esau continues to disappoint his parents. He marries not one but two Hittite women, outsiders, not ‘of the clan’. He’s sold his birthright and position in the family for a bowl of soup. And, he’s made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah, the story says, but still, Isaac adores him.

Finally, in the third vignette, years have passed by and Isaac recognizes his days are numbered. He is old and blind and knows it’s time to put his affairs in order. He sends Esau out to kill some game and prepare him a savory meal. “Go do this,” he says, “and bring it to me to eat so that I can bless you before I die.” A blessing in those times was more than good wishes or a show of favouritism. A blessing was more like the mystic passing of divine favour, a transfer of God’s mysterious power for life and wellbeing. As God had blessed Abraham, and Abraham had blessed Isaac, now Isaac seeks to hand that inheritance of divine favour onto Esau.

But Rebekah, like any good soap opera heroine, is ready to intervene, in favour of *her* favourite son, Jacob. She takes charge, ordering Jacob to beat his brother to the punch. He objects, not unreasonably: “My brother is hairy. I’m a smooth skinned man.” “Just do what I say,” says Rebekah. “Because I said so,” takes on a whole new imperative and power.

She takes Esau’s best garments and makes Jacob put them on. She places animal skins on his hands and the back of his neck. She ladles the savory stew Isaac is salivating for into a bowl, thrusts the tray into Jacob’s hands and pushes the whole package through the door of Isaac’s tent. Isaac, although he’s blind, can sense something seems off.

Yet when he feels Jacob’s hands, they are hairy and rough. Even his clothes smell of his beloved Esau. Jacob serves his father and lies through his teeth and the deceived Isaac gives the blessing to the youngest son. “Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may your mothers’s sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be everyone who blesses you!” The reversal is complete.

But Esau is devastated, eaten up with pain, sorrow and rage. When Rebekah hears that Esau will only be consoled by bashing Jacob's head in, she comes up with yet another plan. She convinces Isaac to send Jacob away immediately, back to the land of their ancestors to find a suitable wife, and away from the wrath of his brother.

Three storylines that are worthy of a modern soap opera: a boy scheming to get ahead of his brother...a mother favouring one child over another...a twin taking the place of another. But unlike soap operas, Scripture claims to have a word of life, of blessing, for us today. What could it be?

Surely, we aren't to take any of these characters as role models. Impatient, unthinking Esau, led by his stomach rather than his brain? Grasping Jacob, always wanting and taking what belongs to another? Cunning Rebekah, deceiving her husband? Or aged Isaac, blind and passive and "dim"?

"Here is the family of God in all its gory detail, prayer and miraculous conception, yes; but also brothers who fight from conception, parents who divide their loves, a supplanter from birth who offers his own brother a kind of anti-communion meal, a meal that divides and takes for the self at the other's expense", rather than giving life. [Jason Byassee, *Feasting on the Word*]

Yet it is precisely here, among these people, that God works to save, to bless, the world. It turns out that divine yet desperate housewives, and broken and flawed men, and even squabbling and conniving siblings, can all be vehicles for God's power for life and blessing to unfold. It turns out that this murky world of human reality *is* the arena where God's word is brought to fulfilment. Through our lives: our times of faithfulness, and falling short; our best intentions and failed efforts; our clear vision and our blind spots; God is working God's promises still.

Who knows why Rebecca loves Jacob more than Esau? He is hardly a lovable character. Yet she loves the cheat, the liar, fiercely. Who knows why Isaac loves Esau? The one who valued his identity so little that he sold it for a bowl of soup, the one who betrayed the family by bringing in "foreign" wives. Yet even with their secrets, their faults, their weaknesses, their parents love them with their whole hearts and souls and beings. Hmmm. Perhaps Scripture tells us something about God, more than it tells us about ourselves, about God's mysterious, breath-taking and sometimes surprising love for each one of us, in our brokenness, in our imperfection, in our humanity.

But back to the soap opera. Friday's episode always ends with a cliffhanger, doesn't it? And so do we. Jacob is on the run from his brother's murderous wrath. What will happen to him? How will God intervene? Come back next week, to find out...