

Genesis 25:19–34

19 These 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;
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. 26Afterwards 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.

27 When 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.

29 Once 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.

Holy, Holy, Holy One, guide us by the Spirit of truth to hear the Word of life you speak, and to give all glory, honor, and praise to your threefold name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Friday July 3rd this year had a big premier. I don't know how many of you were aware of this, but a taped performance of the Broadway hit Hamilton, done by the original cast, was released on the streaming platform Disney +. This was a big deal for many people. It allowed a large number of folks that would not be able to see the play with any cast, let alone the original Broadway cast. And it only cost them a free trial or \$6.99 a month.

Two years ago, I took Morgan to see Hamilton in Chicago. We got seats midway up the mezzanine level. I think I paid a little under \$100 per seat. It was an amazing performance and I know she could see everything really well. My view of the upper level of the stage was slightly blocked by the balcony above us, being tall has its disadvantages too, but they were still good seats.

Why am I talking about Hamilton this morning? Because as I was contemplating the scriptures for today our passage from Genesis caught my attention. This is the start of the story of Jacob one of the beloved patriarchs of the Jewish people. And much like Hamilton himself, Jacob was determined to strive for what he thought he deserved. Both were part of the founding of a nation, both were considered underdogs, and both of them, when given the opportunity, felt like, as the song in Hamilton says, "I am not throwing away my shot."

So, let's start at the beginning. Our story starts out with Isaac, the son of Abraham, and his wife Rebekah. They were married when Isaac was 40. And it looked like they weren't going

to have children. This isn't all that unusual, remember that Abraham and Sarah also had trouble conceiving. They were so old that they had given up on having children. But the Lord said they would and by a miracle they did. So, as Isaac turns 60, he prays to God for children and Rebekah finally succeeds in becoming pregnant. Having children was a matter of survival in those days, so I understand their desire, but I don't think that I would want to start my family at 60!

Rebekah is pregnant not with just one child but two, and the pregnancy is not easy on her. The two babies seem to be constantly moving and fighting each other in the womb. Rebekah prays to God and the Lord said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger."

Eventually the fraternal twins are born. The first out of the womb is Esau, a big hairy red child. A child who grows up strong, and straightforward and prefers the wilderness and hunting. Jacob the second born child comes out holding his brother's heel, another example that he is going to be in competition with his brother. Jacob isn't hairy like his brother and he grew up preferring to stay in the camp and was quiet. Isaac favored his first-born son Esau. Especially since Esau hunted and brought fresh game back to camp, which Isaac enjoyed eating. Rebekah favored Jacob. The text doesn't say why, but the assumption is that she was influenced by the prophecy of the Lord.

Now at this point there is some historical context that I want to go over with you. In the patriarchal society of the times there were two things that mattered when it came to passing down the right to run the clan. There was the birthright, which is mentioned in this story, and the blessing, which Jacob steals in chapter 27 by tricking Isaac, who is blind at the time, into giving him.

The birthright was simply the eldest son's right to have at least twice as much of the inheritance as his younger brothers, and maybe more. Isaac, for example, got all Abraham's stuff, being the only child left after they sent off his half-brother Ishmael. But more than that, the birthright gave the one who had it the right to be the ruler of the family clan. He was the teacher, judge, general, police, doctor, and priest of the whole family. OK, maybe that's a bit of an exaggeration, but you get the point. Numero Uno!

The blessing was the powerful final wish of the dying father on the one who had the birthright. The ancient peoples believed that such a blessing had real power, an almost magical ability to make good things happen. It was a virtual guarantee of success and prosperity.

If you had both the birthright and the blessing, you had it made. Your position and your future were solid and secure. Without those twin benefits, you were more or less on your own, out in the cold, doomed to a life of hard struggle.

As the first borne, and favorite of Isaac's, Esau was destined for both the birthright and the blessing. One day Esau comes into the camp and he is hungry. He declares he is starving. We don't know if this is an exaggeration or if it was the truth. Either way it would have been proper and lawful for Jacob to give his brother some of the stew that he was making. After all, that is what hospitality is all about, as we saw when Abraham gusted angels unaware. Maybe it's different when the person is family, I didn't see anything about it in my studies, but I would doubt it.

Instead of just offering stew to Esau, Jacob instead decides to demand that Esau promise to forgo his birthright to Jacob. Now, maybe Esau thought it was all a joke. The text says that he despised his birthright, so maybe he didn't think much of having his father's possessions and wealth, after all, he preferred being out in the wild and hunting. Either way, he claims that his birthright won't help him later if he starves to death now, so he promises Jacob his birthright.

Jacob has schemed himself halfway to being the family leader, just as the Lord has said he would.

Here's the chicken or the egg question; did Jacob need to plot and scheme to get Esau's birthright, or could he have waited and found a different way to go about it? It was proclaimed by God that he would get it, so did God know that Jacob was so ambitious that he would do the things he did, and get the birthright and blessing, or did Jacob jump the gun and cause a fracture in the family because he was going to fulfill the prophesy because he had been told it would happen?

Being a good reformed theologian, I believe that God knew how Jacob was going to act and that is why God said what God did. At the same time if Jacob had waited, I am sure that God would have arranged for Jacob to become the head of the clan anyway.

God knew Jacob's personality. God knew that Jacob, much like Alexander Hamilton, was ambitious and was going to work non-stop to get what he wanted, and he did want to be in charge. Given the opportunity he was not going to throw away his shot.

I find the similarities between Jacob and Hamilton striking in so many ways. They were both underdogs. I will say that, at least based upon the play, Hamilton wasn't quite the schemer that Jacob was. Hamilton wasn't as willing to cheat and bend the rules, but both men were very intent on making something of themselves, creating a legacy. Their ambition was non-stop, and both men were willing to fight anyone, family, people in power, and even God to get to where they wanted to go.

Both men also had to face consequences for their actions as well. Hamilton was sent home from the Revolutionary Army because he was unwilling to back down, feeling his (and George Washington's honor) had been impinged upon at one point by General Lee. He bitterly fought over early policy issues with many of the founding father's including Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and John Adams. He had an affair which cost him his family for a while, and the only reason his wife forgave him was because they lost their first-born son in a duel. A son who felt he needed to duel to defend his father's honor.

Jacob schemed his way into getting both the birthright and the blessing from Isaac. He had to leave the camp because Esau threatened to kill him. Jacob worked for his uncle Laban for 14 years to earn his wives, Leah and Rachel, and then he schemed for six more to build up his own flocks at the expense of Laban. Between Leah, Rachel, and both of their maidservants Jacob had plenty of family issues as well.

I mentioned last week that God works in mysterious ways, I know it can also be said that God works through our decisions as well. God works through our ambition, through our lethargy, through everything that we do.

I think that what we can take away from this scripture is that even when we are fighting God's will, and not doing what God would want us to, despite having the consequences of what we have done, God will still be with us. God will still use us, God will still create opportunities for us to follow God's path. Jacob is not a perfect role model by any means, and let's face it, none of the founding fathers of our country are either, yet this story proves that despite our flaws and transgressions we have the potential to be used by God to do something great for the world. That is something to be happy about. Amen.