

Narrator: When Isaac was old and his eyes were dim so that he could not see, he called his elder son Esau and said to him,
Isaac: "My son";
Narrator: and he answered,
Esau: "Here I am."
Narrator: Isaac said,
Isaac: "See, I am old; I do not know the day of my death. Now then, take your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field, and hunt game for me. Then prepare for me savory food, such as I like, and bring it to me to eat, so that I may bless you before I die."
Narrator: Then Rebekah took the best garments of her elder son Esau, which were with her in the house, and put them on her younger son Jacob; and she put the skins of the kids on his hands and on the smooth part of his neck. Then she handed the savory food, and the bread that she had prepared, to her son Jacob.
So he went in to his father, and said,
Jacob: "My father";
Narrator: and he said,
Isaac: "Here I am; who are you, my son?"
Narrator: Jacob said to his father,
Jacob: "I am Esau your firstborn. I have done as you told me; now sit up and eat of my game, so that you may bless me."
Narrator: But Isaac said to his son,
Isaac: "How is it that you have found it so quickly, my son?"
Narrator: He answered,
Jacob: "Because the Lord your God granted me success."
Narrator: Then Isaac said to Jacob,
Isaac: "Come near, that I may feel you, my son, to know whether you are really my son Esau or not."
Narrator: So Jacob went up to his father Isaac, who felt him and said,
Isaac: "The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau."
Narrator: He did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau's hands; so he blessed him.
Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the Lord stood beside him[and said,
The Lord: "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go,

and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”

Narrator: Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said,
Jacob: “Surely the Lord is in this place— and I did not know it!”
Narrator: And he was afraid, and said,
Jacob: “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”

Narrator: So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first. Then Jacob made a vow, saying,
Jacob: “If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you.”

I arrived as your pastor in 2017, at a moment when it seemed the fabric of our nation was tearing. I’ve been with you through the prolonged pandemic during which we witnessed massive protests and even insurrection. But there’s something about this moment that feels even more dreadful— it feels like our nation is torn, we fear, irreparably. A rise in political violence, the silencing of speech, daily protests, military deployments into American cities. I suspect that many of you have friends, neighbors, or family members even, whom you do not understand and with whom you do not know how to speak. Some of you may even feel betrayed by friends, neighbors, or family members. The division runs deep.

I walked through the rather bleak and slowly unfolding circumstances of the past eight years because what I see in this story of Isaac and his twin sons is a slowly building story of estrangement. I see more than that, don’t worry, I’ll get there, but let’s start here. Remember, last time we saw Isaac he was bound on top of a pile of wood and his father stood above him with a knife. The conversation that Isaac and Abraham have on their way up the mountain is the last recorded conversation between them. Surely, though God preserved Isaac’s life, this was the beginning of a life-long estrangement between father and son. And now we see Isaac in his old age, his vision failing him. He believes himself to be on the doorstep of death. And he wishes to do his fatherly duty and pass on a blessing to his firstborn son. Now, perhaps

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you recall that Rebekah, Isaac's wife, birthed twins, Esau and Jacob. And yes, Esau was born first, but Jacob was born immediately thereafter, grasping at his brother's heel. Rebekah had a vision when she was pregnant in which she heard that the older would serve the younger. Esau is barely the older, but technically is. It seems that Esau was Isaac's most beloved, and Jacob was Rebekah's most beloved. In any case, Esau was Isaac's intended recipient of his innermost blessing. This is not just nice words passed along. It is something more significant— a passing on of life force and purpose, perhaps would be one way to say it.

Early in the story we don't hear names in the dialogue. Isaac calls out saying "My son," not "Esau" or even "Esau, my son," just "My son." And Esau replies, "Here I am." This is a Hebrew Word that shows up repeatedly in the Hebrew Bible- *Hineni*. This is the word Abraham and later prophets used to respond to God's call. It's also the word Abraham used to respond to Isaac's query on the way up the mountain. Two scholars I listened to this week suggested *Hineni* suggests total presence. I'm here for you. It is a word of connection. When Isaac calls, Esau is fully present to him. My Son, My Father. An intimate bond. And Isaac invites him to go hunting with bow and arrow, and bring back game with which to prepare a stew for him, and over this meal, Isaac will bless him. Esau immediately sets out on the hunt, faithfully responding to his father's invitation.

Rebekah is listening in and hatches a plan to be sure that it is Jacob and not Esau who gets the blessing. She makes a stew and disguises Jacob with Esau's clothes and the skins of young goats. We skipped over this time of preparation, but Jacob is skeptical that this ruse will work. His mother prepares him to deceive her husband, his father. When he approaches his father he says, "My father" and his father replies "*Hineni*- Here I am, but who are you, my Son?" So at the first, the intimate connection, my father, my son. But something is cracking. Isaac does not know with whom he is speaking. And then Jacob lies, lie upon lie, upon lie. Isaac knows something is not right. It takes time to hunt, skin, butcher, and cook; this has unfolded too quickly. He asks, again addressing Jacob as "my son." And Jacob's response to how did you find it so quickly is "Because the Lord YOUR God granted me success." Here in the words

chosen I start to hear the estrangement— not my God, your God. The narrator then says, “Then Isaac said to Jacob” not to his son, to Jacob. And though Isaac says “Come near me, my son, so I may feel you.” The narrator keeps using names rather than familial labels in every exchange thereafter— Isaac and Jacob, not father and son. And Isaac is troubled because he knows the voice belongs to Jacob, but the hairy hands feel like Esau. We don’t know why he overrode his misgivings and bestowed the blessing. It is possible he did not want to believe his family would deceive him. Who can blame him for that? But this act of deception tears this family apart. We see it slowly and subtly happening in the language used throughout the passage. But if we kept reading in the bit we skipped over, we’d see the agony and rage that Isaac and Esau experience when they discover what has been done. And we’d see Rebekah preparing Jacob to run away, back to her homeland, back to the land from which his grandfather Abraham had come, sending him back to find a wife and preserve his life.

Which is how Jacob ends up traveling, alone, in the second portion of our reading this morning. He is running away, fearing his brother’s rage and deeply estranged from his father. He is utterly alone and surely vulnerable. He gets as far as he can and then lies down with a stone for a pillow as the sun sets. A young man, asleep under the stars, so vulnerable.... I can’t believe he could sleep given the fear, the guilt, maybe the shame, the existential estrangement, and a stone for a pillow? But we know he slept because he dreamt. And it was in this dream that he met the God of his father and grandfather. But before I get into that. I want you to sit for a bit with the vulnerability and estrangement of Jacob. Do you feel his fear? His desperation? His loneliness? Does it feel familiar? Do you relate to being estranged from loved ones and feeling alone in the world? If not that, to the fear that comes from growing estrangement in our society? Do you relate to his peril? I do.

As is so often the case, God makes God’s presence known at rock bottom. It is at this moment of extremity that Jacob encounters the holy. He sees angels going up and down something like an escalator, and he feels and hears the voice of God at his side. That voice makes huge promises. Promises that echo those made to his grandfather—

promises to be his God, to grant him the land on which he is sleeping, to grant him countless offspring who will fill the land in all directions and who will bless all the families of the earth, promising to be with him wherever he goes and bring him back safely to this land. Though it would seem he is reversing the progress of his family by heading back to the land from which they have come, God promises to allow him to return to his native land and keep him alive and allow him to procreate. God's promise is spoken into this moment of desperation. And it is so huge it wakes Jacob up. And he declares this place the house of God, and sets up the rock on which his head rested to be the pillar of a house for God, and makes his own, conditional promise. IF God does all God has promised, and then some, THEN Jacob will worship and serve God, create a house for God, and give 10% of all he receives back to God. We see that Jacob's awe is mixed with fear and uncertainty. He is still vulnerable and estranged, but something has changed. He has met God and been bestowed with a life-changing blessing.

We might think God's choice of servants to bless is pretty poor. Abraham was willing to sacrifice two sons. Jacob is a deceiver. But the fact is, this is a pretty good sample of humanity- all have fallen short of the glory of God. Jesus says that he was sent for sinners, not for the righteous. And does it not seem, as we consider our national and global landscape, that sin, estrangement from God and neighbor, is rife in our world? Are we approaching rock bottom culturally? If so, perhaps we're ready to let God meet us where we are and help us, even save us. Perhaps we are ready to trust God to be with us and provide to us and guide us. Perhaps we are ready to respond in generous gratitude.

As Psalm 139 attests, there is nowhere we can run to escape the loving presence of God— even if we make our bed in the depths of hell, God is still there. Jesus said to his disciples before he ascended, “Remember, I am with you always to the end of the age.” If you are feeling lost and estranged and afraid, lie down or get on your knees. Take deep breaths and listen for the holy. We will be reminding you a lot in the next month that we are never alone. I hope you feel this and experience this and trust this and that this awareness is transformative.

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Resource in addition to scripture that influenced this sermon:
Amy Robertson and Bobby Williamson, "Episode 703: The Blessing of Jacob, Genesis 27:1-4, 15-23, 28:10-17" on their *Bible Worm Podcast*, <https://www.biblewormpodcast.com/e/episode-703-the-blessing-of-jacob-genesis-271-4-15-23-2810-17/>