A two session Bible study on the Jacob saga

Pr. Edward Dufresne

The poem that follows reflects ways in which the Jacob stories from the Hebrew Bible speak to the death of George Floyd, to BLM, to COVID-19. The four stories I reference are found between Genesis 25 and Genesis 33.
They are (1) Jacob's birth during which he wrestles with his twin, Esau; (2)Deceiving his blind father Isaac to steal the blessing which should have been Esau's;(3)Wrestling all night with the Angel of the Lord at the River Jabbok; And (4)his meeting with Esau the next day when he had every reason to think Esau would kill him and his family. Jacob stole the blessing, yet God confirmed his possession of it. And Jacob was blessed ─ but, at every turn in his life he was reminded of the terrible thing he had done. Like Jacob, however blessed we are as individuals or as a nation, we cannot escape the
consequences of the taking of this land, of the genocide, of slavery and of Jim Crow.

"And are we yet alive . . ." are the very first words from the Charles Wesley hymn. They have been sung at the memorial service for the year's dead at every Methodist conference for 240 years. They were especially poignant in the early years of the American Republic when Methodist clergy were circuit riders on the frontier. On average they died before they were 29. Thanks to COVID-19, when we meet again at Reversing Falls Sanctuary or with extended family or with any group of friends or colleagues, especially if we can meet without masks, we may well look around and ask, "And are we yet alive, and see each other's face?"

Is This What I Prayed For

Is this what I prayed for?* So prayed Rebekah
as two wrestled
in her womb.
There are two,
today,
wrestling in the womb
of this republic. Wrestling not with each other. but with us,
with all of us.

They are striving, one striving to breathe, the other striving
to take our breath away.
The angel of death,
the father of one.
The other has many fathers: Malcolm and Martin and
Medgar and so many,
so many more.

Treyvon and Michael and Eric and George and so many,
oh, ever so many
more.
All dying,
everyone,
like a motherless child."
We are blind,
like old Isaac,
we are blind.
We do not know where this is going.
We do not know where we are going.
As we took this land, so, Jacob took, took from his brother,
the blessing,
and all that his father possessed.
Is there a more plaintive, a more rending plea
in all the Hebrew scriptures, than the cry of Esau: Bless me,
even me also,
oh my father."
In the streets.
the children cry for justice. Rachel weeps for her children,
wails, for they are no more.

Fathers call out

with nothing, nothing left of their hopes but the bad taste
of broken dreams
in their mouths: Bless me,
even me also,
oh my father."
Is it possible,
in this time, now,
this time,
for old, blind Isaac to say,
now:
Yes!
Yes, my son, there is for you also, a blessing.
Limping we leave the Jabbok. singing with Charles Wesley as we leave the Jabbok, And are we yet alive and see each other s face?"
Masked we go forth hoping to meet,
to truly meet our brother, to see in his eyes a smile, to smile with our eyes.

How hard it is to see,
to see each other,
to see
over the masks
of hatred and of fear, over the long dark history of the lash and the noose we have so carefully, ever so carefully, masked.
Yet we go forth hoping
that as Jacob saw, we will see
in our brother s face. in the other s face, this time,
see,
now,
at last,

see
the face
of God.

Gary Vencill July 2, 2020
*Translation by David Rosenberg in The Book of J by Harold Bloom
Masks can conceal and masks can reveal.

SESSION I

1.) Genesis 25: 21-28 The Birth and Youth of Esau and Jacob

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?"z ["Is this what I prayed for?" Translation by David Rosenberg in The Book of J by Harold Bloom]

What happened to you when you felt disappointed in/betrayed by God? How did Rebekah handle it? How did you?

Have you ever read the Bible seeking guidance and inspiration and discovered what you *shouldn't* do?

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;
the 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. 26Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob.a Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.

27When 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.

Do you agree with Vencill when he writes:

There are two,
today,
wrestling in the womb
of this republic. Wrestling not with each other. but with us,
with all of us.
They are striving, one striving to breathe, the other striving
to take our breath away.
The angel of death,
the father of one.
The other has many fathers: Malcolm and Martin and Medgar and so many,
so many more.

Treyvon and Michael and Eric and George and so many,
oh, ever so many
more.
All dying,
everyone,
“like a motherless child.”

2.) Genesis 27: 1-29,30-38b Isaac blesses Jacob

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, “My son”; and he answered, “Here
I am.” 2He said, “See, I am old; I do not know the day of my death. 3Now
then, take your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field,
and hunt game for me. 4Then 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.”

5Now Rebekah was listening when Isaac spoke to his son Esau. So when
Esau went to the field to hunt for game and bring it, 6Rebekah said to her
son Jacob, “I heard your father say to your brother Esau, 7‘Bring me game,
and prepare for me savory food to eat, that I may bless you before the Lord
before I die. ’8Now therefore, my son, obey my word as I command you. 9Go
to the flock, and get me two choice kids, so that I may prepare from them
savory food for your father, such as he likes; 10and you shall take it to your
father to eat, so that he may bless you ko he dies.” 11But Jacob said to his
mother Rebekah, “Look, my brother Esau is a hairy man, and I am a man of
smooth skin. 12Perhaps my father will feel me, and I shall seem to be

mocking him, and bring a curse on myself and not a blessing.” 13His mother said to him, “Let your curse be on me, my son; only obey my word, and go, get them for me.” 14So he went and got them and brought them to his mother; and his mother prepared savory food, such as his father loved. 15Then 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; 16and she put the skins of the kids on his hands and on the smooth part of his neck. 17Then she handed the savory food, and the bread that she had prepared, to her son Jacob.

18So he went in to his father, and said, “My father”; and he said, “Here I am; who are you, my son?” 19Jacob said to his father, “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.” 20But Isaac said to his son, “How is it that you have found it so quickly, my son?” He answered, “Because the Lord your God granted me success.” 21Then Isaac said to Jacob, “Come near, that I may feel you, my son, to know whether you are really my son Esau or not.” 22So 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.” 23He did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau’s hands; so he blessed him. 24He said, “Are you really my son Esau?” He answered, “I am.” 25Then he said, “Bring it to me, that I may eat of my son’s game and bless you.” So he brought it to him, and he ate; and he brought him wine, and he drank. 26Then his father Isaac said to him, “Come near and kiss me, my son.” 27So he came near and kissed him; and he smelled the smell of his garments, and blessed him, and said,

“Ah, the smell of my son
is like the smell of a field that the Lord has blessed.
28
May God give you of the dew of heaven,
and of the fatness of the earth,
and plenty of grain and wine.
29
Let peoples serve you,
and nations bow down to you.
Be lord over your brothers,
and may your mother’s sons bow down to you.
Cursed be everyone who curses you,
and blessed be everyone who blesses you!”

We are blind,

like old Isaac,
we are blind.
We do not know where this is going.
We do not know where we are going.
As we took this land, so, Jacob took, took from his brother, the blessing,
and all that his father possessed.

"Life is unfair," said John F. Kennedy. What should we do when we discover that we, ourselves are contributors to the unfairness of life for others?

In these times, how do we help "repair the world," *tikkun olam,* in the words of Jewish rabbinical teaching?

3.) Genesis 27: 30-38b Esau's Lost Blessing

30As soon as Isaac had finished blessing Jacob, when Jacob had scarcely
gone out from the presence of his father Isaac, his brother Esau came in from
his hunting. 31He also prepared savory food, and brought it to his father. And
he said to his father, "Let my father sit up and eat of his son's game, so that
you may bless me." 32His father Isaac said to him, "Who are you?" He
answered, "I am your firstborn son, Esau." 33Then Isaac trembled violently,
and said, "Who was it then that hunted game and brought it to me, and I ate
it allj before you came, and I have blessed him?—yes, and blessed he shall
be!" 34When Esau heard his father's words, he cried out with an exceedingly
great and bitter cry, and said to his father, "Bless me, me also, father!" 35But
he said, "Your brother came deceitfully, and he has taken away your
blessing." 36Esau said, "Is he not rightly named Jacob?k For he has
supplanted me these two times. He took away my birthright; and look, now
he has taken away my blessing." Then he said, "Have you not reserved a
blessing for me?" 37Isaac answered Esau, "I have already made him your
lord, and I have given him all his brothers as servants, and with grain and
wine I have sustained him. What then can I do for you, my son?" 38 And Esau
lifted up his voice and wept.

Is there a more plaintive, a more rending plea
in all the Hebrew scriptures, than the cry of Esau: "Bless me,
even me also,
oh my father."

Have you ever felt that, for most, or even for all of your life you have been fighting a lost cause?

Have you found a way out of the situation?

SESSION II

4.) Genesis 27: 41-45 Jacob Escapes Esau's Fury

41Now Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him, and Esau said to himself, "The days of mourning for my father are approaching; then I will kill my brother Jacob." 42But the words of her elder son Esau were told to Rebekah; so she sent and called her younger son Jacob and said to him, "Your brother Esau is consoling himself by planning to kill you. 43Now therefore, my son, obey my voice; flee at once to my brother Laban in Haran, 44and stay with him a while, until your brother's fury turns away— 45until your brother's anger against you turns away, and he forgets what you have done to him; then I will send, and bring you back from there. Why should I lose both of you in one day?"

In all her scheming, Rebekah demonstrates remarkable insight. Have you ever run into a person like her?

Do you agree that the Jacob saga might be characterized as "the story of a highly dysfunctional family blessed by God." Why or why not?

5.) Genesis 32:3-10a, 11-21 Jacob Sends Presents to Appease Esau

3Jacob sent messengers before him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom, 4instructing them, "Thus you shall say to my lord Esau: Thus says your servant Jacob, 'I have lived with Laban as an alien, and stayed until now; 5and I have oxen, donkeys, flocks, male and female slaves; and I have sent to tell my lord, in order that I may find favor in your sight." '

6The messengers returned to Jacob, saying, "We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him."

9And Jacob said, “O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac,
O Lord who said to me, ‘Return to your country and to your kindred, and I
will do you good, ’10I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and
all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant . . . .

11Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau,
for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the
children. 12Yet you have said, ‘I will surely do you good, and make your
offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted because of their
number.” ’

13So he spent that night there, and from what he had with him he took a
present for his brother Esau, 14two hundred female goats and twenty male
goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, 15thirty milch camels and their
colts, forty cows and ten bulls, twenty female donkeys and ten male donkeys.
For he thought, “I may appease him with the present that goes ahead of me,
and afterwards I shall see his face; perhaps he will accept me.” 21So the
present passed on ahead of him; and he himself spent that night in the camp.

In a twist on a strikingly contemporary image, the mask, Vencill writes:

How hard it is to see,
to see each other,
to see
over the masks
of hatred and of fear, over the long dark history of the lash and the noose we have so carefully, ever so carefully, masked.

What illusions need to be unmasked in our society and world today?

What illusion have you’ve personally held in your life that you have struggled to unmask?

9.) Genesis 33:2-11 Esau forgives Jacob

Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming, and four hundred men with
him. 3He himself went on ahead of them, bowing himself to the ground
seven times, until he came near his brother.

4But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. Esau said, “I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself.” 10Jacob said, “No, please; if I find favor with you, then accept my present from my hand; for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God—since you have received me with such favor. 11Please accept my gift that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have everything I want.” So he urged him, and he took it.

Yet we go forth hoping
that as Jacob saw, we will see
in our brother’s face. in the other’s face, this time,
see,
now,
at last,
see
the face
of God.

What do you think of the ending of the biblical story?

Does it remind you of the ending of a famous parable that Jesus told? (Luke 15: 11-32)

What do you think of the point that Genesis makes that, in the end, it is Esau, the victim of an injustice, who models the mercy and forgiveness of God, while Jacob, the great and favored reat patriarch of Israel, plays the role that Jesus later would assign in his parable to the ‘prodigal son’?

What do you think of the poem’s conclusion:

Yet we go forth hoping
that as Jacob saw, we will see
in our brother s face. in the other s face, this time,
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