Jacob, Esau and Us

25

20Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah. 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 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, (that is, He takes by the heel or He supplants).

27When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. 28Now, Isaac loved Esau, (but Rebekah loved Jacob.)

27

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, "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,"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 before he dies." 18So [Jacob] went in to his father, and said, "My 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." 26Then his father Isaac said to him, "Come near and kiss me, my son." 27So he came near and kissed him; and he . . . blessed him.

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." 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 before you came, and I have blessed him?, "Your brother came deceitfully, and he has taken away your blessing." 36Esau said, "Is he not rightly named Jacob? For he has supplanted me."

41Now Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him, and Esau said to himself, "I will kill my brother Jacob."

— Genesis 25 and 27, *passim*

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

There are moments when an ancient, inspired story in scripture reveals itself as a provocative moral parallel to the story of our own times. This was made clear to me after reading a poem written recently by writer, pastor and friend, Gary Vencill. He takes the story of Jacob and Esau in the Book of Genesis and shows how it speaks to what is playing out in this moment in American life.

You recall the dramatic story of Jacob and Esau, twin brothers and fierce rivals who struggled with one another, even while in the womb of their mother, Rebekah. In the middle of that tumultuous and surely quite painful pregnancy, Rebekah would cry to God with all the defiant sarcasm so characteristic of Jewish humor, [A child, yes, God, but this,] "Is this what I prayed to you for?!"

Esau was born first, an accident of biology, but a fact of history with momentous consequences. As the oldest son, even if only by a few seconds, he became the` rightful heir to the entirety of his family's vast legacy according to the ancient laws of primogeniture.

Recall how the story progresses: the twins' father Isaac, old, blind and dying, called his eldest son Esau, not Jacob, but Esau, to his bedside to give him the blessing and the family inheritance.

Remember how the twin boys' mother Rebecca overheard what Isaac said to Esau and schemed to trick her husband into giving the blessing to Jacob, her favorite son. She got Jacob to lie to his father and steal Esau's heritage for himself.

The saga of a stolen birthright — back then, and in these days continues. Since the birth of our country, black folks and native peoples have been robbed of every human being's rightful inheritance, the birthright of freedom from fear. In our society, for generations, some of us have been treated differently from the rest of us, and it is unfair, unloving, unjust. Just as Jacob cheated Esau of what was most precious to him, since well before our birth as a nation, in these lands, ingrained racism has cheated people of color out of their rightful heritage of equal opportunity and justice for all.

Now we find ourselves in a time of strife as a nation, a time of reckoning. And what is almost miraculous is that these perilous times have also become a signature moment when we've begun to face up to our tragic family history as a people.

We find ourselves facing a moment for national repentance, a time to change our minds and our hearts, an occasion to admit our complicity and to do something, many things, about what has gone on for far too long: the soul-destroying societal battle between "one striving to breathe, the other striving to take breath away," as the poet put it.

Hear me well: this is not a call from the pulpit to promote "partisan politics." It is a summons in the name of our shared faith to embrace anew our "core Christian values." In the words of our baptismal promises we are, each and all of us, committed to a society-transforming perspective. For, by our baptism we have pledged to:

- "persevere in resisting evil,
- seek and serve Christ in all persons,
- strive for justice and peace among all people,
- respect the dignity of every human being."

(From the service of Holy Baptism, Book of Common Prayer, pp.304-305)

We must no longer act, in the poet's words, as if we were "blind, like old Isaac," while "In the streets, [our] children cry for justice." The question is, how will each and every one of us, no matter what our politics may be, make it clear that every life of every human being matters — matters very deeply to God and to God's people?

We know how difficult it will be for our nation to arrive at that new and godly place, that "beloved community," as Martin Luther King described it. We have turned our backs on one another for so long, we have avoided eye contact for generations, neglected to see the dignity in every human being that we seem to have gone blind to the brutality and to the injustice of it all.

The poet reminds us:

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.

But hear this Good News: history has always had its transforming moments. Often they come, not in tranquil times but in moments like these, times of conflict and struggle when it looks like things are falling apart in the world. These are times of profoundly meaningful, grace-filled moments when reconciliation, healing and renewal take hold.

And so the poet asks, " Is it possible:"

<u>in this time, now,</u>
<u>this</u> time,
for old, blind Isaac to say,
<u>now</u>:
Yes!
Yes, my son, there is <u>for you also</u>, a blessing.

It is possible that things may be changing in our country right now, that this moment may be God's sacred transforming time? Scripture bathes us in hope. Recall how Esau first reacted to Jacob's selfish behavior:

"Now Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him, and Esau said, "I will kill my brother Jacob." — Genesis 27:41

Five chapters later in the Genesis story after many years had elapsed according to the saga, Jacob and Esau finally meet again and a miracle of reconciliation takes place:

"Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming, and four hundred men with him. He himself went on ahead of them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother. But 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." —Genesis 32: 2-4,10

The winds of renewal are blowing all around us. That biblical-like miracle of reconciliation, that recognition of mutual respect, that sacred honoring of the dignity of all can be ours today. But we must work hard for it, we must pray constantly for it, we must recommit ourselves every day to it.

People of God, this is the holy work we must commit to, for our nation, for our times, for our common life. And so, in the poet's words,

. . . 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.

Amen.

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