

Stairway to Heaven
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
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Genesis 27:1-4, 15-23; 28:10-17

Rebekah got suspicious when she saw Isaac called Esau into his tent last week. She had the feeling they were up to something... a mother always knows! Once Esau was inside, she stood oh-so-quietly at the entrance, barely even breathing, straining her ears to hear what the old man was saying to his favorite son.

The part of their secret conversation that really made her cringe was when Isaac whispered to Esau: *"I can bless you before I die."*

A father's blessing on his sons was never done in private, and certainly not in secret! No, a man blessed his sons with the entire household present, so that everyone would hear what the future would hold. It was a public, legal, binding moment.

There was only one reason Isaac would try to bless Esau in secret - he was going to try to find a way to get around the promises God had already made to their youngest son, Jacob.

The couple had been married for twenty years before they conceived. Isaac prayed every day for a son. He kept telling Rebekah to have faith—it was the same way with his parents. Abraham was 100 when Isaac was born. And his mother was 90, if you can believe it!

When Rebekah finally became pregnant, it felt like there was a battle royale going on in her belly. So she prayed about it. And that's when God told her she had not one, but two sons in her womb.

"Two nations are in your womb; two different peoples will emerge from your body. One people will be stronger than the other; the older will serve the younger." (Gen. 25.23)

The boys, Esau and Jacob, were twins – but just about as different as two young men could be. Esau, rough, and hairy – a man's man... and then there was Jacob, soft-spoken, domesticated, intelligent.

She never did understand why it had to be this way; one son was all she really needed. In her opinion, Esau always complicated everything. He was such a hot mess, marrying those two rowdy Canaanite women, throwing wild parties after his hunts, bringing disgrace on the family.

But Isaac loved Esau, no matter how reckless he was. And now the old man was going to try and give the blessing God had promised to Jacob to him! No way was Rebekah going to let that happen.

Panicked, she went to find her younger son. She took Esau's clothes and put them on Jacob. She found some animal skin and string and wrapped it around his spindly arms. Then, she took the delicious food and bread she had made and put it in her favorite son's hands. "*There, we're all set!*" she thought.

When the boys were born, Jacob came out holding Esau's heel. It was almost like he knew, even as a baby, that he was supposed to be first. Jacob was the one God chose. Now it was time to pull Esau's hairy legs out from under him, but for real this time.

Jacob hadn't really wanted to trick his old, broken-down, blind father into blessing him. Not because he had any moral reservations about it, he was mostly just afraid of getting caught! When his mother Rebekah presented him with the idea, he protested. But she insisted, saying "*Your curse will be on me, my son. Just listen to me.*" So he did what his mother told him to do.

Jacob knew his father Isaac was suspicious. He almost panicked when his dad started sniffing the air around him, feeling his arms with the goat skin tied around them. He really thought he'd blown it when he heard the old man mutter "*The voice is Jacob's, but the arms are Esau's*".

His father couldn't tell the difference between the goat Rebecca had prepared and the wild venison Esau usually brought him. Maybe his taste buds were tired, too. *I'm really going to pull this off!* Jacob thought.

After Isaac had gobbled up his dinner with a nice glass of Pinot Noir, he blessed Jacob. Dad thought he was blessing his favorite, but now ... the blessing had been spoken over Jacob. Which meant it had to be honored, it couldn't be taken back. His mother was right, after all!

As Jacob left Isaac's tent, he saw Esau off in the distance, returning from a successful hunt. That's when it occurred to him: *When Esau finds out what I did, he's going to kill me.*

Jacob went back to his tent, took off his disguise and started packing.

Esau proudly brought the dinner he'd killed and cooked into his father's tent. *"Let my father sit up and eat from his son's game"*, he said as he walked in, *"so that you may bless me."* A confused Isaac asked: *"Who are you?"*

That shook him up. Isaac was old, and while his body may be giving up, Esau knew his mind was still as sharp as a tack. Isaac's voice trembled as he told Esau that someone else had already brought him dinner, and he'd already blessed whoever it was.

Esau began to wail and cry and beg: *"Bless me! Me too, father!"* And that's when blind old Isaac opened his eyes and saw everything clearly, for once in his life. *"Your brother Jacob has already come and taken it"*, he quietly said.

Deep down, Esau knew his father couldn't un-bless Jacob. It took the old man a while to think of what to say next. With a cracking voice, he gave the only words of blessing left to give:

"Now, you will make a home far away from the olive groves of the earth, far away from the showers of the sky above. You will live by your sword; you will serve your brother. But when you grow restless, you will tear away his harness from your neck." (Gen. 27.39-40)

Esau stomped out of his father's tent, his face burning with tears of rage. He marched right over to his mother's tent and shouted: *"I know you had something to do with this! You always loved Jacob more! Well, just you wait. When dad dies, I'm going to kill that thieving son of yours! Then I'll get it all. He can't have my birthright if he's dead! And I won't have to serve him if I kill him!"*

Rebekah knew he meant it, too. As soon as Esau crawled into his tent to sulk, she snuck into Jacob's tent, where he was already packing. She told him to go stay with her family in another town until his brother cooled off.

She began to feel a little guilty for putting poor old Isaac through all this, so she went to his tent and told him she was sending their youngest back to her hometown to find a wife. *"I really can't stand to see another one of our sons marry a Canaanite!"*

But they both knew why Jacob was really going away.

I like to imagine that the sun was setting as **God** watched a man making his way through a lonely stretch of wilderness, looking sunburnt and a little lost. The man stopped, put a rock under his head for a pillow, and went to sleep.

God sighed and thought: *They're all kind of like that, really - scheming, fighting, lying, hurting each other. Getting caught. Running away. Trying to grab and snatch and steal what I was always just going to give them...*

Jacob was so very much like Adam and Eve. So tragic. So pathetic. Their children were no better. Even in the womb, Esau resembled Cain. Reactive, not proactive. Prone to a bad temper. Jealous, couldn't stand to see anybody else in the spotlight.

At least Rebekah was wise enough to send Jacob away before Esau killed him, like Cain killed his brother Abel. But Jacob ... Jacob wasn't like Abel, innocent and trusting. Jacob was the kind of man who'd do what he needed to do to survive.

God could see both their futures—Esau's and Jacob's—it was written in their DNA. God would take good care of Esau, so when Jacob finally came back, Esau would forgive his brother and embrace him at the Jabbock River. Despite the heavy weight of jealousy, hate and disappointment he had been carrying on his shoulders all these years.

Because Jacob would need to know what forgiveness felt like.

God had called Jacob's grandfather Abraham out from the rubble of a place called Babel, where a generation of humans had tried to build a stairway to heaven. Now here was the real thing. Dreaming, Jacob saw a sliver of God's glory, standing on top of the staircase. And God promised to protect Jacob on every step of his journey.

When the sun has set, and darkness takes over, there is a moment when you realize you can no longer go on and the only thing to do is to stop and lie down. The darkness teaches us that we are no longer in control of our own destiny.

The ladder Jacob saw was not in a physical location. It was a dream, revealing the connection between heaven and earth, divinity and humanity, the uncreated and the created. And it appears at every moment in our life, even when we are on the run.

The ladder is revealed in the darkest places of life where the sun has set, in the hard stony settings, in the moments of wilderness we never would have expected. The miracle is not that God shows up and breaks into our lives, because that is always happening. The miracle is, we recognize it.

What are you searching for? What are you running from? Let the sun set and do not be afraid. No matter where you go, or the circumstances you face, the ladder of connection goes with you. It is a part of you. Wake up and see that the dream has come true. *"Surely the Lord is in this place and now I know it."* Amen.