

July 27, 2014

TEXT: Genesis 27:30-40

TITLE: A Month with Isaac: One More Blessing

The best-known patriarchs of the Old Testament were leaders of three, successive generations: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We've spent this month remembering the middle one, Isaac. Miraculously born to Abraham and Sarah, almost sacrificed on Mount Moriah, prone to the failings that marked his entire family, we now encounter Isaac on his death-bed. Blind and bed-ridden, he wants to offer his final blessing to his eldest son, Esau. But family histories can be contentious and complicated; and on that day long ago, things didn't go as planned. Isaac was tricked; Jacob stole his father's words; and Esau was left standing there, weeping and asking, "Have you only one blessing, father?"

I want you to consider where you are standing, figuratively speaking, as you hear this story about Isaac. More than likely, you are standing in a place where you believe that life is basically good and fair – that the righteous prosper and the wicked are punished, that right and wrong are clear choices with one to be followed and the other to be avoided. For this morning, though, I need you to move to a different place, figuratively. I want you to begin with the idea that life is not fair. We know there is truth in this statement, but it still sounds harsh to our ears. We like the first story better: that life is good and fair, the good prosper, the wicked are punished, and God is Lord over it all.

But the second story is actually truer: life is not fair. Tragedies happen. Idiots shoot planes out of the sky. Companies profit from weapons of war. Life is not fair and we need to be reminded of that fact in church because it reminds us that life is not God. Life and God are not synonymous. We do not believe in pantheism that says God is simply the sum total of all that is. Life is life. It contains natural laws, free choices and bad decisions, births and deaths, beauty and tragedy. Now beside and within and over this created world is God, the Creator; but the two are distinct. Life is often unfair; the God of life weeps over that unfairness and acts to bring hope and healing into a broken world.

So we stand here for a moment, remembering that life isn't fair. One of the last so-called robber barons was J. Paul Getty, a billionaire who made great wealth on oil speculations in Saudi Arabia. Shortly before his death in 1976, Getty wrote in his diary that he had no guilty complex about money although he had inherited much and greatly increased it over the years. As he cynically put it, "I know that if all the money and property in the world were equally divided to every adult at 3 o'clock this afternoon, by 3:30 there would be wide differences."¹ Getty's philosophy seems to be built around the idea that life isn't fair; some prosper, some don't – that's just the way it is. And so in a real way, we are to stand beside cynical Getty as we think about Isaac, Esau the tricked and Jacob the trickster.

In reality, some version of Isaac's deathbed scene is played out over and over again in families today. Every one of us knows a family where there was tension over inheritance issues. Settling up estates after a death in the family almost always involves some degree of coveting, calculating and hurt feelings – am I right? Isaac wants to give his blessing to his eldest son; Rebekah wants it to go to Judah, the younger son. Deception and lies ensue, ending with tears and hurt feelings. We've all seen this or lived through this before. The Genesis story does not pass judgment on the morality of Esau and Jacob; it basically just tells us the story as it happened.

But standing over here in the "life is unfair" category, we know that being powerful is not the same as being good – and sometimes in this world the rules about right and wrong are written by those in power to the disadvantage of those on the margins: Segregation laws and "red lining" in real estate practices were written by a dominant European class to the detriment of African Americans and other discriminated-against groups. "Glass ceilings" and wage disparities still benefit men over women. Educational opportunities and medical care are shaped today more by your ability to pay for it than your fundamental right to receive it. When life is unfair, sometimes the powerless have to rely on tricks and deception to make things fair.

God, who is not the same as life, moves through life surprising us and inverting the established order of things. An old prophecy had said about Esau and Jacob that the elder would serve the younger. That came true. Now think about Jesus and his disciples. None of them possessed power or authority by the world's standards. Jesus was not a beloved "elder son" of the temple, a well-educated Pharisee or respected scribe. He was a 12-year old boy who taught the teachers; he was an outsider from Galilee, a carpenter from Nazareth. And his followers were just as non-descript and powerless: fishermen, tax collectors, women from small villages. This story from Isaac's deathbed challenges us to ask "Who has written the rules of life?" "Who is the underdog forced to break rules in order to get what's fair in an unfair world?" and "Where are we in this larger family drama?" Most of us benefit from the way the rules of life have been written. Sometimes people have to act subversively to overturn the injustice and false powers around us. God in Christ wants us to daily consider these things with hearts and minds of faith so that an unfair world might become more fair.

Now let's talk briefly about blessings. As modern folk, we've diminished blessings to being short prayers spoken before meals. Some extra guests for dinner caused a mother to feel frazzled when everyone sat down to eat, so she asked her 6-year old daughter to say the blessing. "But I don't know what to say," replied the little girl. "Just say what you hear Mommy say." "OK – Dear Lord, why on earth did I invite all these people to dinner? Amen."

Blessings in Isaac's time were real words from the heart – the deepest wishes of a father being passed on to his children. It was almost a sacred act, a ritual in

which the baton of authority was handed down to the next generation. Blind Isaac, having tasted the meal brought to him, felt the hair on his son's hands and smelt his garments, believed that Esau knelt before him, and so he used those same senses to bless his son. He said, *"Ah, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field that the Lord has blessed. May God give you the dew of heaven and the fatness of the earth, plenty of grain and wine.* He offered a blessing of prosperity, followed by a blessing of power: *People and nations will serve you and you will be lord over your brothers.* And that blessing was fulfilled – Jacob ruled over Esau, Israel ruled over Edom, the younger prospered over the elder.

When Esau entered Isaac's bedchamber and asked for his father's blessing, the unfairness of life became apparent to both men. Isaac knew he had been tricked and blessed the wrong son. Esau wept and pleaded with his father, *"Have you not reserved a blessing for me? Do you have one more blessing, father, for me?"*

Tragedy happens: Hardship, prejudice, bias, unfairness of life. You fill in the blanks about what this has looked like in your own life – you offer the stories from the news that fit this category of tragic pain. At times the order of life we trusted instead of God falls apart around us. But we don't want to become bitter and cynical or live filled with despair in a world without God. So through our tears we cry out, "Dear Lord, in this hard time, have you one more blessing reserved for me?"

For Esau, the best that Isaac could offer him was a small word of hope – that in time Esau and his descendants would be free of Jacob's yoke. For us today, whether we stand within a story that professes that life is fair and good is always rewarded, or stand within a story that says life is not fair and injustice is rewarded more than righteousness, there is a bigger story which we are a part of – and there is another blessing that is spoken to us by God. For in the fullness of time, the word of God took on flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. That word, Jesus Christ, spoke a blessing to you saying, "Come to me, all you that are heavy laden and I will give you rest." That blessing was spoken over baptism waters and says to all of us, "You are my beloved child, with whom I am well-pleased." That blessing came wrapped in the promise of Christ who said, "I will not leave you orphaned; in a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; and because I live, you also will live" (John 14:18-19). And that blessing was spoken by the resurrected Lord, who promised this: "Remember I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Mt 28:20).

Family history can be complicated and contentious. Life is often indifferent, if not unfair. Yet to us has been spoken a blessing – one more blessing when we had given up all hope. Trust in the One who has blessed you and trust in the blessing of Christ. Then go forth to be a blessing, serving the Creator God whose mercy and love is greater than all life.

¹ "Self-Portrait of the Oilman as Collector," Hugh Eakin, *New York Times*, 12/26/2010, p. AR 24.