

Genesis 28:10-19a

The name “Jacob” means “heel-puller” or “supplanter.” He is a younger twin, born grasping the heel of his brother Esau, as if even at birth he were trying to push Esau aside and get there first. Jacob is a trickster and a manipulator all his life. But in this early part of his story, we see that in a sense he was brought up to be that way.

What has just come before is the survey of the brothers’ boyhood, in which Jacob tricks Esau out of his birthright for a bowl of lentils. The boys are established as opposites—Esau is impulsive and outdoorsy, Jacob is conniving and not very athletic. Their father Isaac is now very old, blind, and desirous of giving Esau the blessing of the oldest son. It’s not a great system; as we saw in the story of Judah and Tamar, when only the oldest son inherits, there are cascading consequences that can be quite cruel. But there it is, there’s one blessing for one oldest son, and somebody is going to lose out.

Yes, Jacob is a trickster. But it’s his mother, Rebekah, who really sets up this trick of stealing Esau’s birthright. She has more agency than any of the men in the story. She is the one who overhears Isaac’s intent to bless Esau, and *she* sets up Jacob to receive the blessing by tricking his father into thinking the hairier son is present. Rebekah is the one who learns that Esau now plans to kill Jacob, and so *she* tells Jacob to flee, go to her brother Laban, and find a wife and stay there. Rebekah says she will wait for Jacob to return. And when Jacob gets to his uncle’s territory and is met by his cousin Rachel, he identifies himself as Rebekah’s son, not mentioning his father Isaac at all. Rebekah, Jacob’s mother, has set this ball rolling; it’s because of her that he is now far from home, searching for his uncle’s land, and sleeping on the ground with a stone for a headrest.

We could profitably discuss this family's dynamics, because they're complicated. But it's safe to say that Rebekah meant well. She thought it would be best for Jacob to receive Isaac's blessing. But she also set in motion a blood grudge and a long alienation in the family. She reinforced Jacob's tendency toward duplicity and separated him from his closest kin, his twin brother. This is a terrifying text for the parents of adult children. More on this later.

At this moment in the story, Jacob is at his most vulnerable. He is in a new place, and it's not a real place, but a stop along a journey of indeterminate length. He is exiled from his family. He has no wife and no property. AND he's not even conscious when he sees this stairway to heaven. He's asleep. He's certainly not thinking about God, and there's no indication that he's praying or has any sense that there's a larger reality than the one he's dealing with. In that helplessness, he dreams that there is a ladder between heaven and earth, and angels are climbing down and up on the ladder. There is traffic between heaven and earth; they are not disconnected.

God speaks to Jacob and promises him land and family and God's own presence with him—a direct promise to Jacob, not the one made to his grandfather Abraham. When Jacob awakens from his dream, he realizes that 'the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!' ¹⁷And he was afraid, and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.'

I find myself identifying with Rebekah in this story, which is not very comfortable. As parents of adult children, we desperately want the best for our children *and* we don't necessarily have the wisdom or the efficacy to make that happen. My friends last week were telling me about their son, who is studying abroad or perhaps not studying but definitely

abroad, and there will be a cascade of consequences having to do with visas, which are a notoriously non-negotiable thing, and they have many ideas for him but also the wisdom to know that the only idea that will work for him is the one he comes up with himself. So difficult.

We watch our older adult children look for jobs, and agonize on their behalf about how inhospitable the world is, how desperate and demoralized they become as they soldier on looking for their place. Or we see them having children, which is a joy and a blessing but also SO hard and risky, and involves a thousand decisions every day. When I had children I did not even think about whether to treat them as gendered. It's so complicated. All we can hope for is that our advice is better than Rebekah's.

But then on the other hand, we all knew there would be crises. It's part of the deal. This dream comes to Jacob at a time of crisis. Earlier, when he was being so smart and conniving, he might not have been so open to God's message. We all may need to have our certainties shaken up in order that we can become open to what God has to say to us. And whatever God may have specifically to say to us, a valuable part of the message is always that we are not in charge, and that there is a much bigger reality of which we are unaware or dimly aware. It makes perfect sense that while Jacob was doing all his striving and calculating and acting, he never heard the voice of God—but when he was asleep and vulnerable God found *him*.

The vision of the stairway to heaven, the angels ascending and descending drive home this point: that God is there, present, and standing with Jacob. God is not just off in some cut-off, distant realm but present in the world, active, as signified by the rapid movements of God's agents coming and going. . Earth is not left to its own resources and heaven is not a remote self-contained realm for the gods. Heaven has to do with earth. And earth may finally count on

the resources of heaven. (Walter Brueggeman, [*Interpretation: Genesis*](#), p. 243)

We never find out how Esau made his way through adulthood, bereft of his birthright. It seems likely to me, consistent with this story, that he also came to a point when he had nothing, no good ideas, no promises on the horizon, and maybe God found him in a dream too. One way or another, Esau not only survived into adulthood but, according to Genesis, commanded a very respectable army, which accompanied him to meet Jacob upon Jacob's return many years later. But Jacob was contrite and had brought some gifts, and Esau had experienced the grace of God despite his original loss, and the brothers embraced and were reconciled. Rebekah was long gone, buried with her husband Isaac, but she would have rejoiced to know that where the goodness of her advice came to an end, the infinite goodness of God picked up. The ladder to heaven is still there for each of us, carrying God's messages as we are able to hear them.

Let us pray:

Thank you for Your faithful presence among us,

even when we are not fully aware of it.

Continue to reveal Yourself to us.

Open our eyes to see You here among us;

open our ears to hear Your Word.

For surely, You are with us in this place.