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St. Peter's, Perth Amboy
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Proper 10 A – **God's Unsettling Pattern**
Genesis 25:19-34

Stories are important to our lives as people, as human beings. We tell stories to each other over the dinner table. We tell family history and folklore to our children and grandchildren to pass them on. In case you haven't heard, there was a great story written this week. Many of you may remember Freddie Paiva, who spent time at St. Peter's discerning his call to ordained ministry. He married his now wife, Jessica, on Friday. And one day, God willing, they will be able to tell their children's children stories of their wedding, streamed live over the internet, during a global pandemic, during a time of civil unrest, during a tropical storm! I dare say not many people will be able to tell a better story!

Our life at church is full of stories. We hear the story of salvation history whenever we celebrate the Eucharist in full. We pray it will be one day soon that we can tell that story again and receive the gifts of God. We hear stories every week in our lectionary cycle of scripture readings as well. This morning, we are treated to one of these stories of the founding fathers and mothers of our faith, and not just OUR faith, but the faith of Jews and Muslims too. We are *all* children of Abraham.

The story of Jacob and Esau should be a familiar one to anyone who grew up in Sunday School or Vacation Bible School and learned the stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs of our faith, the characters in the story of the people of God. It is OUR story. I love the vivid details of this story, details that would capture the imagination of any child. The babies wrestling in the womb. Jacob grabbing his brother's heel as they are born. Esau was ruddy and HAIRY. The smell of stew and the bubbling pot of "red stuff." The curious details of birthrights and blessings. Isaac's blindness, Esau's hunger, Jacob's craftiness and all the while Rebekah pulling strings behind the scenes. This family drama is powerful storytelling. It may not be as violent as Game of Thrones, but it sure has plenty of scheming and intrigue.

This particular story is pivotal in the unfolding of the story of the People of Israel. Let's look back briefly at the story so far. If you recall, Isaac is the *only* son of Abraham and Sarah. God promised Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation, numbering more people than the stars in the sky. If God's promise is going to be fulfilled – it *has* to happen through Isaac. Just like Sarah, Isaac's mother, Rebekah is at first barren. She can have no children. How will God keep the promise this time? Will there be another miracle? We don't have to wait in suspense for long. Soon Rebekah gives birth to two sons. They may be twins, but they SURE aren't identical.

Isaac has grown old. His sight is dim. His own story is almost done. Isaac's last part to play in this story is to pass on his blessing. In the ancient world this was basically a "done deal." At his father's death, the eldest son would receive the birthright (all his father's property), and the eldest son would *also* inherit God's blessing passed down from father to son. Abraham had blessed Isaac in this way, and we have no reason to expect anything unexpected to happen. Esau will inherit the birthright and the blessing from Isaac. But something unexpected does happen! God gives this prophecy to Rebekah: "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."

These are words of strife, of power and control, and of ultimate destiny. But it must have been perplexing to Rebekah. Esau was his father's favorite. He loved to hunt. He was manly. How will Jacob, the younger son, triumph over Esau. Jacob was not a powerful hunter. He was his mother's favorite.

The name Jacob, or Yakob, name means "supplanter" or "usurper". It may actually come from a wrestling term, picture a wrestler grabbing at his opponent's heel to get his feet out from under him. Jacob was already planning his move as he emerged from the womb, grabbing Esau's right heel. He sure is crafty, from the start! If you read further in Jacob's story,

you'll find wrestling will play an important part yet again.

But back to today's reading, I love this scene when turns tables on Esau. "Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished." Jacob saw his opportunity. Esau was hungry. Esau was vulnerable. And what's most important, Esau wasn't as smart as Jacob. He was driven by his appetites. He thought with his stomach. He was so hungry, he wasn't thinking clearly. Here's their back and forth:

Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!" Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

Jacob has begun to make his move, aided and abetted by Rebekah. Surely God's promise was still ringing in her ears. Was she trying to help make it happen? Our reading today does not include the second act to this drama, one of my favorite stories in scripture.

This time Isaac is hungry. He asks Esau, his favorite, to catch some game and make him his last meal. He is

preparing to give Esau his deathbed blessing. Rebekah overhears this and sees her chance. She makes Isaac's favorite stew. Then Rebekah disguises Jacob in Esau's clothes and covers his smooth arms with animal pelts. If Isaac feels Jacob's arms, he'll think he is Esau. Isaac is tricked, and he blesses Jacob instead of Esau, leaving the older brother with *nothing*.

What kind of God is this? A God who chooses the unlikely figure and raises him up to prominence.

God's ways are often mysterious and surprising from our perspective. I can assure of this – it won't be the *last* time. God blessed Abel instead of Cain. God favored Jacob over Esau, Rachel over Leah, Joseph over his brothers, a young girl named Mary. These choices, as mysterious as they may seem, should tell us something about the character of God. God often chooses the unlikely. Favors the one with no power. Turning the tables. This seems to be God's way.

In the end, it seems that being used by God is not about power. God is no respecter of privilege or status. God's purpose is justice, and God's pattern is mercy. Beware of those who claim to have it all figured out – who's in and who's out. Those who think they have power and privilege may discover that God doesn't always agree with them. The time will come when the tables are turned.

We shouldn't find stories like that of Esau and Jacob sweet, but unsettling. To the establishment it should say don't get comfortable, and don't expect God to leave things right side up. To the marginalized and forgotten, this story should say, your lives matter. God sees and God makes unexpected choices.

We need to recite the Magnificat more, Mary's hymn of praise: God has cast down the mighty from their thrones and lifted up the lowly!

God's ways are not always *our* ways. God's choices are not always our first picks. We must trust God's character – yes, the character of a God who loves us and provides for us, so that to the world *we* can truly be a blessing, not a curse, bringing peace, not war, seeking justice, not discrimination.

We see a hint of this in the Gospel this morning as well. The word of God is scattered like seed. The sower scatters it everywhere, not carefully but wildly. The sower cannot know the fate of each seed. That part is above the sower's pay grade. The fate of the seed is known to God, and God's plans often surprise us. I don't know about you, but God's plans, even when we are surprised, are the best plans. The stories of our faith tell us this. And many of us, when we have the chance to tell our personal will agree: trust God. God's plan is the best.

Amen.