

**The God of Jacob**

"I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac...I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."                      Genesis 28:13-15

It is hard to listen to the story of Jacob without being distracted by our own problems. We interrupt the story with our own version of personal issues from sibling rivalry and marital conflict to infertility and job success. We are tempted to use the strange world of Jacob with its birthrights, paternal blessings, and extraordinary encounters with God, to introduce our modern world of self esteem issues. I imagine that to some extent we all read the Bible from a personal interest point of view and freely associate the biblical story with our story. But the story of Jacob was not told to gain our interest because it can be so relevant to our problems. God's revelation does not bow before what we decide is relevant. In fact the whole point of the biblical story is to impress upon us what God deems relevant.

If we want to learn from the story of Jacob we must forget about our own story and resist the temptation to use Jacob as a starting point for our own tale. Have you ever tried to talk to someone who doesn't hear a word you're saying because they're so busy thinking about what they want to say next? Of course, we've all been on both sides of that issue. Forgetting about ourselves long enough to listen to our friend is the only way we will ever know our friend, and denying ourselves in order to listen to God's Word is the only way we will ever know God and discover our true selves.

The surprising truth about the God of Jacob is his divine humility that refuses to give up on the promise and the blessing, even though all he has to work with is a fast-talking, shifty-eyed, self-serving person like Jacob. By the third generation, the faith of Abraham can hardly be recognized in his grandson, Jacob. Even though Isaac experienced the passion of his father's faith first hand on Mount Moriah, and benefited from his father's love and provision in the selection of his

wife Rebekah, Isaac's spirituality proved anemic when it came to parenting. He had obeyed God by refusing to go down to Egypt (26:1-6). He had acknowledged God's provision (26:22) and, in the tradition of his father, had built altars and called on the name of the Lord (26:24). Like Abraham's wife, Sarah, Rebekah was barren and Isaac prayed to the Lord on her behalf and she became pregnant (25:21).

But Isaac's impact on his sons appears superficial at best. He "had a taste for wild game" so he loved Esau best, because Esau was a skillful hunter. The story teller implies that Isaac didn't relate very well to Jacob, who was "a quiet man, staying among the tents" (25:27). Whereas Abraham had assumed responsibility for finding a good wife for his son, Isaac seemed indifferent to his sons' marriages. When Abraham sent his servant to look for a wife for Isaac he gave him gold and silver and expensive clothing for the bride price (24:53), but when Isaac sent Jacob back to Rebekah's family in Paddan Aram to find a wife, all he had was his staff (32:10). Jacob arrived among his mother's relatives lonely and broke.

Passing the Faith from one generation to the next is always risky business. Parents find it hard enough staying in the story, let alone helping their children stay in the story. If the passion for God and radical obedience of the first generation wanes in the second, even the routines and rhythms of worship may be lost by the third generation. It is hard to judge what, if anything, Jacob understood about his parents' and grandparents' faith. By the time we meet Jacob he seems far more the product of a dysfunctional family than a man of faith blessed with the promises of God.

### **A Conflicted Family**

Jacob was "born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward" (Job 5:7). From birth, Jacob's experience of life involved struggling and striving. His life became one long series of conflicts. He must have felt like he lost out at birth by being born just behind his twin brother Esau. He failed to measure up to his father's expectations and he was molded by his mother's aspirations. Doted on by his mother and distanced from his father, he felt both abandoned and possessed. He was a pawn in their marital conflict and an antagonist to his brother whom he conned out of his birthright and cheated out of his blessing. True to his name, he was always grasping for more and striving to achieve the upper hand for himself.

Our story teller relishes giving us the details, especially when Jacob deceived his father into thinking that he was Esau. Rebekah overheard what was meant to be a secret conversation between Isaac and Esau. The blessing Isaac planned to give Esau should have been a public event, witnessed by a third party, but the old man thought he could get away with a private blessing over a good meal. His wife thought to herself, two can play this game of secrecy. She masterminded a scheme that led Jacob to give a boldfaced lie to his father. “I am Esau, your firstborn. I have done as you told me. Please sit up and eat some of my game so that you may give me your blessing” (27:19). Isaac questioned how his son could have killed and prepared the wild game so quickly. He was positive the voice sounded like Jacob, but the skin he touched felt like Esau. “Are you really my son Esau?” he asked. Jacob lied, “I am.” Three lies and an Esau costume gained for Jacob his father’s blessing.

In his blessing, Isaac promised everything to the one he thought was Esau. He held nothing back: “May God give you of heaven’s dew and of earth’s richness—an abundance of grain and new wine. May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down to you. May those who curse you be cursed and those who bless you be blessed” (27:28-29). His blessing was based on his refusal to accept what the Lord had said to his wife years ago, before his sons were born. When the babies were jostling each other in the womb the Lord said to her, “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger” (25:23). Was this conflict of destinies at the heart of their marital conflict? One thing is for sure, individualism was not born yesterday. Each member of the family had their own version of how the world should be and no one seemed to take much stock in the promise of God. Isaac expected cultural customs to dictate the future of the family, which meant the oldest son would naturally receive the birthright and blessing. Rebekah seemed confident in her own strategy to frustrate Isaac’s plan.

The story does not encourage us to sympathize with Esau, even though he is a victim of Jacob’s foul play. There is little commendable about Esau and no one would be flattered by being likened to Esau. Vincent van Gogh’s father used Esau and Jacob to explain the differences between his own two sons. He compared Vincent to Esau in appearance and temperament. His bristling red hair and unkempt appearance, along with Vincent’s feelings of aloofness and alienation made for an easy match with Esau. The comparison hurt Vincent and explains, at

least in part, why he renounced his inheritance and returned his father's Bible to his younger brother (Cliff Edwards, *Van Gogh and God*, Loyola University Press (Chicago), 1989, p.8).

I've never met anyone who aspired to be like Esau. He despised his birthright and grieved his parents by marrying a Hittite woman. He expected life to be handed to him, but instead it was stolen from him by his conniving brother. Having promised the world to Jacob, Isaac had little left to offer Esau. "Your dwelling will be away from earth's richness, away from the dew of heaven above. You will live by the sword and you will serve your brother. But when you grow restless, you will throw his yoke from off your neck" (27:39-40). With a blessing like that who needs a curse. Ironically, the blessing given to Jacob and the involuntary rejection of Esau, took place because Isaac thought he was dying (27:2), but he didn't die for at least another twenty to twenty-five years. Esau didn't feel he had long to wait before avenging himself. "The days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob" (27:41). It must have been a surprise to everyone that Isaac lived as long as he did (35:28).

Esau's grudge against Jacob and Rebekah's desire for Jacob not to marry a Canaanite woman, resulted in Isaac calling Jacob and sending him to Paddan Aram (Northwest Mesopotamia). If he felt any animosity against Jacob for his deception, it didn't show in his farewell. He sent him away empty-handed, but with a blessing. "May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and increase your numbers until you become a community of peoples. May he give you and your descendants the blessing of Abraham, so that you may take possession of the land where you now live as an alien, the land God gave to Abraham" (28:3-4). Perhaps the unusual twist of circumstance caused Isaac to reconsider his wife's claim that the Lord had spoken to her (... "and the older will serve the younger" 25:23).

Before the story proceeds with Jacob's exile to Paddan Aram to find a wife among Rebekah's relatives, a change of heart in Esau is duly noted. Isaac's command, "Do not marry a Canaanite woman," and Jacob's obedience influenced Esau. Up until then he did everything he wanted to do with no thought for the destiny of the family. "Esau then realized how displeasing the Canaanite women were to his father Isaac; so he went to Ishmael and married Mahalath sister of Nebaioth, the daughter of Ishmael son of Abraham, in addition to the wives he already had" (28:8-9). Perhaps the reversal of fortunes had led Esau to rethink his life. The

bitterness he had against his brother may already be waning. In the company of Ishmael, Esau stays in the story. Undoubtedly his efforts were feeble, but the story teller wants us to be aware that God is working in Esau's life, too.

## **Bethel**

In between Jacob's striving and achieving, the Lord God revealed himself to this homeless sojourner. Jacob had done nothing to deserve this revelation, yet God made himself known in an unforgettable way. Asleep in the wilderness, with his defenses down and besetting fears momentarily forgotten, God declared himself to Jacob. The dream pictured the connection between heaven and earth. He saw "a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it" (28:12). Above this stood the Lord who announced, "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac." Jacob was reminded of the blessing of Abraham, "Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth...All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring" (28:14).

We might think that Jacob should be suffering from nightmares, but instead he experienced the awesome presence of God. Instead of a review of his sordid past, he beheld the gracious promise of his future! The Gospel reigns in spite of the mess of the human condition. Up until now Jacob's existence was almost entirely horizontal. He appeared to live in a one-dimensional universe of his own making. Jacob's response to the dream was a true understatement, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it." It wasn't only in this place, but in his entire life that Jacob had failed to recognize the living God. One wonders, too, if Jacob didn't confuse person and place. "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven" (28:17). But God had promised, "I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land."

In the morning Jacob poured oil on top of the stone that he rested his head on and called the place Bethel, which means house of God. His grandfather, Abraham, had built an altar and called on the name of the Lord (12:8), but Jacob raised a little monument to mark the sight where the Lord had called on him. The Lord God receives all the praise for keeping Jacob in the story! By the third generation, the unconditional "Here I am" response to the call of God had become a conditional vow, "If God will do this for me, then the Lord will be my God" (see

22:1). True to character he struck a deal with God, "and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth." I'm sure God was not impressed, but in the vernacular of our day, God was saying to Jacob, "Work with me on this. It is a far better deal than you could ever imagine." If Jacob was true to his deal-making, what's-in-it-for-me character, God was true to his character of love and mercy.

The difference between what God had in mind and what Jacob had in mind recalls the conversation between Nathanael and Jesus in the Gospel of John. Nathanael's vision of Israel's messiah was far more humanistic and horizontal than Jesus' messianic self-understanding. Jesus' announcement gives Jacob's dream its ultimate fulfillment. The greatest of all connections between heaven and earth is the incarnation of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. "I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man" (Jn 1:51). The story is moving from Bethel to Bethlehem, disclosing the secret of how "all peoples on earth" will be blessed through Jacob and his offspring.

### **Labor for Laban**

No sooner had Jacob arrived among his mother's relatives than he fell in love with his cousin Rachel. Jacob had met his match in his uncle Laban who put his future son-in-law to work for seven years to pay the bride price. Laban had agreed to give his daughter Rachel to Jacob, or had he? In retrospect Laban carefully worded his response, "It's better to give her to you than to some other man. Stay here with me" (29:19). Then came the wedding night and Laban switched Leah, his oldest daughter, for Rachel. With a little too much to drink, Jacob didn't even recognize he had the wrong wife until morning. The deceiver had been deceived and he got a taste of his own medicine. As it turned out, Jacob got Rachel at the end of the week on the installment plan. Now he had two wives and another seven-year contract.

The wife he loved, Rachel, was barren and the wife he didn't love, Leah, quickly bore him four sons. She named her sons after her experience, each one a reminder of her troubled marriage. Reuben meant "the Lord has seen my misery"; Simeon meant "the Lord has heard that I am not loved"; Levi meant, "now at last my husband will become attached to me"; and Judah meant, "This time I will praise the Lord" (29:32-35). Like Sarah and Rebekah before her, Rachel was distraught with her inability to have children, but unlike Abraham and Isaac, Jacob was

unsympathetic. His father and grandfather prayed for their barren wives, but Jacob just got angry with Rachel and said, "Am I in the place of God, who has kept you from having children?" (30:2).

Surrogate motherhood through Leah and Rachel's servants gave Jacob five more sons, Dan, Naphtali, Zilpah, Gad, and Asher. By now Rachel was desperate to have a child. When she heard that Reuben, Leah's firstborn, had returned from the fields with mandrakes she bargained with Leah. Leah could sleep with Jacob in return for the mandrakes. These large-leaved weeds with a carrot-like root were thought to induce fertility, sort of an ancient version of viagra. Ironically the mandrakes didn't help Rachel, but Leah's night with Jacob produced another son (Issachar). Some time later she conceived her sixth son, Zebulun, and then a daughter, named Dinah. Finally, after this long list of births, "God remembered Rachel; he listened to her and opened her womb." Rachel said, "God has taken away my disgrace." She named her son Joseph and said, "May the Lord add to me another son" (30:24).

With the growth of his family and his flocks, Jacob was a wealthy man. It became obvious to Laban that Jacob had also increased Laban's wealth and prosperity. When Jacob asked to leave, his father-in-law requested that he stay, "Name your wages, and I will pay them" (30:28). Jacob spelled out the terms of the new contract, "Let me go through all your flocks today and remove from them every speckled or spotted sheep, every dark-colored lamb and every spotted or speckled goat" (30:32). Laban agreed, but what Jacob hadn't counted on was that Laban would quickly remove all the goats and lambs that fit that description and put a three-day journey between his speckled, spotted, and dark-colored flocks and Jacob's flocks. Once again Laban thought he had outsmarted his son-in-law.

Like Rachel with her mandrakes, Jacob thought displaying tree branches with their bark stripped away before the flocks in heat would produce streaked or speckled or spotted animals. The thought was that the visual impact of the stripped tree limbs would leave its mark on the embryo (Derek Kidner, *Genesis*, p.163). Jacob didn't understand the genetics that produced streaked and dark-colored animals, but he did understand selective breeding. He kept the weaker animals out of his flocks' gene pool and sent them to Laban. "In this way the man grew exceedingly prosperous and came to own large flocks, and maidservants and menservants, and camels and donkeys" (30:43).

What began for Jacob as a labor of love (29:20) became a frustrating labor for Laban, and after twenty-years Jacob was ready to be released from his servitude. Instead of gratitude, Jacob's success generated only envy and resentment among Laban's sons. Jacob also "noticed that Laban's attitude toward him was not what it had been" (31:2). But it was not only the worsening situation with Laban that led Jacob to return to his homeland, he heard the call of the Lord, "Go back to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you" (31:3). Jacob's speech to Rachel and Leah was not needed to persuade them to leave. They were ready to go (31:14), but his speech was important because it reflected Jacob's keen awareness of the Lord: "the God of my father has been with me...God has not allowed him [Laban] to harm me...So God has taken away your father's livestock and has given them to me." Jacob even gave credit to God for the successful breeding of streaked, speckled or spotted lambs and goats. It was as if he knew that "every good and perfect gift [was] from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows" (James 1:17). He was ready to follow the Lord's orders, but seemed unwilling to trust in the Lord to free him from Laban's grip. True to form, Jacob tried to use deception to get away, but Laban easily caught up to him. The story teller let's us know that apart from God coming to Laban in a dream and warning him not to say anything to Jacob, "either good or bad," Laban might have easily attacked and harmed Jacob (31:24,29).

As it was, the departure was messy. Jacob's strategy was woefully inadequate and Rachel stole the household gods which she hid in her camel's saddle bags. We don't know why she took these household gods? Maybe it was her way of getting back at her father for how he had treated her husband. The storyteller meant for us to see the humor in this situation. Laban angrily searched from tent to tent, but found nothing, while Rachel politely declined to get off her camel because she was having her period. Finally, Jacob had enough. He took Laban to task. "What is my crime?" he asked. "What sin have I committed that you hunt me down?" We rightly picture this dramatic exchange with raised voices and barely controlled tempers. Jacob made his case with self-righteous passion, "I worked for you fourteen years for your two daughters and six years for your flocks, and you changed my wages ten times. If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had not been with me, you would surely have sent me away empty-handed. But God has seen my hardship and the toil of my hands, and last night he rebuked you" (31:41-42).

For his part, Laban was unwilling to concede a thing. "The women are my daughters, the children are my children, and the flocks are my flocks. All you see is mine." But Laban knew it was over. "Yet what can I do today about these daughters of mine, or about the children they have borne? Come now, let's make a covenant, you and I, and let it serve as a witness between us" (31:43-44). Laban and Jacob parted company with a sworn covenant between them. Each named the site in their own language. Jacob invoked the God of Abraham and Laban invoked the God of Nahor. They had little in common and it was time to move on.

### **Fearing Esau**

In Jacob's mind getting away from Laban was not half as bad as facing Esau. He would not have parted with his possessions to pacify Laban, but for Esau he was prepared to give away his herds. Always the clever strategist, Jacob thought, "I will pacify him with these gifts I am sending on ahead; later, when I see him, perhaps he will receive me" (32:20). But as the story unfolds it becomes obvious that the one he truly should have feared was God not Esau. Jacob's fear of his encounter with Esau drove him to pray, "Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid he will come and attack me, and also the mothers with their children. But you have said, 'I will surely make you prosper and will make your descendants like the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted'" (32:11-12).

On the night before this dreaded meeting with Esau, God confronted Jacob in way that is still very hard to put into words. Everyone was strategically placed for the morning meeting with Esau and Jacob was left alone to pray and contemplate the fearful reunion. If Esau was not appeased Jacob could very well have been the first to die. Through the long night "a man wrestled with him till daybreak" (32:24). It was as if a lifetime of striving and grasping was being confronted and the self-sufficiency that Jacob had clung to was being wrenched from his grasp. In the morning, "when the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man" (32:26). The identity of Jacob's opponent, although shrouded in mystery, seemed clear to Jacob. He clung to God and insisted on a blessing, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

I am reminded of Jesus' agonizing prayer in Gethsemane and the apostle Paul's conversion on the Damascus road. This was a turning point in Jacob's life, forcing

him to acknowledge God's sovereignty in his life. The "not my will but your will be done" dynamic was at the heart of this encounter with God. Jacob had spent his whole life resisting the will of God and depending upon his own resources to get his way. He was good at it and even in this encounter Jacob's tenacity was evident. "When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man" (32:25). In spite of Jacob's dramatic resistance, all it took was a touch to render him crippled. The apostle Paul was blinded for a time because of his encounter with God, Jacob was crippled.

Yet even though he was crippled, Jacob would not let go unless he was blessed. The man asked him, "What is your name?" The question recalls the time Jacob lied to his father, Isaac. Twenty years ago he had claimed to be Esau when his father offered the blessing (27:19). Now Jacob spoke the truth. He gave his real name. He was honest about who he was. The blessing came in the form of a new name. "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome" (32:28). The new name meant a new identity. No longer would he be known as a deceiver, grasping for his own way through cunning and duplicity. He would now be defined by his struggle with God. His new name meant "God strives" and his new identity was forged out of the crucible of relating to God. Jacob called the place Peniel (face of God) saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared" (32:30).

This was the climax of Jacob's life. He knew now, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that God was accomplishing his purposes through his life. The man who spent his life striving and strategizing finally realized he was no match for God and that God would not let him go. In spite of the fact that Jacob was Jacob, the living God would remain forever the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. What was true in the apostle's day had always been true: "If we disown him, he will disown us; if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself" (2 Tim 2:12-13).

Jacob's experience of God at Peniel became the core value of his life from which all other relationships were judged. He knew first hand that there was One far more formidable to deal with than an obstinate father, a vengeful brother or a selfish father-in-law. Jacob had spent much of his life operating on fear, running from one conflict only to land in another, but at long last he was catching a glimpse of what it was like to live by faith. The blessing of God prevailed over his

striving and straining. The essence of life was to be found not in what he achieved, but in what he received from the Lord God. His reunion with Esau went beautifully and was immediately perceived in the light of his encounter with God. “For to see your face is like seeing the face of God, now that you have received me favorably” (33:10). In spite of the fact that Jacob remained distrustful of his brother Esau and passive toward the treachery and violence of his sons (34:1-31), Jacob had a renewed passion for God. The old Jacob was still lurking in the background, which I suspect is true enough of our old sinful nature as well, but there were also evidences of a profound desire to please God. Like Abraham he pitched a tent in Shechem and built an altar. He called it El Elohe Israel, which meant “God is the God of Israel” (33:20).

After the slaughter at Shechem, carried out by Simeon and Levi because of the defilement of their sister Dinah, Jacob and his family were forced to flee. Unlike his son Joseph, Jacob never appeared successful in representing the Lord God to the surrounding cultures. “You have brought trouble on me,” lamented Jacob to his sons, “by making me a stench to the Canaanites...” (34:30). Once again he was both driven and called. God said to Jacob, “Go up to Bethel and settle there, and build an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you were fleeing from your brother Esau” (35:1). This time Jacob responded to the call with passion. He ordered whatever foreign gods his family possessed to be surrendered, purification rites performed and their clothes changed. They were to renounce the old ways and put off the old nature (see Eph 4:22-25). For once in his life Jacob sounded like Israel instead of Jacob. “Then come, let us go up to Bethel, where I will build an altar to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and who has been with me wherever I have gone” (35:3).

### **One Greater Than Jacob**

Jacob’s story should be a constant reminder that the life we make for ourselves cannot be compared to the life God creates for us. Life consists not of what we achieve, but of what we receive from the Lord our God. The blessing of God is offered to us in spite of our stressing and straining. On our own, we cannot fill the void with meaning and significance. The theme running through all of Jacob’s deceptive and manipulative efforts was that God’s promise will prevail, not because Esau was cheated or Isaac was fooled or Laban was mastered, but because of God’s grace. Left to himself, Jacob would have lived like anyone else in a dog-eat-dog world, but instead, God transformed his life and saved him from

himself. The psalms recognize that the God of Jacob “is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in trouble” (46:1). Throughout his life Jacob needed a lot of saving, but what he needed saving from the most was himself. At every turn his selfish, manipulative ways threatened his life, but God persevered and prevailed. For Jacob, as well as for us, the transition from living by fear to living by faith can be slow and arduous, but God is patient. That is why when we pray, “The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress,” we are reminded of how loving and gracious God is, not how great we are.

It is ironic that the Samaritan woman encountered by Jesus at the well of Sychar should ask, “Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?” (Jn 4:12). The fame of Jacob’s name and stature was great because of what God had done in his life, not because of who he was in his own strength and character. The significance of Jacob’s life as well as the destiny of salvation history rested in the One who asked the woman for a drink. Jesus of Nazareth was none other than the God of Jacob, who had come to bring the promised blessing. He had come to bring salvation. Her focus, like that of the ancient patriarch Jacob, had to be lifted from the temporal to the eternal, from the physical to the spiritual, from drinking water to living water. Her one-dimensional existence was a dead end, but the God of Jacob was ready to save her in spite of herself. Although we seem so insistent on a flat-land, humanistic existence, God keeps impressing upon us, as he did with Jacob, that the key to life is praying, “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt 6:10).

Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman also reminds us, that the God of Jacob is the God of Esau. Like Ishmael, Esau stays in the story. His many descendants are named and his gracious acceptance of Jacob is stressed. Our hearts go out to a man who forgives as Esau did. The storyteller wants us to remember that “Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him” (33:4). God hasn’t forgotten his promise to Abraham, that “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (12:3).

The disciples were shocked that Jesus would talk to a Samaritan, much less a woman, much less a woman of questionable character. Isn’t there a parallel here with Isaac who was shocked that God would choose Jacob over Esau, the younger over the older? Clearly, the God of Jacob intended to put the human race on notice that he wasn’t following conventional rules. The path of blessing didn’t follow

birthrights and racial lines. The story of Jacob calls in question the way society ranks people, decides privilege and organizes life. God's ways are not our ways. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa 55:8-9). This means, for example that "the last will be first, and the first will be last" (Mt 20:16). The same God, who the apostle claimed, "chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise" and "the weak things of the world to shame the strong," chose Jacob. "He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him" (1 Cor 1:27-29). The story goes according to God's plan, not ours. It is absolutely essential that we understand this if we are to enjoy staying in the story.