

THERE'S A NEW GOD IN TOWN

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Genesis 25:19-34

I want to ask you all a question. Don't raise your hand just yet. Think about it. But here's my question: Is your family perfect? And by perfect, I mean free from jealousy and resentment and strife, you have no hidden secrets, lies, or skeletons, you are exactly as the world sees you. Does anyone have a family like that? No. No family is perfect. As someone once said, "Families are like fudge -- mostly sweet but with a few nuts."

When we are honest with ourselves (and we rarely are), we will admit that most of our families put the "fun" in dysfunctional. We have our family secrets, embarrassments, jealousies; we have our pettiness, our resentments, and our insecurities. We should all be in therapy.

And for this reason, there happens to be a broad body of study on family relationships by psychologists, therapists, anthropologists, and more.

One of the more interesting offshoots of this area of study is the work of Edwin Friedman. Friedman was a rabbi and the author of a book called *Generation to Generation*. Friedman takes the work of family systems theory and applies it to synagogues and churches. Yes, if you've felt that the stresses in your church were eerily familiar, that is because they mirror the stresses that we find in our families. And often, we transfer the stresses from our family onto our church relationships. It is no accident that we speak of our "church family." It really is.

When a family is free from any unusual stress, they function as they normally should. But when the family is under stress, then members of the family adopt certain roles; they take on certain personalities. Friedman and others have identified these and given them names. These roles include the Family Hero, the Scapegoat, and the Caretaker. So, what are these like?

Briefly, the **Family Hero** is the perfect one on whom all praise and attention can be showered. When a family system is under stress, the Family Hero presents a façade that makes everything appear to be all right. A family can be falling apart, but if Ginny is the prom queen, then they can pretend that all is normal.

Then there is the **Scapegoat**. The scapegoat is the family member on whom all the problems can be blamed (whether it is their fault or not). The family will say, "If not for Bobby's (drinking, stealing, lying, drugs, bad grades, whatever) everything would be perfect. He's the reason we are in this mess." That is the role of the Scapegoat.

And then there is the **Caretaker** (also known as the Mascot). This is the member of the family system (who is usually a child) who takes responsibility for the family's emotional wellbeing. Usually, they become the clown to divert the family's attention from their pain and anger that is present. For a child to take on this responsibility is a terrible price.

Our scripture reading for today continues our journey through the book of Genesis. Today, we come to the story of the birth of Esau and Jacob—the twin sons of Isaac and Rebekah.

Now, I want you to think up all of the family dysfunctions you can imagine and then I want you to dump them all on the floor here in front of us. It doesn't matter how much anxiety, fear, anger, resentment, insecurity that we dredge up...if we were to fill this room with dysfunction, it still would not match what we find in the stories surrounding Jacob and Esau.

As I said, Jacob and Esau are the twin sons of Isaac and Rebekah. Isaac, as you will recall, is only son of Abraham and Sarah. Many years earlier, God reached out to Abraham and Sarah and called them to follow him to a land that he would show them. In return, God promised the couple descendants as numerous as the stars. The names of Abraham and Sarah would be a blessing to all the families of the earth. Abraham and Sarah comply, and they resettle in the land of Canaan.

At the time of this call, Abraham and Sarah were well on in years and had no children. The promise of their having descendants seemed far-fetched, to say the least. Abraham does have a son, Ishmael, with his servant Hagar. But God informs Abraham that God's promise will play out through the descendants of Isaac, not Ishmael. God's promise appears to be put on hold when God instructs Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, which he almost does.

Isaac survives. His father finds him a wife, Rebekah, among Abraham's kin because Abraham is adamant that his son will not marry a Canaanite woman. Rebekah is brought back to Canaan to marry Isaac.

Now, Isaac and Rebekah should have had a fairy tale life. They are like royalty. They seemingly had everything going for them. Isaac was practically a prince and would inherit his father's great wealth; Rebekah was a beautiful young bride from a good family. Yet, they were not immune from the problems of life.

For one thing, Isaac and Rebekah did not conceive any children for the first 20 years of their marriage. If the promise of God to Abraham that he would be the father of a great many descendants through Isaac was to be fulfilled, then Isaac would need to produce.

And so, Isaac prayed to the Lord, and in time his prayers were answered, and Rebekah became pregnant. The pregnancy was clearly a difficult one because we

are told that *the children struggled together within her*. In fact, the pregnancy was so distressing to Rebekah that at one point she called out to God asking, *Why do I live?*

God answered her cry saying, *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.*

Eventually, Rebekah gives birth to twin boys. The first twin to be born had a body that was reddish and covered in hair. They named him Esau, which means “hairy one.” Later on, he will acquire the name Edom, which means “red.”

The second of the twins was born with his hand still gripping onto the heel of his brother, continuing the struggle that initiated within their mother’s womb. This child they named Jacob. In Hebrew, the word Jacob sounds a lot like the Hebrew word for “heel” as well as the Hebrew word for “deceiver.” We’ll see why in a moment. Later on, Jacob will take on the name Israel.

So now, Isaac has two sons. Through which will God’s promise play out?

The story jumps from their birth and tells us that the boys grew up and could not be more different. Esau was an outdoorsman and a skilled hunter. Jacob, on the other hand, was quiet and lived inside. Esau was his father’s son, and Jacob was Rebekah’s favorite.

Then there is the story of the day that Jacob had cooked up a stew. It must have smelled delicious, because when Esau came in from hunting, he was famished, and he told his brother to give him some of that *red stuff*. Jacob tells Esau, *First sell me your birthright*. Since Esau is the first born (if only by seconds), he is due the greater portion of his father’s estate along with any titles that go with it. Instead of refusing, Esau says, *I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?* He’s not about to die, he’s just hungry. So, Jacob presses on (and probably dips in the ladle just to stir the soup and fan the smell toward his brother. Jacob says, *Swear to me first*. And Esau swears and on the spot sells his birthright to Jacob for some soup and bread.

Now, on one level, the purpose of this story is to explain to a later audience of Israelites the cause of the strained relationship between Israel and the Edomites. The Edomites were an older nation of people that were supplanted by the Israelites. How could this happen? This story attempts to explain it telling how the younger Jacob acquired the blessing of God in the birthright and got the upper hand of his brother Esau, a.k.a. Edom (or Red). The Edomites were an older, nomadic people who preferred hunting, while the newer Israelite people tended to be farmers and lived in settled communities.

But there is more to it than that, especially for us today who know little about the Edomites.

What this story does do is to tell us a great deal about YHWH, the God of the Israelites. This God is not like other gods. YHWH is not like the gods of the Canaanites or the Edomites, or the Moabites or any other peoples. This God is something new, something different.

What we see here is that with the old order, the tables are turned. In the regular scheme, the oldest son receives the blessing. But here, the youngest fights and claws his way past his brother who is both ruled and ruined by his appetites. In the old order, might means right. But here, power loses out to scheming.

In the old order, the small gods of the people provide instant gratification. Do you want a bountiful crop, then appease your small god with a sacrifice and make it so. But here, we find a God who schemes across generations. God's plan is for the salvation of all people. It is far grander than just a rich harvest. With this God, we live in the constant tension of a promise made and yet a promise to be fulfilled.

But that is our God—a God who loves us beyond reason, a God who will gladly disrupt the old order. A God who makes all things new. A God who sees beyond our ambitions, our deceits, our enmity and our pride. This is the God who stands by his promise even when we don't. A God who will sacrifice everything for our sake. This is the God of Abraham and Sarah, of Isaac and Rebekah, of Jacob who will become Israel. This is the God who sent his own son to die so that we might be saved. This is our God.