

**HERE I AM: CHEATING DESTINY**  
**Based on Gen 27:15-35 and Mark 15:5-16**

The story of Jacob and Esau is a story of twins who are different from one another in every possible way. It's a familiar story, especially at my house. I sometimes tell friends that my own children *are* Jacob and Esau, although neither of them has shown an interest in hunting wild animals yet. And we don't use body hair as a distinguishing characteristic, though that's something that distinguishes Jacob and Esau.

But, like Jacob and Esau, my kids are about as different as two brothers could be. I mean, they're not quite Arnold Schwarzenegger and Danny DeVito in the movie *Twins*, but they are very different, probably like a lot of siblings. Many pairs of siblings become almost alter egos, each one embracing exactly those things that the other one rejects. Twins especially do this, I think. They divide the world between them, so as to compete less, or so as to find their own individual identity: you take the inside, I'll take the outside. You be fierce, I'll be thoughtful. You be what Mom wants; I'll be what Dad wants—and we don't do that part of the story at my house, let me be perfectly clear. But you can see how that favoritism might happen, how the parents' love might also be divided between the siblings, if the parents were not very careful to avoid it.

Although it seems almost abusive to us, favoritism crops up as inevitable in the Bible stories. Isaac prefers Esau—it's a statement, not a judgment. Rebekah prefers Jacob. What's worse, God prefers Jacob. Later on in the prophets and in Paul's letters we will hear this preference restated—Jacob have I loved, God declares, Esau have I hated. Why? Did Esau do something wrong? But there is no why; it's just the way it is. God chooses one over the other, unchoosing the other. It's sometimes called the scandal of particularity. The descendants of Abraham are chosen to hear God's word and follow God's ways. Humankind in general is not chosen, but only this family, this people. And Jesus, born in one historical time, in one geographical place, carries the hope of humanity's salvation—why there and then? Where does that leave the Incas or the Celts, both of whom must wait hundreds of years to even hear the story of this foreign Son of God. God chooses. It's the theological equivalent of "Eat this, not that." The Jews, not the Celts. Jacob, not Esau. It doesn't seem fair.

But it's whom God chooses that gives us some kind of hope. It's not fair, but it is amazing. God seems to seek out the unlikely. Despite law and custom, the elder son almost never inherits in this story, and the stronger force almost never prevails. In this morning's story, even the ancient structures of father to son succession, even the determination of the father and his clear preference for the elder, stronger, more aggressive twin, Esau, none of that can stand against the wily ways of God's preference, God's choice. Bypassing the dying wish of the father, God's will asserts itself instead in the passion of the scheming mother. In a way, Rebekah herself is chosen by God—chosen over and above her husband, Isaac.

On the one hand, the story affirms the power of the father—what Isaac blesses stays blessed, no matter what. On the other hand, the blessing can be twisted off course, intercepted, by the hope, the determination, the persistence, maybe we could even call it the faith of one fiercely loving mother.

Jacob himself seems reluctant, though he in the end presents himself to his father--“Here I am”-- as Esau. Beforehand he is afraid that tricking his father into giving him the blessing will backfire and end in a curse. But Rebekah thinks it’s worth the risk. She pushes him, dresses him up in the hairy goatskin, cooks him the savory dish, puts it in his hands, tells him what to do and then when there’s a reaction she tells him where to flee. Jacob will later become a pretty tricky guy himself, getting the better of his father-in-law and buttering up his estranged brother, but here Jacob seems to be the trickster in training. His tiger mother is his motivation, his ability; she makes him win, she gets him a different destiny than the one that was headed his way. He was supposed to be 2<sup>nd</sup> place, which in this story is almost no place at all. But Rebekah believes that he is first place material and she makes sure he gets there.

Recently, I heard a presentation about a program that brings poetry writing into inner city schools. It’s called Art Well, and it sounds amazing, getting kids in touch with their own potential and getting communities in touch with the kids, through all kinds of art—poetry, painting, performance. They told a story of going into one classroom of high risk, low income kids and the teacher, overworked and underpaid, took the Art Well leaders aside and said, “Look, I know your hearts are in the right place, but these kids can’t write poetry. Some of them can’t even read. It’s a waste of your time.” Ok, the Art Well people said, but just let us try. They spent an afternoon with the kids, talking it through, hearing their passions, giving them permission to say things out loud that no one else seemed to want to hear. And at the end, the kids had produced poems, and more than that, they knew themselves to be, among their many other identities, poets, writers, artists. The teacher, the whole system in fact, had locked those kids into one destiny, and it wasn’t a good one. Sometimes it takes creativity, an outsider perspective, even a little disregard for the immediate obligations of the day, to break out of the boundaries of a too-narrow destiny, to steal a blessing for the unlikely chosen ones.

My kids, like the other kids of this church, go to an incredibly good school system. Their teachers assume that these kids are headed for college, for success, that they can have the destiny they want to work for. Most of the teachers, at least, make those valuable assumptions. Occasionally, of course, you get what the British would call a rotter. One of the worst things I’ve heard from my kids about school involved a kid whose family life wasn’t the greatest, a very bright, very funny and lovable kid, but a kid with serious trouble following the rules. Most teachers saw his potential and did what they could to harness his energy and keep him moving forward. But one teacher, who retired that same year, told this rambunctious, bright, troubled kid repeatedly, in front of the whole class, “Son, you’re destined for failure.”

The terrible part was the seed of truth in it. Failure of epic proportions is a possibility for that young man. But declaring that destiny, declaring that future to him at age 11—no. Like the counterpart of the blessing that can't be unblessed, that curse, that prophecy of failure has its effect, and the effect will not be good.

And every teacher should know that destinies can change--not only because the individual decides to wrench his or her life from its apparent course. Destinies can be changed by someone like a teacher, someone like an elder, a mentor, a friend. Someone else, close to you, who sees a different path for you, who sees possibilities that others have not seen, possibilities that you yourself have not seen. Rebekah may bring Jacob into line with God's plans for him. Or maybe it only looks that way in hindsight. Maybe God would have made do with Esau, but for Rebekah's insistence—see him, bless him, choose him. Rebekah essentially makes Isaac bless Jacob. Maybe in some sense she makes God bless him—she puts Jacob out there, when God's blessing is about to rain, so the blessing rains on Jacob and the whole story is channeled in Jacob's direction.

Maybe the message is, we can channel God's blessing. The church, as everyone's pushy tiger mother, can lift up any one who needs to be lifted up, can with prayers and attention and concern and care put any person out into the downpour of God's blessings, can lift that person up to be God's chosen.

The New Testament reading is one of the more mysterious parts of the passion story, in which the crowd before Pilate is allowed to choose between two prisoners—Jesus the King of the Jews on the one hand and Barabbas, whose name means “Son of the Father,” on the other. Son of the Father—isn't that weird? Is it a name or just something that they call this guy, this revolutionary who killed someone in the rebellion. Son of the Father—it sounds like what we call Jesus. The crowd has to choose, and, like Jacob and Esau, only one can be blessed, while the other will be cursed. One will be freed and the other will die. Again, the logic of the choice is not explained—the crowd is simply told to choose. The King of the Jews or the Son of the Father. Jesus the Messiah, or his alter ego, his fraternal twin of the moment, Barabbas, the revolutionary, the one who embraced what Jesus disdained. Like Isaac, their vision not very clear. Like Isaac, the crowd chooses the wrong man.

I don't know if any of you saw Schindler's List on TV last week. There was a scene in which some prisoners in a concentration camp are being accused of stealing the camp guards' chicken. No one confesses, so the guard shoots one of the prisoners. He threatens to shoot another if he doesn't get information on who stole the chicken. Then a boy steps forward, crying. The guard says, “Was it you?” “No,” the boy says. “But you know who did it,” the guard says. “Yes,” the boy says, and he points to the man who's already been shot and killed—“He did,” the boy says.

The scene with Jesus and Barabbas is a little like that kind of scene. Someone has to die—no one knows why, but death is demanded. The crowd chooses Jesus, and maybe that's ok, in the same way that it's ok when the boy seems to finger the man who has already been killed. If Barabbas were crucified, he would suffer and die. Jesus, on the other hand, will suffer and die and rise again. Pilate believes he is in control of both men's lives. He will kill

one and let one live. But in the end, Barabbas lives and Jesus lives too. As in the Hunger Games, the underlying premise of the system—to pit one life against another—is the only thing that finally gets destroyed.

Isaac wanted to bless Esau, but Rebekah pulled God in another direction. The crowd condemned Jesus to die and released Barabbas to live, but God went a different way on that choice as well. We have our own ideas about who deserves to live and be blessed and how, but God chooses with benefits in mind that we cannot understand. Steve Jobs once said, “You can't connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backwards. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future. You have to trust in something—your gut, destiny, life, karma, whatever.” I agree about connecting the dots. But here in this community of faith, we don't have to trust in whatever—and destiny, we know from scripture, is iffy and changeable. We trust in God to make the choices, choices that we'll see later were necessary to connect all those dots. We trust in God, and we lift up those we know are worth that blessing. Amen