

Underdog  
Genesis 25:19 – 34  
Sunday, July 12, 2020

There is a movie that Jen and I love called *Facing the Giants*. It came out back in 2006, and not a lot of people have heard of it because it's not a *good* movie. And what I mean by that is, it's a good *story*, but it is not written or acted well. It was made by a church in Georgia. Almost all of the actors in the movie are church members or staff. The pastor of the church wrote it, directed it, and starred in it. So these aren't professional actors. This was just a church that said, "We want to start using movies to convey the message of our faith." So they made this movie.

It's the story of a small Christian high school football team that has not had a winning season in seven years. The players are not good athletes. They are small and slow and nowhere near as good as the other teams in the area. Nobody thinks the coach is good enough to turn things around, so they're about to fire him. On top of that, the coach and his wife have been trying to have a baby, but they *can't*. His house is starting to fall apart, and his truck is starting to break down. Nothing is going right. No matter what they do – on *and* off the field – they just can't win.

Until the coach has an awakening. He devotes his life to God and says, "No matter what happens, win or lose, I am going to praise you." He instills that same mindset in his team. And what do you think happens? They start to win. In fact, they go on to win the state championship. He keeps his job and gets a pay raise. He gets a new truck. And his wife is pregnant. But the whole way through, the coach stresses to his team that it is not by their own strength or ability that they are able to do this. It is only by the strength and goodness and grace of God.

So this team that nobody thinks is good enough, led by a coach that nobody thinks is good enough, ends up being better than everyone else. This team that *should* be in last place ends up winning it all. They play for the state championship against a team called the Giants that is bigger, stronger, faster, and better than them. There is *no way* they should win, but they do. It's an underdog story. And we *love* underdog stories, right? That's why the story of Rocky Balboa won the Oscar for best picture back in 1977. It's why we always cheer for the team playing *against* the New York Yankees.

We love pulling for the underdog because they give us hope. They give us hope that, even though *we* may not be the biggest or the best, *we* can pull off something great, too. We love underdogs because they represent all of *our* hopes and dreams. They represent the possibility that *all of us* can do something great. We love the underdog because we live in a world where every day we see the rich getting richer and the strong getting stronger and the best getting better and the winners keep on winning, while the losers keep on losing, but some part of us *still believes in miracles*. Some part of us still believes that the little guy can rise up and do something great. So we pull for the underdog.

The Bible is *full* of underdog stories (I mean, it's *literally* where we get David and Goliath), and they all start with Abraham and his family. A family who, the odds are always stacked against them, and yet they keep on *defying* those odds. Abraham, who was 100 years old and wasn't *supposed* to have children, but he *did*. Abraham, who was a *nobody*, but God made him the father of *nations*. Isaac, Abraham's *second* born son who, because of that, was not *supposed* to inherit his father's household, but *did*. Isaac, who as a child was about to be *sacrificed*, and God's promise would end with him, but God stepped in at the last second and *saved* him. And now we get to Jacob.

Last week I told you how, for the next few months, the lectionary (the calendar of assigned scripture readings for each week) has us following the stories of Abraham’s descendants (Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph) from the book of Genesis. These stories were passed on orally for centuries before they were written down sometime around the 700s BC when the people of Israel were in exile. They had been conquered by foreign nations, displaced from their homes, and forced to live in foreign lands. So they wrote these stories down so they wouldn’t be lost forever. And their experience of exile *shaped* the way in which they wrote these stories because, they said, “*Those* stories of our ancestors’ faithfulness can teach *us* something about how to remain faithful in our current situation.” In that same way, *we* are looking at these stories and asking, “What can these stories teach *us* about how to be the faithful people of God in *our* current experience of displacement?”

And what we see in this story of Jacob today is that when the odds are stacked against him, God does what he cannot do on his own, because God loves the underdog.

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At the very beginning of this story, we see that the odds are against Jacob before he was even born. It says that Rebekah was barren. She couldn’t have children. God’s promise is in jeopardy. But Isaac prays to God for his wife, and she conceives. But then we find out that she’s having *twins*. And those twins struggle together in her womb; they are fighting before they are even born. And when they are born, Esau comes out first, and Jacob’s hand is on his heel, trying to pull him back in. They were fighting over who would be the firstborn, because *being* the firstborn son carried with it enormous privilege. The firstborn son would typically take on his father’s profession, succeed his father as the family patriarch, and inherit a significantly larger portion of the family’s land, money, and goods than his younger brothers. These

privileges make up the birthright and provide a level of social and material security that the younger brothers would not enjoy. The younger siblings would have to depend on the mercy of the older brother for their own wellbeing.<sup>1</sup> Not being the firstborn son automatically made life harder.

Jacob is *not* the firstborn son. Esau is. Esau is a hunter, an outdoorsman, strong and hairy, while Jacob is a quiet man who lives in tents. And it says, “Isaac loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob.” So there is tension in this family from the very beginning. Esau is bigger and stronger, and his father loves *him* more than he loves *Jacob*. So the deck is already stacked against Jacob. But Rebekah knows something that, presumably, the others don’t. Because before her sons were born, God spoke to her and said, “One will be stronger than the other, but the *older* will *serve* the *younger*.” So already we see God making a way when the odds are against Jacob.

We fast forward a little bit to when they are older. One day Esau comes in from the field, and after a hard day of hunting and working, he is *famished*. Jacob is making a lentil stew. Esau says, “Let me have some of that red stuff,” and the text says, “Therefore he was called *Edom*, which means *red*.” It’s a weird thing to mention, but it’s actually important, so we’re going to come back to that later. Jacob says, “I’ll give you some, but first sell me your birthright.” Give me the privileges of being the firstborn son. And you think, “What kind of fool would do *that*?” but Esau says, “I’m *starving*! What use is a birthright to me? A birthright will help me *one day*, but it’s not going to put food in my stomach *now*.” So he does it. Now, who knows how official this was – if it was a legally binding agreement – but what we see here is the order being reversed. Jacob is overcoming the odds. The one born *last* is becoming *first*.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=4508](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4508)

There is a story that comes after this that the lectionary doesn't cover in which Jacob disguises himself as Esau and tricks their father into giving *him* the blessing of the firstborn son. And once Isaac *gives* that blessing, he can't take it back. So Jacob *does* eventually assume the position of the firstborn son. And Esau is so angry that he wants to *kill* Jacob, so Jacob runs away from home, and goes into exile. While he's in exile, Jacob ends up having an encounter with God in which he wrestles with God, demanding that God give him a blessing, and God changes his name to Israel.

So what we see through Jacob's story is that Israel – as a *person* and as a *people* – has always had to struggle, and the odds have always been against them. They were not the biggest, wealthiest, most powerful nation, just like Jacob was not the biggest and the strongest and the best, but just like God chose Jacob and blessed *him*, God chose *Israel*, and they were favored and blessed and loved by God. God does for them what they cannot do on their own. Because God loves the underdog.

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The story of Jacob is being written down while Israel is in exile. This is a time when the odds are totally stacked against them. They have been conquered, their homes and temple destroyed, and they are forced to go live in foreign lands. They have no power, no privilege, and there is no way that they should come out on top. Now, let's come back real quick to that strange reference to Esau being called "Edom" which means "red," because he was *born* all red and hairy, and he sold his birthright for some of Jacob's red stew. The Edomites were a nation of people to the south of Israel. The Hebrew word for *red* is *admoni*, which (Hebrew scholars say) is a play on the word *Edom*, and the Hebrew word for *hairy* is *seyar*, which is a play on *Seir*, the name of the region where the Edomites lived. So Esau is connected here to the Edomites. Just as Israel came from Jacob, the Edomites came from Esau.

When the people of Israel were in exile, the Edomites invaded southern Israel and set up settlements there. They took advantage of Israel's weakness and tried to take over their land. So centuries after Jacob and Esau, Israel was at odds with the Edomites. These two brothers were fighting *again*. So the people of Israel are telling this story of their ancestor Jacob, their *namesake*, who is *also* in exile with the odds stacked against him, as a way of saying, "This has *always* been our story. The odds have *always* been against us. We have *always* been the underdog. But God *loves* the underdog. And God will do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Just as Jacob overcame Esau, we will overcome the Edomites. Just as Jacob eventually came home from exile, we will come home, too."

This is a theme that resonated with the early Christians, too. We talked last week about how there was a sense that *they* were in exile. They were being persecuted by the Romans. They were citizens of the Kingdom of God, living in the kingdom of man, not at home in this world, so they were *displaced*. They were not powerful or privileged. They were a small group of upstarts who were at odds with powerful political and religious institutions. They were underdogs. But the thing is, they weren't trying to become a wealthy, powerful institution themselves. They were simply asking, "How can we live faithfully in the midst of this exile and persecution?" And so we get Paul saying things like, "Not many of us were powerful or of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world, the things that are *not*, to reduce to nothing the things that *are*, so that no one might boast in the presence of God."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:26–29 (NRSV)

*God chose* what is foolish and weak and low and despised. *God chose* the underdog. This is a theme that resonated in Jesus' teaching, too. He said, "The last shall be first, and the first shall be last." Jacob and Esau – the one born *last* became *first*. *God chose* the underdog. *God* chooses the "least of these" to receive his blessing and favor, so that no one can boast. No one can say, "It is by my own will and power and ability that I have done this." Because when the underdog comes out on top, it is not because they are good enough or strong enough. It is because *God* is good enough, and *God* is strong enough.

Living faithfully in the midst of exile is not about exerting your own will and power and ability. It is about humbly relying on God's will and power and ability; trusting in God's ability to do in us what we cannot do on our own. Abraham did that. Isaac did that. Jacob did that. Israel did that. The early church did that. Do we?

In *our* current experience of exile, in which we are displaced from our building and from one another; this experience of exile in which we are citizens of the Kingdom of God living in the kingdom of this world, and the things that we see going on around us do not match up with the love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and justice that we are called to; in all of this, are we trying to make our own way, pursuing our own will, trusting in our own power and ability? Or are we pursuing *God's* will and humbly relying on *God's* power and ability? Are we on the side of the underdog, loving and blessing the "least of these" among us? Because *that* is where we will *always* find Jesus. Are we striving to be *first*, or are we using the privilege that we have been afforded to lift up those who are *last*?

In this time of displacement, we are called to live faithfully by humbly trusting in God's ability to do what we cannot do on our own. And we are called to stand with the underprivileged, because God loves the underdog, so we should, too.