

A Holy Land: A Scarcity of Blessing

Genesis 25:19-34

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They say that sometimes the answer to prayer is “no.” For Rebekah, in the soap opera-worthy familial drama that is Genesis, the answer is twins.

We drop in today in the middle of the show’s season, as it were; Sarah has laughed from her own barrenness into having a child that Abraham almost killed, while Hagar and Keturah bore children Abraham publicly disowned. Isaac has been paired off with Rebekah, ready to start the cycle over again, and start over again they do; Isaac and Rebekah, too, struggle to have children for twenty years. When the answer to their repeated prayers becomes “yes,” it is with a caveat so fierce that Rebekah asks why she even continues to live; Jacob and Esau fight before they even breathe, and will continue to do so as Esau gives up Isaac’s blessing along with his birthright. This newest generation is foolishness and manipulation as an answer to prayer, a scarcity of fellowship in pursuit of the perceived abundance of blessing.

There are plenty of lessons of God’s presence in these stories, including good news about standing with the forgotten and blessing those barren of hope and societal approval. But as I was reading this over and over this week, I could not get past how exhaustingly dreadful so many of these characters are; they are liars and cheats, swindlers and cowards, hapless fools with faithless hearts.

They are so devastatingly *human*.

Some of you may remember that I went on my first trip to Israel and Jordan this past February. I joked about how I had to go because it’s a square on Pastor Bingo, but it is important for those who preach this holy text to take the opportunity to see it. Our faith, for all that it’s global now, is deeply rooted in specific geographical spaces and mindsets, and it aids those of us who dig deep into the text to see what the writers are referencing and how that space affected the ways they understood the world. Christianity would look a lot different if Jesus were from Sault Ste. Marie.

With that said, I had never expected to take a trip like this. It landed in my lap via a friend of mine, which is a good way to avoid packing expectations alongside one’s socks when traveling. I’ve had five months to figure out how to talk about how the trip went and I’ve spent three weeks wrestling with the reality that I wanted to anchor this sermon—and those of the next two weeks—in it and honestly, I’m still not sure what to say.

The thing is, the land we call holy is a very, very weird experience. It is history stacked like Jenga blocks, just as haphazard and just as unsteady; it is a never-ending swarm of tourists like locusts that devour the wheat-gold-covered churches built on every site that might even possibly have a connection to Scripture; it is the boredom and the tension of people going to the dry cleaners in some of the most contentious places on the planet; it is absolutely beautiful and depressingly ugly; it is, like the religions we have crafted over thousands of years, not at all the same thing it was when the people of our texts walked its soil. I had so many people kindly pray

for a transformative experience for me when I went there, and I had some, but perhaps not in the mountaintop-type way they'd had in mind.

You will hear several anecdotes of mine over the next few weeks in my sermons, but the thing is, the land we call holy is full of people. It may seem obvious, but those of us from so-called Christian lands have painted Israel and Jordan and Palestine as somehow otherworldly, connected to the faith in a way that changes the land itself; we call it the Holy Land as though every inch of this earth wasn't made holy by the very fact that it was made at all. There is a sense that I didn't even realize had been instilled in me that Jerusalem or Gethsemane or Nazareth being somehow *different*.

This is a doubly foolish idea considering the lengths our Scriptures go to to show the humanity of God's work in the world. Top to bottom, these texts are about people attempting to live together in the world as *people*, full of foibles and fear and faith. This tale of the fractured fraternity of Jacob and Esau is no different; there is battle for the finite assets at hand from the beginning. "Two nations are in your womb," says the response to Isaac and Rebekah's prayer for children. Professor Juliana Claassens remarks that, "This account may be a type of etiological story explaining why the brothers Jacob and Esau and the nations they represent (Israel and Edom) are at odds with one another. This birth story seems to say: They were born fighting. We are not told whether Rebecca is satisfied with this answer; however, the narrative gap that omits her response could well be filled with all the unspoken emotions of mothers and other relatives standing helpless in the face of violent conflict."¹ *It has always been this way*, the story seems to say; just accept that there will always be fighting, even God is resigned to it.

There's a friend of mine who is a Presbyterian pastor who does a lot of work with the Palestinian people, and she has taught me to look at the Israel-Palestine conflict in entirely new ways. So when I went to Israel, I looked; I looked at how all of the signs in Jerusalem were in English, Hebrew, and Arabic except for the signs at border crossings and guarded gates, which were only in Hebrew. I looked at the graffiti-covered wall surrounding the West Bank and the Israeli military guards who looked as young as my college students when I was still teaching, Tavor assault rifles slung ready across their backs. I looked at the corruption and bribery required to pass through checkpoints, and the way that we clearly American tourists dodged so much because our money is lifeblood to an economy that depends on it and is still reeling from the pandemic's drain. I looked at the tension thrumming underneath everything and the way that our tour guides said it is always this way, don't mind it, there has always been fighting.

I looked, and I wondered who had sold what birthright for stew, and why every faith feels like it's starving when it stands on the ground we all call holy.

In the desert, every resource is precious. Israel currently keeps about 80% of the potable water it desalinates and gives 20% to the Palestinians despite the fact that Palestine's population is 60% the size of Israel's.² With its connection to both the Sea of Galilee and the Mediterranean Sea, Israel sells water to its mostly-landlocked neighbor Jordan—50 million cubic meters of it per

¹ [Commentary on Genesis 25:19-34 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#) 2011

² [Israel Population \(2023\) - Worldometer \(worldometers.info\)](#); [State of Palestine Population \(2023\) - Worldometer \(worldometers.info\)](#); [Obstacles to Arab-Israeli peace: Water - BBC News](#)

year.³ A country with roughly the population of New Jersey knows that whoever has the resources, the blessing, the upper hand has the power, and it gives safety, of a sort.

Here in Michigan, surrounded by the freshwater Great Lakes and the mines and forests of the UP, it can be hard to think of what resource scarcity looks like on this scale, but it becomes somewhat easier to think of bargaining for birthrights over dinner as though they don't matter and as though they matter more than anything else. Over and over again, here in the pages of Genesis and in the carefully-curated land of Israel and Jordan, I see the promise of abundance and the relationship with scarcity, the fear that there will not be enough for everyone, that God will not answer prayer this time, whether prayers for children, or status, food, or water; direction, or safety, or hope.

Dean Esther Menn of the Lutheran School of Theology writes that, “God is generous to both brothers. Like Jacob, Esau becomes the ancestor of a multitude (Genesis 36). Like Jacob, Esau is blessed with abundance to meet his family’s needs (Gen. 33:9-11). In their reunion, Jacob recognizes the face of God in the face of his brother, Esau, because of the positive reception that he receives (Gen. 33:10). The brothers’ reconciliation continues as they bury their father, Isaac, together (Gen. 35:29). Ultimately, this story of sibling rivalry ends with reconciliation and blessing.”⁴ Professor Kathryn Schifferdecker says, “Jacob is neither a moral exemplar nor a villain. He is a complicated figure. The narrator here at the beginning of his story describes him as *tam*, a word that means something like ‘whole’ or ‘complete,’ a person of integrity (25:27). Most English translations translate *tam* here to mean ‘civilized’ or ‘quiet,’ because it is difficult to describe Jacob as a man of integrity.

“Ellen Davis interprets *tam* as ‘perfect or loyal service’ or a constant awareness of God. Jacob displays that essential religious quality of being obsessed with God’s blessing, mediated through the blessing of his father Isaac. Jacob is obsessed throughout his life with that blessing, ‘which he can never possess as fully as it possesses him.’

“Jacob is not an admirable figure, at least not here at the beginning of his story. But he is one who is singularly focused on obtaining the blessing of God passed down from his grandfather Abraham. And his focus on that blessing will shape the rest of his life. The blessing will bring wealth and children, but it will also mean exile, loss, and sorrow.”⁵

One of the most important things I learned from going on this trip is that I, as an American, have a very limited understanding from which I can speak about Israel or Jordan. We who own the faith called Christian, we who live in the land billed as one of opportunity and plenty even while we know there is a different kind of scarcity here, we who read the texts of a holy God in a holy land and wonder where that God is across seas and centuries do not have the same language of scarcity and blessing, and yet we share the same human desire to stop being afraid, to know there is enough, to have God say anything at all when we pray. We know what it is to have souls so hungry that we give away priceless things just to make it stop; we know what it is to give up any pretense of honesty to make sure we get the thing that will make us comfortable enough in the long run.

³ [Israel signs deal doubling water supply to parched Jordan | The Times of Israel](#)

⁴ [Commentary on Genesis 25:19-34 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#) 2008

⁵ [Commentary on Genesis 25:19-34 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#) 2017

Perhaps it is the good news, then, that Genesis and Israel and Ann Arbor are all full of people and God is *here*. God is in the moment of Esau's hunger and Isaac's scheming; God is in the Temple filled with rifle-carrying soldiers and the Palestinian home rationing their water; God is in the torn-up streets of a city halfway across the world filled with an entirely different kind of blessing. And some days, that doesn't feel like enough; the scarcity of God can feel as real as the scarcity of blessing. But the children become nations, anyway, full of people, and God does not turn away from any of us, no matter where we are. May the promise of that be enough, just for today. Amen.