

**SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
THE SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT**

Lessons:¹

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-seventh Chapter of the First Book of Moses, called Genesis.²

“And it came to pass, that when Isaac was old, and his eyes were dim, so that he could not see, he called Esau his eldest son, and said unto him, My son: and he said unto him, Behold, here am I. And he said, Behold now, I am old, I know not the day of my death: Now therefore take, I pray thee, thy weapons, thy quiver and thy bow, and go out to the field, and take me some venison; And make me savoury meat, such as I love, and bring it to me, that I may eat; that my soul may bless thee before I die. And Rebekah heard when Isaac spake to Esau his son. And Esau went to the field to hunt for venison, and to bring it.

“And Rebekah spake unto Jacob her son, saying, Behold, I heard thy father speak unto Esau thy brother, saying, Bring me venison, and make me savoury meat, that I may eat, and bless thee before the LORD before my death. Now therefore, my son, obey my voice according to that which I command thee. Go now to the flock, and fetch me from thence two good kids of the goats; and I will make them savoury meat for thy father, such as he loveth: And thou shalt bring it to thy father, that he may eat, and that he may bless thee before his death. And Jacob said to Rebekah his mother, Behold, Esau my brother is a hairy man, and I am a smooth man: My father peradventure will feel me, and I shall seem to him as a deceiver; and I shall bring a curse upon me, and not a blessing. And his mother said unto him, Upon me be thy curse, my son: only obey my voice, and go fetch me them. And he went, and fetched, and brought them to his mother: and his mother made savoury meat, such as his father loved. And Rebekah took goodly raiment of her eldest son Esau, which were with her in the house, and put them upon Jacob her younger son: And she put the skins of

the kids of the goats upon his hands, and upon the smooth of his neck: And she gave the savoury meat and the bread, which she had prepared, into the hand of her son Jacob.

“And he came unto his father, and said, My father: and he said, Here am I; who art thou, my son? And Jacob said unto his father, I am Esau thy first born; I have done according as thou badest me: arise, I pray thee, sit and eat of my venison, that thy soul may bless me. And Isaac said unto his son, How is it that thou hast found it so quickly, my son? And he said, Because the LORD thy God brought it to me. And Isaac said unto Jacob, Come near, I pray thee, that I may feel thee, my son, whether thou be my very son Esau or not. And Jacob went near unto Isaac his father; and he felt him, and said, The voice is Jacob’s voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau. And he discerned him not, because his hands were hairy, as his brother Esau’s hands: so he blessed him. And he said, Art thou my very son Esau? And he said, I am. And he said, Bring it near to me, and I will eat of my son’s venison, that my soul may bless thee. And he brought it near to him, and he did eat: and he brought him wine and he drank. And his father Isaac said unto him, Come near now, and kiss me, my son. And he came near, and kissed him: and he smelled the smell of his raiment, and blessed him, and said, See, the smell of my son is as the smell of a field which the LORD hath blessed: Therefore God give thee of the dew of heaven, and the fatness of the earth, and plenty of corn and wine: Let people serve thee, and nations bow down to thee: be lord over thy brethren, and let thy mother’s sons bow down to thee: cursed be every one that curseth thee, and blessed be he that blesseth thee.

“And it came to pass, as soon as Isaac had made an end of blessing Jacob, and Jacob was yet scarce gone out from the presence of Isaac his father, that Esau his brother came in from his hunting. And he also had made savoury meat, and brought it unto his father, and said unto his father, Let my father arise, and eat of his son’s venison, that thy soul may bless me. And Isaac his father said unto him, Who art thou? And he said, I am thy son, thy firstborn Esau. And

²⁰ Genesis 25:5.

²¹ Genesis 27:1-4.

²² Leviticus 19:9-10, 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:19-20.

²³ *John H. Marks, The Book of Genesis*, in CHARLES M. LAYMON, ED., THE INTERPRETER’S ONE-VOLUME COMMENTARY ON THE BIBLE 21 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1971).

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Conclusion:

So, far from being a melodrama or a soap opera, this story is a salutary lesson that God has a purpose for mankind. That purpose will prevail despite the best and worst that humans can do and, in so prevailing will, will bend to its ends both that best and that worst.²³ As an old saying puts it, “God can write straight with crooked lines.”

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The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister²⁴
March 20, 2011.

¹ *An Alternative Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised in 1928)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER, WITH THE ADDITIONS AND DEVIATIONS PROPOSED IN 1928 35 (Canterbury Press 2008); *The Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised In 1928)*, A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxvii (South Africa 1954); *A Table of Lessons (authorized by the Episcopal Synod)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxv (CIPBC 1963).

² Genesis 27:1-40 (KJV).

³ St. Matthew 9:1-17 (KJV).

⁴ Hebrews 9:11-end (KJV).

⁵ Genesis 27:22 (KJV).

⁶ W. MURRAY SEVERANCE, PRONOUNCING BIBLE NAMES (rev. ed.) 25 (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 1985), alt.

⁷ Genesis 25:29-34.

⁸ Deuteronomy 21:17.

⁹ Genesis 25:27. Here, “dwelling in tents” is a metaphor for the nomadic Bedouin existence.

¹⁰ Genesis 25:27.

¹¹ SEVERANCE, *op. cit.* 44.

¹² Genesis 9:20-27.

¹³ Genesis 6:10.

¹⁴ Genesis 25:23; cf. Romans 9:11-12.

¹⁵ Genesis 8:20.

¹⁶ Genesis 12:7-8; 13:18; & 22:9.

¹⁷ Genesis 26:25.

¹⁸ Genesis 33:20 & 35:1-7.

¹⁹ Genesis 23:15-18.

Isaac trembled very exceedingly, and said, Who? where is he that hath taken venison, and brought it me, and I have eaten of all before thou camest, and have blessed him? yea, and he shall be blessed. And when Esau heard the words of his father, he cried with a great and exceeding bitter cry, and said unto his father, Bless me, even me also, O my father. And he said, Thy brother came with subtilty, and hath taken away thy blessing. And he said, Is not he rightly named Jacob? for he hath supplanted me these two times: he took away my birthright; and, behold, now he hath taken away my blessing. And he said, Hast thou not reserved a blessing for me? And Isaac answered and said unto Esau, Behold, I have made him thy lord, and all his brethren have I given to him for servants; and with corn and wine have I sustained him: and what shall I do now unto thee, my son? And Esau said unto his father, Hast thou but one blessing, my father? bless me, even me also, O my father. And Esau lifted up his voice, and wept. And Isaac his father answered and said unto him, Behold, thy dwelling shall be the fatness of the earth, and of the dew of heaven from above; And by thy sword shalt thou live, and shalt serve thy brother; and it shall come to pass when thou shalt have the dominion, that thou shalt break his yoke from off thy neck.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the ninth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Matthew.³

“And he entered into a ship, and passed over, and came into his own city. And, behold, they brought to him a man sick of the palsy, lying on a bed: and Jesus seeing their faith said unto the sick of the palsy; Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee. And, behold, certain of the scribes said within themselves, This man blasphemeth. And Jesus knowing their thoughts said, Wherefore think ye evil in your hearts? For whether is easier, to say, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and walk? But that ye may know that

the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (then saith [SETH] he to the sick of the palsy,) Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thine house. And he arose, and departed to his house. But when the multitudes saw it, they marvelled, and glorified God, which had given such power unto men.

“And as Jesus passed forth from thence, he saw a man, named Matthew, sitting at the receipt of custom: and he saith [SETH] unto him, Follow me. And he arose, and followed him.

“And it came to pass, as Jesus sat at meat in the house, behold, many publicans and sinners came and sat down with him and his disciples. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said unto his disciples, Why eateth your Master with publicans and sinners? But when Jesus heard that, he said unto them, They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick. But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

“Then came to him the disciples of John, saying, Why do we and the Pharisees fast oft, but thy disciples fast not? And Jesus said unto them, Can the children of the bridechamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them? but the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then shall they fast. No man putteth a piece of new cloth unto an old garment, for that which is put in to fill it up taketh from the garment, and the rent is made worse. Neither do men put new wine into old bottles: else the bottles break, and the wine runneth out, and the bottles perish: but they put new wine into new bottles, and both are preserved.”

Or,

Here beginneth the Eleventh Verse of the ninth Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews.⁴

God on behalf of their families and followers. Further, as we see several times with Abraham, he could have personal contact with God and with God’s messengers.

As the priest and prophet of his people, the patriarch stood as God’s representative to them. So when Isaac conferred his dying blessing on his sons, he was passing on to them God’s blessing upon Abraham,¹⁹ that he himself had inherited from Abraham.²⁰ This commission was analogous to our concept of ordination and was almost certainly accompanied by the laying of the patriarch’s hands upon the one to be blessed, so it was a sacrament. Apparently Isaac intended to pass that divine commission on to Esau, as the biological first-born.²¹

Perhaps Isaac intended thus to redress the balance between his twin sons, with Jacob getting the greater property as a result of his contract with Esau but Esau at least retaining the chiefship. However, his plan threatened the fulfillment of God’s plan.

If Isaac had succeeded in severing the transmission of the leadership of his family in passing it to Esau, from the transmission of the bulk of his wealth which had to go to Jacob, he would have set up between them a potential and fratricidal struggle for dominance that would have weakened, and perhaps wrecked, the developing Abrahamite people.

So God permitted Rebekah to act upon her mother’s knowledge of her children and so to assist Jacob in attaining the headship of Abraham’s tribe for which he was so much better fitted than was his brother, Esau. And Isaac’s priestly and prophetic role, and the sacramental nature of the testamentary blessing, are the reasons why, once Isaac had pronounced the first-born’s blessing upon the younger Jacob, he could not retract it. Then he could give Esau only what was left over, like the gleanings the farmer was to leave at the edges of the field as alms for the needy.²²

hope of tribal chiefship, all demonstrated his comparative unfitness to be the patriarch and leader of a clan that was to grow not only into a great nation but to be God's people, chosen to receive His final revelation in the form of the incarnate Christ.

Esau's unfitness to lead is something that God, in His omniscience, must have known. That is why He told Rebekah, the mother of these twins, while they were yet *in utero*, that the elder would serve the younger and, of the two nations that would form from their descendants, the stronger would be that of Jacob. As is so often the case in Scripture, this parallels an earlier incident, in which Noah's sons Shem and Japheth **[JAY-feth]**¹¹ were preferred at the expense of his son Ham,¹² who seems to have been at least the second-born and so elder than the favored Japheth¹³ **[JAY-feth]**.

In other words, Scripture attests that God had elected Jacob rather than Esau to be the leader of the greater part of the descendants of Abraham.¹⁴ And by giving Jacob control of two-thirds of Isaac's inheritance and Esau control of only one-third, Esau's unthinking sale to Jacob of his claim to preëminence assured the fulfillment of God's prophecy to Rebekah.

This brings us to Jacob's second act of betrayal of his older brother, his stealing of Isaac's testamentary blessing of Esau, which is the center piece of today's First Lesson.

To understand the significance of this, we must remember that in the time of the Biblical patriarchs, the chieftain of the clan – or as we might say today, the sheikh of the tribe – was not only the priest of his people but also held much of the character of their prophet. He received from God God's revelation of what He willed for them and, in turn, passed on to them what he himself had received from God. Thus we see successively Noah,¹⁵ Abraham,¹⁶ Isaac,¹⁷ and Jacob¹⁸ erecting altars and conducting the worship of

“... But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building; Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us. For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh: How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? And for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance. For where a testament is, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator. For a testament is of force after men are dead: otherwise it is of no strength at all while the testator liveth. Whereupon neither the first testament was dedicated without blood. For when Moses had spoken every precept to all the people according to the law, he took the blood of calves and of goats, with water, and scarlet wool, and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book, and all the people, Saying, This is the blood of the testament which God hath enjoined unto you. Moreover he sprinkled with blood both the tabernacle, and all the vessels of the ministry. And almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood is no remission. It was therefore necessary that the patterns of things in the heavens should be purified with these; but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures of the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us: Nor yet that he should offer himself often, as the high priest entereth into the holy place every year with blood of others; For then must he often have suffered since the foundation of the world: but now once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And as it is appointed unto men once to

die, but after this the judgment: So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson: “And Jacob went near unto Isaac his father; and he felt him, and said, The voice is Jacob’s voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau.”⁵ In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Development:

At first hearing, today’s First Lesson seems a strange account to have found its way into, and to have been preserved as, Scripture. Jacob, the presumed hero of the story, exhibits a crass greed and sneaking dishonesty that comports oddly with his character as one of the great patriarchs of the Hebrew nation. He comes across, in fact, as a distinctly un-sympathetic figure.

In contrast, Esau, as the elder brother the rightful successor to their father, Isaac, and who is the loser in their two most significant encounters, appears in many ways much the more sympathetic figure, especially as his second downfall – the loss of his father’s blessing -- is accomplished through his betrayal by his own mother. Thus many of the elements of a good “daytime television drama” are present here.

But this *is* Scripture, not soap opera, and so we must assume that it incorporates lessons for our instruction and guidance. And one of the lessons here, it seems to me, is that God has a purpose and is careful to see that His purpose is carried out by His human agents. Remember that the es-

sential element of this portion of the Book of Genesis is God’s promise to Abraham that He would give Abraham and His descendants the lush land of Canaan [**KAY-nunn**]⁶ and there would make of them a great people.

With this in mind, which of Isaac’s two sons would make the stronger leader, better fit to lead Abraham’s descendants to the greatness God had promised them? Was it Esau, who valued his position as Isaac’s elder son and presumptive heir so lightly that once, prior to the events in today’s Lesson, when Esau was hungry and impatient to eat, he sold his birthright as the elder son to Jacob for them trivial price of one meal?⁷

In judging the full extent of Esau’s carelessness on that occasion, we must recall that this particular time and place, the elder son’s birthright consisted of a double share in the father’s inheritance.⁸ In this particular case, there were two sons, so all that Isaac possessed at his death would be divided into three equal portions, two of which would go to the one who possessed the elder son’s birthright and one of which would go to the other. Then, regardless of those sons’ respective orders of birth, the one who possessed twice the wealth of the other was virtually certain to become the patriarch of the tribe or clan.

The outcome of this incident reflected something fundamental in the respective characters of the two sons. Jacob devoted himself to the newer pastoral life of his people,⁹ tending the flocks which were the stable basis of their prosperity, while Esau indulged himself by pursuing the older hunting lifestyle¹⁰ which, while perhaps more exciting and personally pleasurable, represented an earlier and riskier stage of human society.

To my mind, Esau’s improvidence, his self-indulgence, and his reckless disregard for the future in thus casting away a full third of his father’s wealth and with it the