

The Children of Israel

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“Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.” – Genesis 37:3-4

Last week, we heard Francis Miller refer to “the little weasel,” a very apt description of Jacob, who got his new name, Israel, after his nocturnal wrestling match with one of God's emissaries.

Jacob was a little weasel – and a cheat and a scammer and a deceiver and a coward – and a whole bunch of other unsavory personality traits. And, as Israel, he's also the namesake of a great religious heritage, the children of Israel. He's our ancestor in faith – we are his spiritual descendants. We are the children of Israel, not according to the flesh, to use Paul's language, but according to the Spirit – that Spirit that uses flawed creatures such as Jacob – and such as us – for its own purposes. That's how God works – with real flesh and blood people, singly and in groups – to make manifest love in all its forms. It may not be pretty, but it gets the job done. Let's pause to take a look this morning at one of those messy moments.

It's never easy to recognize a parent's flaws, and Jacob had flaws by the pound. His birth name, which means Grabber or Grasper or Supplanter, established the trajectory for his entire life. He swindled his brother Esau out of his birthright, and then deceived their aged father, Isaac, into getting the blessing that should have gone to his older brother. He had to flee his brother's murderous rage and spent years working for a relative in Mesopotamia who duped him into marrying not one but both of his daughters. And through it all, Jacob managed to become rich and powerful. Jacob got every situation to work to his advantage. He was an operator, par excellence.

When we entered his story last week, he was on his way back to his homeland, the land God had promised to his grandparents, Abraham and Sarah. He'd just resolved a major dispute with his father-in-law, Laban, about livestock and Laban's family gods. As Jacob continued west, he was told that his brother Esau, whom he hadn't seen in years, was headed in his direction with a formidable force of fighting men. Jacob thought he was done for, and he split up his entourage, so that if Esau attacked him – which Jacob fully expected his brother to do – at least some of his family might survive.

And on the eve of battle, Jacob was indeed attacked, not by someone sent by Esau, but by something sent by God. Some force, described in Genesis simply as a man, wrestled with Jacob all night, neither of them winning a clear victory. As dawn was about to break, the divine reality tried to escape, but Jacob held firm, demanding a blessing before he'd release his opponent. The blessing was a name change – “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed” (Gen. 32:28).

In Hebrew, *yisrael* does indeed mean “the one who struggles with El,” an old name for God, and that's who Jacob was – someone who struggled with God. Jacob was a grasper, a grabber, a supplanter, a weasel – but he also struggled with God. And God struggled with Jacob. The God who had promised to make of Abraham and Sarah's descendants a nation of blessing for the entire world

kept that promise, struggling with a human being driven by a massive and irrepressible ego.

And in today's reading from Genesis, we pick up wrestling Jacob's story when he's an old man. He has settled in Canaan, continued to prosper, and fathered twelve sons and one daughter. "This is the story of the family of Jacob," Genesis 37:2 begins, but immediately we're told not of Jacob, but rather of his favorite son, Joseph: "Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father."

If the names Bilhah and Zilpah don't sound familiar, that's because we're used to hearing of Leah and Rachel as Jacob's wives, forgetting the two concubines, Bilhah and Zilpah, who gave birth to four of Jacob's twelve sons. Bilhah and Zilpah were handmaids in the sense that Margaret Atwood uses that term, meaning women who are baby-making machines. When we talk about biblical family values, we shouldn't forget the family members forced into sexual slavery by those values.

Jacob's family story begins with Jacob being Jacob – the Grabber, the Grasper, the Little Weasel – who, even in his old age, still doesn't get it. The story of the family of Jacob gets off on the wrong foot, as it were, with Joseph, "being seventeen years old," still doing a child's job. That's what that little detail of Joseph's age is telling us – Joseph is too old to be a spoiled little brat with big dreams tattling on his brothers. At seventeen, Joseph should have been a married man with a family and on his own. Instead, he's helping his half-brothers shepherd their father's sheep – he's being a baby, in other words. Jacob is babying Joseph, and we all know what trouble that leads to in a family.

And that's exactly where the story of Jacob's family is going to go – straight into trouble. "Now Israel" – that's Jacob's new name, the One Who Struggles with El -- "loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him." (37:3-4)

There we have it, friends, the story of the children of Israel in a nutshell. The story of a very religious and very dysfunctional family doing business as the people of God. Doesn't that describe us – religious and dysfunctional people doing business as the people of God?

The story of Jacob's family wasn't preserved because it was history; the writers of the Bible didn't care all that much about historical truth. They were concerned with a deeper truth. The truth that the Bible's theologians were after is about character or the lack thereof. About betrayal and loyalty and shifting loyalties. About truth and deception. The story of Jacob's family is about loss and gain. It's a story about the use and abuse of power. It's a story about perdition and redemption.

Those are the sorts of truths the story of the family of Jacob is all about. The story of Jacob's family is going to unfold, from this point on in Genesis, largely as the unfolding story of one of Jacob's sons, Joseph, the spoiled baby, favored by his father, hated by his brothers, destined first for suffering and later for greatness. That story will have drama and pathos and humor and tremendous artistic skill. It will hold a mirror up to us, as all the stories of the Bible do, and ask us to take a searching look. And all of that will happen within the broad and mysterious parameters of the will of God.

When Donna received today's readings earlier in the week, she left a message for me saying that she just might break into song as she started reading the story of Joseph and his amazing technicolor dreamcoat. Years ago, Donna and her family helped stage a production of that over-the-top retelling of Joseph's story for the folks in Geauga County, and God bless Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber and the 20,000 or so amateur productions for getting this portion of the Bible in front of people who will never hear it in a church.

It's a wonderful and terrible story, just like the story of the rest of us. Yes, of course, our stories may lack the coat of many colors and pharaoh's prison and the dramatic rise to greatness, but they all

contain those elements of favoritism and jealousy and sibling rivalry and parental cluelessness and hidden motives and misjudgments of character that mark families for better and for worse.

“All happy families are alike,” Tolstoy opens his novel *Anna Karenina*, “each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” And we children of Israel have all been unhappy in our own way as we have made our way through the centuries with our far-from-perfect families.

And yet . . . and yet the divine uses those families in ways none of us can control and few of us can fathom to shape a world worth living in. We children of Israel continue our struggle with the divine, just like our ancestor Jacob-Israel, to overcome those baser instincts, those self-serving tendencies, and those socially-sanctioned flimflammers that provide camouflage for taking advantage of each other.

Many years ago, one of my professors opened a departmental seminar by saying that in that seminar he hoped we'd all treat each other like family, and when another of the faculty members introduced himself, he said he agreed with everything Professor X had said except that he hoped that in that seminar we would treat each other better than many of us treat our families. Maybe he was thinking about the story of Jacob. It was one of the truest things I heard in all my years of schooling.

The Bible takes an honest view of families, not pretending that they're models of perfection or havens of unsullied bliss. Jacob-Israel was more Little Weasel than Ward Cleaver, and the Cleaver family lived only in the pages of Hollywood scripts. For the rest of us, there is no script. We have to make up our lives, individually and together, as we go, struggling with the divine while looking to the crucified and risen Christ to see what it means to be part of a human family.

Families are as flawed as the people who make them up, and yet we haven't found a better way to live together across time. We children of Israel know we're a hot mess sometimes, but what gives our family its distinguishing characteristic is not our flaws, but rather our desire to do better. That's our struggle with the divine, our wrestling match in the dark with our God and with our souls.

We spiritual descendants of Jacob-Israel carry in our DNA as many of our ancestor's faults as anyone – the scheming, the grasping, the weaseling – but we also carry something else: the wound of our encounter with the holy, that part of us always a little out of joint with the world, the stripes we bear on behalf of others, the imprint of nails and thorns we don't deserve. We carry those marks, along with our imperfections and flaws, giving thanks for the privilege of bearing them, and for the mysterious grace of God, that calls us to use those marks to be a blessing to all the families of the earth.