

“Jacob or Israel, Patriarch or Momma’s Boy?”

(A Dramatic Sermon)

Genesis 28:10-19a

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“A rose by any other name is still a rose,” or so they say, but what if you don’t really know who or what you are? And what if you have many different names, each of which seems appropriate in its own way?

You know me as Jacob the Patriarch and that I am. In fact, I am one of the big three – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Yes, Jacob, that’s me. From generation to generation, when believers in our faith refer to our God, they refer to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Jacob... I’m in there, I’m last, but I’m in there.

And like they say, any publicity is good publicity. Everyone here knows my name. Who cares if the stories you remember first might not be very flattering? You remember the one about me getting my brother Esau’s birthright for a pot of stew. And you remember the trick I played to get his blessing from our father. You may even know that the name Jacob means *he supplants*. But, like I said, at least you know who I am.

But, you see, that’s just the thing, I have another name, Israel. You may remember that a man or an angel or something I struggled with in the night gave me this name in addition to a bum hip. It means *one who strives with God*. I tend to like that a bit better than *he supplants*. And it beats the heck out of Momma’s Boy, which is another name that some might call me, and for reasons that make me downright angry!! But Israel, yes, I like that, though it is the name I hear the least.

So, which is it? Who am I really? Jacob or Israel? Patriarch or Momma’s Boy? Maybe you need a little more information to decide. So, let me tell you a little bit more about myself. We can talk about you later. Where shall I begin? Well, perhaps at the beginning, the very beginning, at least mine.

You may recall that my father Isaac was forty years old when he married my mother Rebekah and that she was barren for some time,

unable to have children. So, my father prayed to God for a child and, lo and behold, she became pregnant with twins. It just goes to show you - be careful what you pray for!

Anyway, I was one of these twins, Esau was the other. He was born first, but just by a few minutes, and they say I came out holding his heel. So, they decided to call me, *he takes by the heel* or *he supplants*, Jacob. What a thing to do to a child! I cannot believe the names some parents give their children! Anyway, I was marked from the beginning as one who would try to take what my brother had and I was termed the younger, put in second place, just because he happened to be born first.

I suppose we got along about as well as any two brothers, that is, not that well. We fought some, but compared to what happened between Cain and Abel, I'd say we were tight! The first conflict of note was over the birthright and it is true that, when he came in from the field starving and I had the stew ready, I asked him to give me his birthright in exchange. But I didn't think he would do it. And why did he have the birthright in the first place? The way I see it, it could just as well have been mine, and was now, and only because he was foolish enough to give it to me. I wasn't going to let him starve. This story says more about him than it does about me. Come on!

The next big conflict between us sounds bad, I know, the one where I stole Esau's blessing from our father. I dressed up in animal skins so that Father thought I was Esau; he was so hairy, just like an animal. And I did fool Isaac and receive the blessing because of my deceit. But there are some things you have to understand here.

It was Momma's idea, the whole thing was her idea, for me to steal Esau's blessing. I was her favorite, I suppose, and I was her boy, Momma's Boy, but only because Esau was Father's favorite. I don't know why he liked Esau better. Maybe he was more of a man's man, always out hunting wild animals, all hairy and rough and all. I don't know. And I don't really care, much... Momma loved me, I knew that, and I did what she told me and I got that blessing. Yes, I felt bad afterward. It was certainly nothing to feel proud of.

But before I could muster up any kind of apology, Esau vowed to kill me. So, Momma told me to run away to Haran where her brother,

my Uncle Laban, lived. There I could work and make a reputation and find a wife. And that I did. Momma said she didn't want me to marry a Hittite woman anyway and this gave me all the reason I needed and away I went, just like Momma said.

It was on the way to Haran that I had the dream you have read about today. It wasn't my only important dream. I had a bunch of them. It runs in the family, I guess. My boy Joseph was quite a dreamer and he could make sense of other people's dreams too. I don't know what was going on with my dreams. I think sometimes I was just so discouraged with life, my place as number two, the scheming I had to do to get ahead, the fact that my father never really thought that I measured up, that dreams were a way of lifting me up out of that discouragement.

This night, as I slept with my head on a rock, I dreamed about a staircase leading up to heaven. You call it a ladder and that's "O.K." but it wasn't a ladder. It was wide enough for angels to go up and down on past one another. It was like the ziggurats the Babylonians build, staircases leading up to a summit. Only this summit was heaven itself!

Anyway, as I saw this staircase, suddenly I saw God standing there and God said a number of things I will never forget. "I am the God of Abraham and Isaac and I will be with you and keep you wherever you go. You will have many descendents. Know that I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." When I awoke, I said, "Surely God is in this place and I didn't even know it!" The dream was so real that it didn't really seem like a dream. So, I said a prayer of thanks and offered a sacrifice, I made a little monument and called the place Bethel – *House of God*.

As I say, this wasn't my only dream, nor was this the only time I felt close to God, but I can tell you one thing. I remember all of those dreams where I learned something crucial, I remember all of those places that became holy for me because I felt close to God. God was with me, looking after me, using me to build a nation. I felt like more than Jacob the deceiving Momma's Boy that day and for days to come!

Bolstered by this experience, I journeyed to Haran and met my Uncle Laban, but not until I had seen his daughter Rachel. Whoowee!! What a looker!! I was willing to do whatever it took to get that girl, and

I did work for seven years, at my uncle's request, but at the end of that time, he said I had to marry Rachel's older sister, Leah, first. Jacob, the trickster, had been tricked. I didn't like it, but there are some women you will do just about anything for. So, I married Leah, the oldest, first and had to work seven more years for Rachel. It was worth it.

I have no regrets. And Leah wasn't all that bad. I have heard some people say that I married Rachel, but got stuck with her ugly sister too, but that wasn't true. Beauty is about more than looks and Leah wasn't bad looking. I just loved Rachel more, but I was buried by Leah.

What's that? I almost forgot. You don't understand this two wives thing. Some in your day have attacked the founders of other religions for practicing polygamy and taking their wives pretty young, but this is just the way we did it. I know it doesn't make sense to you, and I am not suggesting we were right, but you can't judge our times by your standards. Pray God future generations don't judge you by their standards! You see, I had two wives, and while I had children by both, I also had children by their two servant women, and when I first saw Rachel, she was pretty young! It was just how we did it in those days.

Anyway, after years of labor and marrying two wives, I was ready to move on. I had been successful in my work and family life, and I had developed a good bit of confidence. It helped to be away from my immediate family where I would always be number two, little Jacob, the deceptive Momma's Boy. I decided to return home and after considerable negotiations and dealings with my uncle, through which I gained even more self-confidence, I headed back.

But, on the way I received some news that concerned me. Esau was coming with an army of men. Maybe it was time for me to pay up. I deserved it. I prayed to God for help. Then, I came up with a plan to give Esau gifts and ask for his forgiveness for all the wrong I had done him. And all of this I did but, before I met my brother from whom I had been estranged for so long, I had what I think was another dream. I don't know for sure. Sometimes dreams and reality overlap.

You know the story. I had crossed the stream at the ford of the Jabbok and this man or angel or something wrestled with me until dawn. Often in my life I had let someone else call the shots. Momma told me

to deceive my father, Momma told me to go to Haran, Laban defined the terms of my marriages and employment. But on this occasion, in this fight, I defined my own terms. I fought hard, held my adversary and told him I would not let him go until he blessed me!

So, that he did; that's when I got the name Israel. For you strive with God, the man said. Or was he a man? I don't know. When it was over, or when I awoke, I know not which, I felt like I had been close to God again. So, I named the place Peniel – *Face of God*. I don't know that my adversary was God or even an angel. Perhaps I was struggling with myself, Israel fighting off Jacob, God's servant within me overwhelming the deceiver who was always there too. I don't know.

What I do know is that once again this experience close to God strengthened me to face my challenges. For what happened next is that I met my brother Esau and fell before him in humble apology and he forgave me and wrapped his arms around me and we cried together. Some might see my behavior and Esau's as signs of weakness. They are mistaken. This was the most courageous moment of my life and maybe my brother's as well. It takes more courage to admit you are wrong than it does to conquer the greatest foe, and it takes even more courage to genuinely forgive another. What a moment it was...

Anyway, that's enough sentimental talk from an old man, that's enough of my story. What do you think now? Am I Jacob or Israel? Patriarch or Momma's Boy? I think I am all of the above. I know we would all like to divide the world into neat categories of good and evil, but I have come to believe that we are all just a mixed-up old bag of stuff. Pray God we grow throughout our journey and let the good overwhelm the evil! And pray God we have a few sacred moments and places that become sacred for us, that help us know that we don't have to do this alone, that God is with us each step of the way! But, I really believe that all of the names fit me in some way.

But look at the time, enough about me. What about you? Who are you really, deep down, not the you you bring out at church when everyone is looking, but the you who lurks around in the dark and schemes to take what is rightfully yours? What are the names that fit you, the ones that cheapen you, the ones that make you angry, mostly

because they contain some truth, but also the ones that point to the genuine nobility the Creator has placed within you? Come on now, be honest! Aren't you a mixed-up bag of stuff too? I may not know your details, but I bet I could come pretty close... Ah... maybe too close.

So, what am I saying here, that we're all a mixed-up pile of junk and there's nothing we can do about it? Yes and no. We all have names that fit and we all have a mixture of instincts and behaviors, good and bad, and we ought to be honest about that. But we can also keep allowing our dreams to bring us closer to God and our own best selves. You see, every time I dreamed, whether out of wishful thinking or holy restlessness, I got in touch with the possibility of something more in my life. We all need that and the truth is something more is always out there for us. We just don't realize it until we allow ourselves to dream, allow God's hopefulness to overcome our cynicism.

You don't believe it? Well, let me tell you about one more dream I had. It's not in your book real clearly but it's there hidden. Years after Esau and I reconciled, and my twelve boys grew, one was sold into slavery and we thought he was lost forever. He got into trouble because I had picked him out as a favorite, gave him a special coat and all. You would have thought that, if anyone would have known the pitfalls of favoring one child over another, I would have.

For many years I thought Joseph was dead and it was my most persistent dream that some day we would see him again. The dream seemed too good to be true, but I kept dreaming it and sometimes the dream alone kept me alive, and, you know the story, of course, he was not dead. He prospered in Egypt. And it was my greatest joy in life to have that dream come true – to see my Joseph again before I died!

So, keep on dreaming. Keep on the journey and expect those sacred moments and places to transform you. No matter how discouraged you are about yourself, your work, your family, your faith, your nation, your world, don't give up! God will never leave you and God will accomplish whatever God has promised in your life.

A rose by any other name is still a rose... beautiful, but thorny; fragrant, but temporary. Maybe that's the lesson. I am Jacob and Israel, Patriarch and Momma's Boy. And so are you.