

## **“The Surprise Party”**

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**Sunday, March 6, 2016  
Fourth Sunday in Lent**

**Readings from Scripture Genesis 32 (selected verses) and Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32**

*So Jacob spent that night there, and from what he had with him he took a present for his brother Esau, 200 female goats and 20 male goats, 200 ewes and 20 rams, 30 camels and their colts, 40 cows and 10 bulls, and 30 donkeys. He delivered these into the hand of his servants, He instructed them, “When Esau my brother meets you, and asks you, ‘To whom do you belong? Where are you going? And whose are these ahead of you?’ You shall say, ‘They belong to your servant Jacob; they are a present sent to my lord Esau; and moreover he is behind us.’” For he thought, “I may appease Esau with the present that goes ahead of me, and afterwards I shall see his face; perhaps he will accept me.” So the present passed on ahead of him; and he himself spent that night in the camp. The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his 11 children, and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had.*

*There Jacob was alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, “Let me go, for the day is breaking.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” So he said to him, “What is your name?” He said, “Jacob.” Then the man said, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.” Then Jacob asked him, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.”*

*Genesis 32 (selected verses)*

*Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. The Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” He told them this parable: “There was a man who had two sons. The younger said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them.*

*A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. Then a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating. But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ So he set off. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.*

*The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.*

*His elder son was in the field; and when he approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He asked one of the slaves what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed a fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' He became angry and refused to go in. His father came out to plead with him. He answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have worked like a slave for you, and have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property, you killed the fatted calf for him!'*

*The father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"*

*Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32*

Will you pray with me? Gracious God, we hear the stories of scripture and we are invited to wrestle with them together, to be guided by your wisdom and spirit, to remember the power of the living word that can live within each one of us. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

In the Tuesday morning book study group this year, we have explored two books recently. One was Seeing Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes. It is a book by Ken Bailey, a Presbyterian pastor who studied at Eden Seminary and taught in Lebanon in the Middle East for many years. In the book he writes about the parables and how they reflect the cultural traditions of the Middle East, and he does a great job of helping us understand the story beneath the story.

The other book is one called Not In God's Name with the subtitle "Confronting Religious Violence." Rabbi Sacks' book challenges us, those of us of the three faiths of Abraham--of Judaism, Christianity and Islam--about the importance of being in dialogue with one another. I thought that was poignantly pointed out by the Quest Class statement of faith today. His theory is that the underlying cause of the tensions is that we view each other like sibling rivals. He shows how these ongoing rivalries among those of the three traditions echo the rivalries between Isaac and Ishmael and Jacob and Esau and Joseph and his brothers. And he takes us into the stories, inviting us to consider whether or not we've gotten so focused on the rivalries, we are oblivious to the reconciliation that takes place in these stories.

Today's readings are the story of Jacob and Esau and the parable of the prodigal son. I found as I read Rabbi Sacks' interpretations of Jacob and Esau, the parable kept coming to mind. Both touch on jealousy between siblings, acts of betrayal and end on notes of reconciliation. At first I thought it was a stretch in my own mind but I was relieved to find out that Ken Bailey wrote a book on exactly that; how Jacob and Esau's story is the root or the basis for Jesus' parable of the prodigal son.

The tensions between Jacob and Esau begin at birth. Esau is born first but Jacob is hot on his tail; he's got his hand on his brother's heel like he wanted to get out first. He wants to take his brother's place as the first born and all that that entitles him to. As they grow up, Jacob's jealousy grows. Jacob and his mother appear to side with one another, while Isaac and Esau are on the other side. One night Jacob goes in to speak to his father pretending to be Esau. He wants to deceive him so that he can receive Esau's blessing. Isaac senses that it is not Esau, but Jacob has planned so well and soon convinces his father that he is indeed Esau and receives the blessing.

When Isaac and Esau realize what has happened, they know the words cannot be taken back and they are both heartbroken. Jacob's mother convinces him to leave town and get out of the way of the anger and so he goes some distance to be near Laban's family, distant relatives of Jacob's family. There he falls in love with one of Laban's daughters and wants to marry her. Laban says he'll grant that after seven years of labor. So Jacob works for seven years and the wedding day comes, and he finds that Laban has tricked him. He is married to the older sister, Leah. Turn about, it seems, is fair play. He has been deceived just as he deceived. Laban gives permission for him to marry Rachel too but is required to commit to seven more years of labor. This morning's reading fast forwards us a number of years when you think the incident would be long buried. Jacob learns, though, that Esau is coming his way and he is not alone. He is so sure that Esau has come to get his revenge, he gathers up his family and tries to get them to safety. Then it occurs to him, maybe I can bribe my brother by offering him herds of animals. He sends out his servants with the animals to make the offer. But Esau will not accept the gift. Now Jacob is really distraught. His betrayal has come back to haunt him big time. And now he wonders, how can I keep my family safe?

But in an interesting twist of faith, that night Jacob struggles with someone in the darkness, a stranger with no name. Some rabbis say he is the guardian angel of Esau, others say it is God. Jungian psychiatrists would say it's Jacob's darker side. Jacob wrestles through the night holding onto the stranger, just as he held on to his brother's heel. Then the stranger says, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." Jacob says, "I'm not going to let you go unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" He said, "Jacob." And the man said "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed." So Jacob called the place Peniel, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."

I think this is the point at which the whole story shifts. Jacob has struggled with the stranger, the one who might be God, but he has also struggled with himself. He appears to understand things in new ways. He realizes his jealousies have resulted in betrayal and destruction, and maybe he begins to realize that Isaac loved them both and was going to bless them according to their particular gifts. A contemporary perspective might be that Isaac, the father, knew that each of his sons had a calling; one would take over the family business and the other would go into the priesthood. Esau had the land and wealth, Jacob was to carry on the faith through the generations. From Sacks' perspective, as the story ends some things are resolved for Jacob. He has a new name. He is moving in a new direction. Esau arrives and once again is offered all those animals, but this time he accepts them. Finally Jacob has returned what did not belong to him in the first place. Esau doesn't kill Jacob, he embraces him. Though they go their separate ways, they are reconciled as brothers once again.

Now we turn to the prodigal son. This son, the younger son, is chomping at the bit to get out of town and he wants his inheritance now. The insult is that he cannot wait for his father to die. So his father grants him the money and he leaves town. But all too soon he has spent it all. He is hungry and homeless and feeding pigs. But then something happens. We are not sure exactly what, but just as Jacob wrestled in the darkness, the son wrestles within. The words in English are, "He comes to himself." He hits bottom and repents. Now Ken Bailey questions the validity of the son's repentance and Jacob's, too. But I find more hope in Rabbi Sacks' perspective so I'm going to stick with him.

So the son comes to himself and it's the beginning of a reckoning. He is aware of what he has done wrong and he decides to go home in spite of all the risks. He doesn't know if his father will welcome him or reject him. He also knows because of what he has done and the shame he has caused his family, he could be stoned by others. But that isn't what happens. When the father sees his son, he picks up his robes and runs as fast as he can. The act of lifting up his robes and running is a very unusual thing for someone in the Middle East to do. Wealthy men never ran. Others did their running for them. They never picked up their robes. But he not

only runs with relief, he runs literally to save his son's life, because if he welcomes him home in public in front of others, they will not stone him.

The father's joy is real and profound. He welcomes him home, it says, with compassion and he schedules a celebration. At first everything seems to be going well, but it's not. Someone is unhappy. The elder brother, the one who stayed behind. That makes sense for many reasons. If his brother shamed his father, he shamed the family. He left him stuck to do all the work of two sons. He squandered their father's money. But it seems that there is something more. In spite of all the love his father professes for him and his gratitude to the elder son for all he has done, there is jealousy in the air. Is he mad at his brother for coming back? Is he upset with his father's seemingly easy forgiveness? Does he think his father loves his younger brother more?

So while we witness the joy of the father welcoming home the long-lost son, the pain remains for the older son, and there is no neat resolution of this story. But that shouldn't surprise us, because Jesus often tells stories without clear resolution. His parables often end with questions. Jesus' teachings also have many layers. Ken Bailey says, in part, this story is one that speaks to the struggles of what is going on in Jerusalem at that time. Jacob is now Israel and Jesus is speaking to Israel, but he has upset them. He welcomes sinners and the unloveable and the unclean. He challenges those in power for their lack of compassion. So on one level this is a story of religious politics, of who is welcome and who is not. But as often happens, there is more. It is a parable that has the power to speak to us directly, as well, as individuals. So how do you hear this story? As the younger son? Have you ever left home and become lost? Do you remember the moment when you had to look within and stop blaming someone else? Or are you in the midst of that journey and need a reminder that it is only when we come to ourselves and are honest that we can trust that God will welcome us home with loving arms. Some of us may be the parent who is waiting for a beloved child to come to him or herself. We want to do something, but sometimes we can only wait. The father never left home. He never sent out an emissary, but he waited. We know he waited because each day he must have scanned that horizon in hope, because when the day came he ran out and welcomed his son home.

In this story we witness the love of a parent who loves with deep love whether or not we are the one who left home or the one who stayed. We are reminded through the father that the grace of God is offered with no strings attached and no works that must be achieved, only the willingness to come to ourselves and repent, to know that it is time to turn around and head home to the one we belong to.

Some of us may hear the story as the older brother, struggling with jealousy or anger, wondering if we matter as much to our parents or others. We are invited to consider whether we are misconstruing the depth of love that someone else may have for us. I remember a story a friend shared. He was part of a family, and had two siblings, two boys and girl in the family, and their grandfather used to drive them crazy. He would talk about the other two to my friend all the time. Peggy this, he heard; Peggy that. John this, John that. Then Grandpa died and they gathered at the table and he said my brother said, "I'm even going to miss Grandpa always telling me how great you two are." And the other one started laughing, "What do you mean? He was always talking about you two." "No," said the third one. "He talked about you two." And they all began to laugh. The truth was out. Grandpa had been proud of all of them. They are reminded, as are we, that we can hold on to sibling rivalry or we can open our hearts and our eyes to see things differently.

I think today's stories remind us of the power of the living word and the depth of God's grace; the power of repentance and forgiveness, the reality of sorrow and joy, of love and jealousy, of hope and despair. In essence these are stories about the realities of life. The journey of Lent is a call to reflect and to grow, and to acknowledge the ways we need to grow. It is a time to be honest with ourselves and with the God we love. A time to remember that no matter what, no matter when, when we finally come to ourselves, we will be welcomed home. Amen.