

Sermon

All Saints' Episcopal Church

The Rev. Zachary C. Nyein

Gospel Reading: Genesis 25:19-34

July 12, 2020



*And the Lord said to Rebecca,
“Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples born of you shall be divided.”*

We are living in a Rebecca moment. As the polarizing effects of politics and pandemic persist in the wake of loss of human life, widespread confusion, chaos and injustices on full display, it can feel like the apocalypse at times. Or maybe just a really difficult pregnancy. In as much as an apocalypse is simply an unveiling, a re-ordering, a re-orientation of the world as we know it, I suppose pregnancy provides an apt metaphor.

*“Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples born of you shall be divided.”*

From the place of confederate monuments in the public square to our willingness to wear masks, we are in so many ways a people embattled with ourselves. Even typically united communities are having a hard time finding common ground. Having studied music education in undergrad it has been fascinating at best and disheartening at worst to see colleagues and acquaintances having robust debates about the potential risk of singing and playing wind instruments together in groups – in the face of so much we honestly don't know about this continually evolving virus.

*“Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples born of you shall be divided.”*

According to the ancient Jewish tradition, Rebecca was extremely uncomfortable during her pregnancy and would inquire of God why she was suffering. Whenever she would pass a house of Torah, Jacob would struggle to come out; whenever she would pass a house of idolatry, Esau would struggle to come out. At first, Rebecca thought she had one child with conflicted propensities, but after consulting the sages learned of warring twins who would fight the whole of their lives.

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In these times of division and contention, these words resonate — sting — so sharply within our souls. How quick we are to identify ourselves and our loyalties with Jacob — the hero as we associate our adversaries with Esau.

Jacob — Good wolf, Esau — bad wolf. But as the narrative plays out, the delineation between the good son and bad son is not so forthright. In the end, Rebecca and her favorite son Jacob — attain for him the family birthright (recognition as the first born and authority over the family) through trickery and deception. In today's story, Esau chooses the instant gratification of warm homemade soup over the honor of the birthright. Years later, Rebecca and Jacob would trick their patriarch Isaac himself by taking advantage of his deteriorating vision and disguising himself as Esau. In turn, Isaac personally and irreversibly turns over the birthright to the second born son, thinking he was Esau. Jacob the wrestler who came out of the womb tugging at his brothers heel and would later wrestle with God himself, would go on to be renamed Israel to lead the people Israel.

There is much to be mined from this story, which never quite wraps up in a bow. Not unlike some of our familial strifes, the brothers never truly reconcile this side of the grave. Ultimately, this episode tells of a God beyond our understanding, who still works and moves amidst and despite the messes we make, not even deterred by our unresolved issues. By every social and societal convention of the time, Esau had absolute claim to the birthright as firstborn. And yet, in this instance, God would seem to choose Jacob, the cunning and deceitful mischief maker to lead God's people. This story tells of a God who disrupts, upends, and subverts our expectations to make grace known.

These stories of grace toward the undeserving in the eyes of the world complicate our desire for individual justice and our proclivity to categorize people as us and them, good and bad, righteous and unrighteous. But perhaps before we too easily react to this Rebecca moment by identifying our team with Jacob and our rivals with Esau, we would do well to acknowledge that — a little bit of Jacob and a little bit of Isaac lives in each of us. And that they each more than the caricature of themselves to begin with — just as each child of God is more than a caricature.

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Speaking of expectations upended, In the Gospel reading today, Jesus has been preaching throughout the region of Galilee preaching the word of a Kingdom not of this world – casting a divine and prophetic vision of valleys exalted and mountains brought low – in a realm rich with blessings not for the rich but for the poor, not for the strong but for the meek, not for the powerful but for the persecuted. His message is embraced by some and spurned by others. At the end of this very chapter he is rejected in his hometown Nazareth. And so today Jesus offers an explanation of why the word of this kingdom takes root among some and not among others in the parable of the Sower – also known as the parable of the four soils. It’s a pretty straightforward metaphor. The word of this kingdom is the seed, and the four types of lesser and more fertile soils represent varying degrees of reception for this word.

While our engagement with this story again could focus solely on figuring out how to make sure we are in the right category – how to cultivate the good soil in our lives – let us not miss the bigger picture. The fact that Jesus speaks of soil to begin with. In using the metaphor of soil, I believe that Jesus is speaking not primarily to singular Christians but to communities. Jesus is focused not only on individuals, but environments. I’m no master-gardener, but think about it. The most basic unit of soil is neither good nor bad. If you took just a small spec or clump of soil, it’s useless. It doesn’t even really qualify as soil. Nutrients from dead and composting plants, moisture, earth worms, oxygen, and microbes – You need all these things to constitute soil. None of us can constitute soil – whether good or bad – on our own. Contrary to the hyper-individualized version of Christianity in the West, the word of the kingdom can only take root in community because the kingdom of God is a reordered, reimagined, reformed community where all the people of God may find flourishing as they love God and neighbor together. Not just individuals, but environments.

As I read this parable, I am really glad that God is not charge of opening back up the economy. To say the sower in this story is lavish would be an understatement. He is utterly spendthrift, reckless, dare I say wasteful with the scattered seed – inhabiting a posture of abundance, extravagance, and sheer hope. Surely seeing the barren land, the dry and rocky soil and offering the seed to its fate anyhow. It’s almost as if, despite seeing the sterility he gives it a chance – It’s almost as if he believes the word of the Kingdom can take root anywhere. Through Esau and Jacob alike. Such is the kingdom of God which surprises our sensibilities and upends our expectations.

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I believe the kingdom of God is yearning to take root, even now. Even in this Rebecca moment we find ourselves. Perhaps more than an apocalypse, this is a pregnancy – as God prepares to do a new thing. Through Jacobs and Esau – a like. And as we consider what it means to be good and hospitable soil in the dual pandemic of COVID-19 alongside the continued degradation of black and brown bodies, I believe a focus on environments alongside individuals is key to the kingdom of God taking root. It's not just about the me and you. It's about the y'all. We may not be overtly racists, but we can acknowledge we inhabit a society that has been influenced by the evils of racism. We may not be highly at risk for complications from the coronavirus, but we may live, work, or play around those who are.

Yeast, salt, light, a spec of dirt, a drop in the ocean, a vapor in the wind. Such are the materials of God's ever-expanding kingdom. Such are the people of God called to be – imperfect and complex as we are. We are just small actors in the unfolding reign of God breaking into a world pregnant with God. As we go about our week may we too listen, yield, and bear the fruit of the kingdom of God. Amen.

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