

Today’s theme reflected on our bulletin covers and in both the Hebrew and Gospel texts is the theme of abundant possibilities. I want to focus on the Genesis story of Jacob and Esau. We begin the story today with some possibilities revealed to us but more will be revealed in the text for next Sunday.

Most of us know this age old story of what on the surface is a bad case of sibling rivalry? Yet, upon reflection we learn much more from the story and what we learn is that God works through and in the lives of ordinary and indeed flawed human beings to bring about good. And so we are able to enter this story in all our ordinary, flawed humanity and receive a message of grace. In Walter Bruggemann’s commentary he often uses these two words: “Other One” when speaking of God. I like that because “Other One” reminds me that all my boxed in definitions of God are just too limiting for that unknown source of life and love that moves throughout our universe and touches each of our lives. So if I use “Other One” in today’s sermon, you know who I’m talking about.

No more than in this story of Rebekah and Isaac, this family of blessing and promise, does the Bible tell us about real people in real circumstances. First, we must take note that Isaac and Rebekah are having trouble getting pregnant. Infertility is a big problem in Genesis; remember that Isaac’s parents, Abraham and Sarah, had the same difficulty. Although we’re told that Isaac and Rebekah belong to the family *destined* to do God’s special work; how’s that work going to continue if they don’t have children? So when biology doesn’t work naturally; they pray. (I’m not saying that if we can’t get pregnant, all we need to do is pray; it happens that I know this from my own experience.) What the story IS saying is that Isaac and Rebekah don’t control God’s future by their own means. They are *needful* of divine grace, and they open themselves to God’s purposes. Prayer includes but can be more than words spoken or rehearsed in our minds. Prayer is an *opening of oneself* to possibilities that we don’t control or determine.

Once Rebekah conceives the story tells us that trouble is coming. The two boys are fighting even within the womb. They are vying for first place in the birth canal. Being the oldest male even for a few minutes meant just about everything in a culture when the first born got a huge measure of the inheritance! (Being a second child myself, I always thought this very unfair!) But then we begin to understand a theme that occurs over and over throughout the Bible; it is a theme of paradox; it is a theme of reversal; it is a theme that says human beings who make the rules that govern society including the privilege of the firstborn are not the ones who truly make the rules of the universe. Human rules and plans and schemes can always be turned upside down.

This story will not be the last time we read that God shows preferential treatment for the despised or the poor, the sick, the unworthy, the scorned of society. The theme of reversal comes to a climax in the Christ who ushers in God’s dream for the world, not from setting high on a throne, but hanging low on a cross.

Once these two boys are born it is interesting that the parents are no longer of one mind in prayer, they choose sides. Rebekah loves Jacob best; and Isaac favors Esau. But the “Other One” works through the lives of both boys in ways that continue for chapters to come.

There are lessons here for us to learn. We might learn from Esau to control our need for immediate gratification. He was starving; pottage solved his physical needs; it did not solve his spiritual needs. The Hebrew word for *pottage* plays on the Hebrew word for *red* referring to

Esau's coloring and insinuates through poetic license that Esau and his progeny will live only for day to day existence.

From Jacob we might learn delayed gratification. Jacob seems to have an idea of a larger view of what's to come and his role in it. Of course, we might also learn clever grasping and manipulation at a moment when Esau is most vulnerable. We might learn the power of those with plenty of food and basic necessities of life lording their way over those living on the point of starvation.

But what we learn from both brothers is that although they think *they* are the ones bargaining for pottage and birthright, their deeds do not determine the rest of the story; they must wait on the "Other One" who in spite of the flawed behavior of human beings, still makes a way for the best possible good for this family of destiny. There are more possibilities awaiting these two brothers which we'll hear about next week.

I'm intrigued with possibilities. I believe the Other One is always in process perceiving the possibilities for the best possible good given the flawed circumstances of human existence. How else do we explain bad things happening to good people? Is it God making bad things happen? I don't think so. It is the way the world is. But given the way the world is, it **IS** the Other One that moves us, inviting us, and sometimes pushing us towards the best possible outcome.

Now, I believed this, I believed that the "Other One" held abundant possibilities, even before my husband got cancer. But it is more real now than ever before. It is in the abundant possibilities of the Other One, in whom I place my trust, though at times I also shake my fist.

Most of us have had experiences in our lives when on retrospect we realize that our life's course moved us towards something meaningful, something holy even if we were disappointed in the moment. Sometimes it is a career or job that we wanted but failed to get. I remember the very first church where I interviewed, wrote me back saying that my resume looked great but my voice was too soft. I resented that rejection at the time because it sounded like they equated a soft voice with weakness, and I was not weak. But shortly afterwards I did get a call to ministry where I found meaningful work and where together Tom and I and the girls had a church home. I don't know what life would have been like if that first church had hired me with my soft voice. I do know that I've been blessed and that possibilities of goodness have opened for me a path, that has held much joy.

In many ways we are a privileged people; we are like the first born receiving the inheritance, simply because we have been born in a great and wealthy nation. Yet, our calling is to humility of purpose, generosity of heart, and faithfulness of spirit. Because in our most astute and wise moments, we know that the "Other One" is constantly loving not only us, but the whole world, and is constantly inviting and drawing all creation to abundant possibilities that are held only within the consciousness of God.

Today we are here not only to worship and to realize our place within God's design but to join ourselves to God's purposes so that abundant possibilities may be not ours alone but that through us we as God's vessels may extend outward and be blessings that are far reaching and beautiful for God's world.