

But I'm So Hungry...
Genesis 25:24-35, Hebrews 12:1-3, 14-17
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights
June 11, 2006
Pastor Dave Carver

I'd like to begin by saying a few words on behalf of Esau. Perhaps it's because I'm an older brother myself; perhaps it's because I have been told by more than acquaintance that Esau and I share a certain...shall I say, "shagginess"...but the truth is that I think that we have turned old Esau into a cartoon character. If you've been around the church very long, you'll have noted that Esau's name almost never comes up unless it's as an example of a Neanderthal-like moron or someone who was just a loser.

Part of that comes from the style in which the scriptures, like today's readings, are written. They're written by someone who already knows how the story is going to turn out and therefore doesn't have to spend a lot of time wondering what might, and what might not, happen.

Kristen introduced us to this next generation of Abraham's family tree a couple of weeks ago. We see that Abraham's son, Isaac, and his wife, Rebekah, have twins for who conflict seems inevitable. Hard to imagine that they're twins, really, because the boys couldn't be more different.

Esau is Mr. Outdoors. Mr. Field & Stream. He's large and in charge, and I'm sure as he heard the campfire stories about Abraham's blessings, he had no trouble seeing himself as the child of the promise.

And his brother, Jacob? He was a mama's boy. If Esau was Mr. Outdoors, Jacob was Mr. Clean. They were really an odd couple, these boys.

In today's reading, we see Esau coming home after a disappointing hunt. We don't know how long he'd been out, but we can assume he hadn't had very much luck. Why do I assume this? Well, first off, chapter 26 verse 1 tells us that there was a famine in the land. And we hear about the fact that the stew that's simmering away on the rangetop is lentil stew. There's no meat anywhere to be found. Esau is famished. In all likelihood, Jacob is hungry, Isaac is hungry, Rebekah is hungry – all God's children are hungry...because there's a famine going on. And he sees the pot of stew – one that does not belong to him – and he asks for it. And, as you have seen, when Jacob is unwilling to just share the stew with his brother, Esau trades away his rights as the older brother – thus sealing his reputation as a dim bulb in all of the "who's who in the Bible" books.

But look at this from Esau's perspective. There are no good options here. Did he know about the promises made to Abraham? Sure he did. Did he know about the descendants and the stars and the grains of sand? Of course. But if he was dying, of what use were promises? If he was ready to keel over from malnutrition, was an old campfire story going to sustain him? It just didn't make sense. So he made a calculated decision. He was smart, really. Logical. He'd worry about the future later, and deal with the crisis now. He made his decision to survive, and he'd deal with the future on another day.

Let me tell you something. In every church, Esau is the guy who gets voted onto the board of Trustees. Esau is the guy who many churches want to be their pastor. He's using flawless logic, taking one day at a time, making sure that he's taking care of himself. It's really sound reasoning.

Except...except it disregards the promises of God. It treats the call of Abraham and the purposes of God as though they were really only campfire stories after all.

If God kept Noah and his family alive during the flood...If God spared Abraham during all of his wanderings, and preserved Ishmael's life in the desert and Isaac's life on the top of Mount Moriah...then clearly, God knows how to keep the elder brother alive. God knows how to care for Esau.

But Esau is so hungry. He just can't quite see all that. It's not logical – not nearly as tangible as that bowl of stew that smells so good.

For a man who is starving, choosing a bowl of soup is a good choice. Yet for Esau, it was not the best choice. As a friend of mine has taught me, sometimes the good is the enemy of the best. Sometimes, when we are struggling to figure out what to do or where to go, we settle for something that sounds reasonable and looks logical rather than waiting for the best answer to emerge.

Have you done that? Have you ever wrestled with the tension between the comfort of the present and the call of the future?

Don't forget, Jacob was hungry, too. The famine was throughout the land. Yet Jacob knew, somehow, that God's promises were even more certain than a bowl of lentil porridge. Jacob had learned that God could be trusted – and in this moment, Jacob saw his chance to get in on the action. So he trades the sure thing – the soup of the day – for an unrealized promise – the blessing of the firstborn.

It's Esau who sleeps like a baby that night – well fed and energized. And it's Jacob who wonders how God's going to pull him through this situation. He knows he's in for some tough sledding – but he's sure enough of the outcome that he's willing to endure that hardship.

One of you was in a pretty tough situation financially not all that long ago. When you shared with me the realities of your situation and your plan for getting through it, I said, "Wow. That looks pretty hard." And you said, "Yeah, it is. But do you know what? I can do anything for six months. If I thought that the rest of my life was going to be like this, I'd take the bridge. But I can live through this because I know that it's not going to last." You can wait through the tough times if you know that the outcome will be favorable.

The people who were the recipients of the Letter to the Hebrews knew something about waiting through tough times. This letter is written to encourage them as they suffer for their faith in Christ. There is some persecution afoot, and these early Christians had begun to wonder if maybe God had forgotten about

them, and a significant theme in the letter is “Hang on! Hold out! Keep on doing what you know is right!”

Chapter 11 of the book of Hebrews is simply a long list of the stories that “everybody knew”. The author begins with the second man on the planet, Abel, and draws a line that goes through the whole history of God’s people, naming names like crazy: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Samson, David, the prophets...and then in chapter 12 reminds the readers that they, too, are a part of this story. That all of these people are not just characters in a book, they are part of the community of faith. They are, he says, “witnesses”.

And since we’re not alone, but in fact surrounded by so many witnesses, then let’s look to Jesus, who himself endured suffering in order to open all the blessings of God to the people of God. And in this passage, the writer of Hebrews uses Esau as a negative example: Don’t be like Esau, who sold out the eternal for the temporary and came to regret it. Instead, claim the grace of God and hold onto it. Live into it.

I don’t think that I need to tell you that we live in a world that would elect Esau to be Secretary General of the UN, Prime Minister of Canada, or even President of the US. If our world values anything, it’s the here and now. It’s easy to see that in our economic choices, ranging from personal choices where we are encouraged to spend far beyond our means and pay it off later to a federal economic policy that seems bent on saddling our children and grandchildren with an astronomic national debt. We see it in our lifestyles, where we think we can eat whatever we want and then just take a pill if it upsets our stomachs. We see it in our moral choices, where everyone knows that we ought to simply do what feels good and worry about consequences down the road. We live in a world that ought to have Esau’s face on the money and the postage stamps.

But we who are a part of the promise that God gave to Abraham and his descendants do not need to find our lives characterized by that kind of lifestyle. What is the word for us in this scripture passage?

I think it’s the same as it was to the readers of Hebrews. Hold on to the promise. Do what God has revealed to be right. Realize that what we see – whether it’s a famine in the land, an angry emperor, a painful job situation, a boyfriend who’s pressuring you to show him that you really love him, a stack of medical bills – whatever the reality that is facing you today – is not the last word. As God’s people, we are called to remember that these stories from the Bible are NOT simply legends from the past without a connection to our world. They are proof that the God whom we serve is a God who guides and leads his people through hard times and enables those people to withstand pressure and to live through incredible difficulty. The promises are not idle dreams, they are anchors that will help hold you steady in the midst of great storms.

Secondly, we need to remember that these promises are not meant to be held on an individual basis. We are to hold onto them in the context of a community – a “cloud of witnesses”. What does that mean? It means that we refuse to suffer alone. When we are hit with a time of pain or testing, the appropriate thing to do is to bring that occasion to the people of God. It means

walking up front after the worship service and saying to the people who are praying, “Yeah, well, I’m really trying hard to get out of this addiction right now, and I can’t do it alone.” It means calling a friend and saying, “Look, I’m having a heck of a time as a parent these days, and I’m afraid I’m not doing a great job. Can you help me out?” It means telling another person the truth when she or he asks, “Hey, how are you doing?”

But it’s more than just opening up the painful places of our lives to another person. It also means being willing to speak truthfully to each other. If I really love you and really want you to hold onto the promises of God for your life, then I’m probably going to have to call you at some point and say, “Hey, friend, I’m having a hard time seeing how this choice that you just made fits in with your calling as a follower of Jesus Christ.” If you want me to hang in there in the midst of suffering, then you’re going to have to be paying attention enough to my life to be able to call and offer me a word of encouragement when you see that I’ve been hit with some seemingly insurmountable obstacle.

And if we do all that – Shazzam! We are SO going against the grain of our culture. In a me-first world, we say that we will give ten percent of our money to make sure that others have enough to eat and access to the help and hope of Jesus Christ. In a mind-your-own business world, we are willing to confront each other and say, “have you thought through the implications of the things that you just said to so-and-so?”. In a “you’re not the boss of me, I’m a free-agent” world, we say, “have you asked other people to pray with you about this decision?”.

Do you see what I’m saying here? We can’t stroll in here and join in with two thousand years of Christianity in being really hard on Esau. What he did made sense – in his culture, and in ours. Don’t beat him up for that.

Just don’t look to him as a role-model for faith. Instead, look to the promise that was extended to him and is extended to you. Look to Jesus as the one who is the embodiment of that promise. And, like Jacob, act as though that promise just might be worth something to you – today, and in the days to come. Amen.