



## “Living Your Name”

*Rev. Dr. Michael L. Gregg*

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*Genesis 25:19-34*

So, I am a twin. And because I'm a twin, I get asked a ton of questions like, “Did your parents dress you the same when you were younger?” Or, “Do you know what your brother is thinking?” Or, “Can you feel the pain when your brother gets hurt?” The question people always ask me the most is which one of us is older. I love this question because my answer tends to stump people. My response is always, “I'm older, but my brother was born first.” I'll let you think about that for a minute while I tell you my birth story, which is similar to the scripture reading we just heard about Jacob and Esau.

The story begins at Flow Memorial Hospital in Denton, Texas in the early morning hours of the tenth of July in 1978. My mother thought she was only having one baby until the birthing process started. Then, low and behold, two babies were set to come into the world. I, twin A, was getting ready to make my grand entrance when my path to birth was thwarted. My brother, who has always been much more impatient and competitive than I, lassoed my neck with his umbilical cord Pecos Bill style so that I would not be the first one out of the womb. I was tied up like an event at the stock show and rodeo. Because I was held back, like Jacob did to Esau, my mother had to have a C-section so I could be rescued from my brother's snare. And ever since our birth, my brother and I have lived lives of mostly good-natured competition and rivalry.

Quite a birth story, isn't it? Well, it's not exactly true...probably like the birth story of Jacob and Esau which is likely an embellishment to establish the personalities of the twin brothers and how God would develop each of their lives. We all love a good story about how we were born, how we were named, or how we found our purpose in life. My brother and I, unbeknownst to our parents took elements of our actual birth story and wove them into a dramatic, though ultimately false tale. As an adult, I mentioned our tumultuous entry into the world to my mother and she laughed at me. You see, what we had imagined to be truth was not. My real birth story? My real birth story was less dramatic. As twin A, I was all set, ready to be born when my umbilical cord prolapsed causing my cord to exit the birth canal before I did. Due to the loss of nutrients and oxygen and my inability to be born in this condition, my mother needed an emergency C-section. So, my brother and I were pulled out backwards with my brother being born first. There was no lassoing, no intentional harm on the part of my brother, no real-life Jacob and Esau tale.

But back to my previous answer to the question, “Which one of you is older?” My answer has always been I am older because if we had been born without a C-section, I would've been born first. But, due to the surgery, we were born backwards and my brother was pulled out before me. So, I am older, but my brother was born first.

We all have stories. Our stories define us and that definition often begins with the stories of our birth. Based on my interpretation of my own birth, I grew-up with the idea that my brother was always trying to one up me and that I would have to live my life in constant competition with him. And no, we didn't struggle in the womb like Jacob and Esau, but we still had plenty of moments of competition growing up. And yet, even in the midst of our fighting and fussing, we chose to live into our names. My mother, since she believed she was having only one child, was going to call the single baby Christopher Michael Gregg. But since two entered the world, she gave me the name Michael and my brother the name Christopher. We decided to overcome our childhood confrontations and struggles and live into our names. I have found it important that Michael means "one who is like God" and Christopher means "one who bears Christ." And we both ended up in vocational ministry with my brother being a Music Minister and me as a Pastor. We are living into our names and the paths God set before us.

Names are important. There is a fanciful story about how the name of a product can make or break its sales. In the early sixties, Chevrolet built a car they named the Nova. Do you remember that car? It was named after a word in astronomy which means a star that suddenly becomes thousands of times brighter and then gradually fades. You probably know the term supernova. The car was somewhat of a success in the United States, but interestingly, the sales of the Nova in Spanish speaking countries were not so super. What the marketing people failed to realize was in Spanish, "no va" means "no go." I mean, who would buy a car whose very name means it doesn't go anywhere?

I mention this urban legend because when it comes to reading scripture, we often do not get the full meaning of terms and names because we are unaware of the implications and ambiguities of the original language of a biblical text. Several weeks ago, we talked about Isaac, whose name means "laughter." We discussed how his parents thought it was a great name because even in their old age it reminded them of how God filled their lives with joy and laughter. But to Isaac the name probably wasn't all that funny. How would you like to go through your life with everyone laughing at you? Names are extremely important in the Bible and they often signify not only a relationship to a family, but they describe something about the character of that person.

Today, the Scripture reading tells us about some twins, two brothers who lived into their deprecating names at first, but then followed a scandalous God who blessed them and changed them. Isaac and Rebekah gave their twin boys names that were descriptive of their birth. The Bible reading for today says when the first twin was born he came out red, and all his body was like a hairy coat; so, they named him Esau. Esau is a name that is a play on words that means "red and hairy." The second twin came out with his hand gripping Esau's heel; so, he was named Jacob.

The meaning of the name Jacob is somewhat unclear. But, as just mentioned, one of the translations is "heel," the one who kicks his way out of or the one who grabs onto the heels of others. But it can also mean "supplanter," the one who would displace and overthrow his twin. This name foreshadowed a life of conflict for Jacob, beginning at his very birth. There was even conflict in the family of Jacob and Esau as parents chose sides, chose names, and chose vocations for their boys. And we see that despite the blessed prestige and societal status of Isaac, God chose the younger twin and went against Isaac's dominant position and the cultural firstborn

hierarchy. God's grace is confusing. It is scandalous. It upsets the way we organize our world and the way we live our lives.

But what was so important to Esau for him to sell his birthright? Instead of striving to be the first born, the one who received the blessing, Esau lived into his name which meant hairy and red by demanding the red stuff, the pottage. That is what several translations call the lentil stew that Jacob made for Esau. Pottage. Pottage is an unusual word. When I heard that word for the first time as a kid in Sunday School, I thought of the three bears and their bowls of porridge. After reading Goldilocks growing up I figured that all real live bears liked to eat oatmeal. But pottage is something different. It was the only time the word was used in the entire Bible. It is translated *adom*, or red. We don't really know if the red stuff was soup, beans, stew, or a bowl of cold oatmeal. But this meal was significant because the word for pottage and red stuff was used to describe Esau when he was born. He was red and hairy. He was *adom*. Later in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Edomites were the people who tended to fight against Israel, just as Esau fought against Jacob. Even from birth, we saw that Jacob and Esau, Israel and the Edomites, were destined down their perilous paths... that Jacob was fated for the battled birthright.

Woody Weilage told me of his Old Testament professor in college who referred to Esau and Jacob by the names of Hairy and Grabby. And from the beginning of Jacob's life we get a picture of just how grabby Jacob really was. We don't really know what Jacob's age was but he was old enough to cook some stew. When his brother Hairy came in from hunting, Jacob grabbed Esau's birthright away from him. The pattern and destiny of Grabby's life was established early and Grabby became a person who preyed on the helpless and took what he wanted. He was a trickster and a predator. Then Grabby and his mother, Rebekah, cooked up a plan to dupe his father Isaac so that Jacob could receive the family blessing. Isaac had grown old and couldn't see, with his eyes or his spirit. And so, the mother and son's elaborate plan to supplant the blessing from Esau worked like a charm. Esau and Jacob, Grabby and Hairy, couldn't escape their family, their fates, and their failures; they lived into the chaos, confrontations, and conflict.

And we definitely see conflict from the very beginning of Jacob and Esau's life. The conflict was evident to Rebekah as she felt her children struggle within her. Jacob and Esau wrestled in the womb and they fought into birth. They were at odds throughout their childhood and they competed nonstop. Jacob's beginning, even his name, revealed that he was born as a child of conflict. He was born to a kind of restlessness so that he would always deceive, grasp, and exploit. He became trouble to everyone he met. Yet, God knew the future of this troubled child, that Jacob would be more than his birth, more than his name, more than his upbringing. And the Lord said to Rebekah, "the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger." God announced this contentious relationship of brother to brother. And we don't know why there was so much conflict. God didn't explain or justify. God simply spoke the life of Jacob into being.

God was indelibly enmeshed in the life of Jacob and Esau and Rebekah and Isaac. Although conflict came from birth, we must not neglect the initiatives of God to reorganize power and position. God's purpose, even today, is to make scandalous promises and keep those promises despite our human intentions and expectations. That is true for the ministry of Jesus. Jesus

spotlighted and blessed the poor, those who mourned, the meek, the hungry, and the marginalized. Throughout the Bible, God did not always align God's self to the most valued ones, or the first born. God called Isaac, the second born of Abraham, to live. God called Jacob, the trickster twin, to be blessed. God called Joseph, the youngest, to prosper. God called David, the smallest, to be king. The last shall be first. The last with all of their faults and failures will continue to find a place in the realm of God's love and purpose in the world.

We are given hope by God that God will bring life out of barrenness and purpose out of defeat. God is a God of inversion and upside down love. We are not fated to the way the world is organized, to our family histories, to our birth limitations, or to our given names. Our God is a scandalous God, and it is a scandalous decision by God to challenge the hierarchy of society. Esau was still blessed with family. Esau was still blessed with wealth. Esau was not judged or condemned. This text simply reminds us that the accident of birth does not guarantee privilege or power. God was free to work God's will in a conflicted person like Jacob and in conflicted people like us because, according to Walter Brueggemann, God is in conflict too. God is in conflict with societal structures. God challenges the positions of power in the world. God elevates the younger one, the weaker one, the one without power, the widow, the orphan, the tax collector, the sinner. The first shall be last and the last shall be first. And through the purposes of God, and indeed some trickery, the last twin became the first twin.

We might feel today that other people and other families are going about their lives and deciding their own futures. But this conflicted family of Jacob and Esau, just like Abraham and Sarah before them, reminds us that we can only rely upon God and God's promises. Relying on God's promises, for us, means we stop trying to control and govern our lives. It is only God who gives life. Our families, friends, and connections don't guarantee us fulfillment or a future. Our given names don't define us. We must cast our worries and our cares upon God, the Giver of Life. The future of everyone in this dysfunctional first family was a gift from God. Sarah, Abraham, Ishmael, Rebekah, Isaac, Esau, and Jacob were all children of promise and their lives were a gift. As it is said of Jesus, "He gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God."

We are children of scandalous promise! We are children of extraordinary gift! Empty, barren lives have no hold on us. Our parents and our families, our pasts and pain, our struggles and sins, do not define us. Only the Lord of Life can call forth and create in us our full potential. We have new names, given by God. We have new names bestowed by Jesus. Our new name is "beloved." And as the beloveds of God, we are also named peace, justice, mercy, compassion, and grace. Let us go through this week trusting in the powerful promises of God and let us live into our new names.

Amen.