

Oh, Esau! Where art thou, brother?

By J B Leftwich

Martin Thielin, minister of Lebanon First United Methodist Church, recently concluded a series of sermons on the fabled Biblical character, Jacob, with a shorter mention of Esau, Jacob's twin brother.

Any person, child or adult, who has participated in Sunday School classes in Christian churches knows the story of how Jacob through fraud and treachery emerged as the leader of a clan that evolved into a nation. Along the way, he had a real life wrestling match with God setting the stage for others who have had spiritual bouts with the Diety before becoming a disciple.

Jacob is a major player in the history of Israel, the nation his clan evolved into as they multiplied and became a political and military power. In fact, Jacob changed his name to Israel after his marathon match with God.

It's a familiar story to graduates of childhood church school classes. Sadie Amonette (Miss Sadie to me) taught us Biblical history in our Sunday classes in the Rock Springs Methodist Church in Putnam County. Cousin Minnie continued my education when my mother transferred us to the Buffalo Valley Church of Christ.

Both teachers carefully avoided the lurid details of the story which are generously sprinkled into the narrative.

“What does it mean that he lay with his daughter-in-law?” we would ask.

Our teacher simply moved to the next subject, leaving us to our speculations.

Martin Thielin's series or sermons delved into the spiritual aspects of the story, but his probing forays into the passage from Genesis prompted collateral questions which sent me to a modern big-print version of the Bible that clarified the “lay with” question by substituting the words, “slept with.”

My question was: “What finally happened to Esau?”

Remember Esau? He was the older brother whom Jacob and his mother defrauded by deceiving Isaac, the twins' father, into blessing Jacob instead of the brother who was entitled to the family blessing.

This, of course, enraged Esau who swore vengeance on Jacob who fled to the sanctuary of his Uncle Laban's domain in the hope that Esau might cool off.

And now the romantic part of the story. Jacob fell for his cousin Rachel, daughter of Uncle Laban, and agreed to work seven years for his uncle in order to have her as his wife.

At the end of seven years, Jacob himself was defrauded when he discovered Leah, Rachel's older and less attractive sister, behind the veil after the wedding celebration died down. Jacob accepted the cold reality of his marriage and agreed to work seven more years for Rachel.

With each bride came a handmaiden, so Jacob and the four women formed a joint venture to develop a clan. Leah produced six sons and a daughter named Dinah, the handmaidens produced two sons each, and poor Rachel came up with a lone child, a boy named Joseph. {See the last chapters of Genesis for another great story, this one starring Joseph.}

In the meantime, Jacob was scheming to return home with his family and was forced to bargain with Uncle Laban, now his father-in-law, on the division of his uncle's property in which Jacob figured he had earned a share.

Uncle Laban agreed to a division but specified only the sheep and goats with stripes or spots would be assigned

This sent Jacob's mind racing. He promptly devised a scheme to see that all of the female sheep were bred to rams with streaks or stripes. When Jacob and his fledgling clan departed, he was a rich man with camels, goats and striped sheep.

So, how was Esau doing during all of these years?

Well, pretty good, thank you. He had stayed home, albeit without the family blessing, worked hard and accumulated. When he heard Jacob was in the neighborhood, he gathered an army of 400 men and intercepted his brother and his family. Jacob prepared his family for assault by placing his handmaidens and their children in the first line of defense, Leah and her family second, and Rachel and Joseph in the rear.

With a peace offering of farm animals, Jacob went to face Esau. Then a strange thing happened. Esau, no longer bitter, refused the offering, embraced his brother and welcomed him home.

And that's a sermon I have never heard. Like the Prodigal Son's older brother, Esau does not get the pulpit attention he deserves. We often overlook the real heroes while the more exciting performers bask in the spotlight.

And if you are interested in excitement, stay tuned. To Genesis, that is. The next episode is even more a page-turner. There are seduction, treachery, mutilation, murder and later the birth of a nation.

And probably a lot of good material for sermons.

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