

Chopped
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Genesis 25 & 27

I'm not much into reality TV, but those of you who know I like to cook will not be surprised one of my favorite shows is "Chopped." On "Chopped," four chefs, each with his or her own gifts, fears and attitudes, compete in a cook-off for \$10,000.

They cook three courses – appetizer, entrée and dessert. They have 20 minutes for appetizer; 30 for each of the others. Each course is judged, and after judgment, one chef is "chopped" – and the remaining chefs compete in the next course.

The kitchen is equipped with 8 burner ranges; a 7 minute ice-cream maker; blast chiller; food processors, griddles, mixers, and the like. Five-pound spice containers like those you find in Sam's or BJ's are everywhere; there is a pantry and a refrigerator full of ingredients.

The kicker? Each course starts with a mystery basket of four ingredients, all of which must be used in the dish. For instance, an appetizer basket might have: Wonton wrappers, cow tongue, papaya, and gummy bears.

The judges are culinary experts – all who have their own quirks. One is a pasta snob who hates raw red onions; one loves anything with a spicy Latin flair, one wants every plate to blend in a perfectly coordinated palate-pleasing dish; another expects the presentation to be fit for royalty.

For you cooks, it's like the extreme version of getting home from work, looking in the pantry, and wondering how in the world what's in there could ever be combined into a savory meal. All along, knowing you will be judged the winner – or chopped – by your household awaiting a miracle at the dinner table.

I suppose the repetition of "savory meal" in our biblical text led me to think of "Chopped." But the reality is, this story, like that show, is filled with the same tension, at times the same, seemingly arbitrary ingredients and judgments, the same pressure, anxiety, creativity, defeat, and despair, and you wonder – what in the world is going to come out in the end?

Some of us heard this Bible story years ago in Sunday school. Jacob and his mother trick his brother Esau and his father Isaac so Jacob will get the birthright. Somewhere along the way, later on I thought to myself, if Esau was willing to

trade the birthright for a bowl of stew, he wasn't a good candidate to keep it anyway. But, since from other stories, we also knew Jacob was God's chosen, then it all made very simple sense. This was God's plan.

As children, we often accept stories at face value. God did this? OK. What else did God do? Flood the world except for an ark-full of people and animals? OK. Part the Red Sea for one group of people; drown the army following them? OK. What else? Tell me another story.

As learned adults, however, when we revisit those Sunday School stories, we find ourselves with a few questions to ask.

I look at this story and I ask: Is deception part of God's plan? Taking advantage of your brother's hunger to strike a lopsided bargain? Parents playing favorites? Tricking your husband into believing he was blessing the rightful firstborn, when all the while it was the younger (her favorite) he was blessing? Are these the ways of God?

The story doesn't seem to worry about those questions. It reports what took place – with little or no moral judgment on the actions. It just "tells it like it is." And that makes you and me anxious. How can this be the work of God?

And the more I look at the text, the more it is a mystery basket of ingredients – many more layers, flavors, numerous underlying themes and a host of unanswered questions.

Last week we learned Isaac wasn't allowed to go back home to pick a wife for himself. Abraham was concerned Isaac couldn't be trusted to return, which doesn't say much for Isaac's wisdom and or his convictions about the promise. It's no wonder Abraham sent his servant to look for a strong, decisive woman like Rebekah to be Isaac's wife, to perhaps hold up, if not wear the pants in the family.

If we had read the intervening verses – we find out Esau marries Hittite women. Something his father was not allowed to do, because they were to marry women from good stock back home. Makes me wonder, why didn't God choose men who were smarter than these two?

The story speaks about Rebekah's deception. But in our story today, Rebekah receives a word from the Lord while the children are still in the womb, that Jacob is going to rule over his brother. Deception? She knew how the story was supposed to turn out.

I wonder if over the years as Jacob hung around his mom while big brother was out in the field, Rebekah might've filled Jacob in on the promise she received from God. "You're the one. God told me. Don't say anything."

So that one day when macho big brother, unsuccessful on a hunt, comes in and says "I'm about to die – give me some food" (sounds like a little kid, "Mom, I'm starving!!!!) – Esau demands his little brother give him the lunch he had just made, should we be surprised that Jacob seized the opportunity? Make a deal. He didn't STEAL it – he traded.

Did you wonder if Jacob was hungry too? What if, given that Esau's hunt was unsuccessful, Jacob was actually trying to provide nourishment for the family, and now Esau was gobbling it up for himself? We never think about that in this story.

There are scholars and preachers who say that Jacob is manipulating the future. But Esau could give a flip about the future. He's hungry NOW! At least Jacob is looking ahead.

The story continues. Isaac is now old. He sends Esau to get some game, and cook him a **savory meal**.

You know this week, when we were talking about this as a team, there were some who were feeling bad for Isaac and Esau. "O, this is awful – they're deceiving Isaac; and Jacob is taking advantage of his brother when he's famished; and then they're forcing the issue, they're trying to force God's hand, instead of waiting for God to do something."

Well that's often true – sometimes we DO try to force God's hand, instead of waiting on God's timing.

But look, Isaac's about to die!! Rebekah has known ALL THESE YEARS about the promise, and if Jacob doesn't get the blessing before his father dies, what will happen? That does sound like they're preempting God. How much longer COULD they wait?

Interestingly, Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, commenting on this passage says that the "duplicity is initiated by Rebekah and implemented by Jacob – but without it, there would be no narrative, and conventional inheritance would prevail."¹

I love and respect Walter Brueggeman.....but "no narrative"??? Without this deceit there would be "no narrative"? How do we know? Certainly not THIS narrative – but perhaps another?

Suppose another thing happened. Suppose Esau received the promise and inheritance and after Isaac died, realized the promise is as much a burden as it is a blessing, could've known Jacob was a far better leader, far better thinker, far wiser and more faithful to the ways of God – and given it to Jacob himself? Of course, that isn't our story – but who is to say it couldn't have been?

These are the sorts of questions I ponder. That's the sort of struggle I have as I read this story. It's like looking at that mystery basket of ingredients and saying, "What in the world are you going to cook with this???" And the text doesn't answer any of those questions. It just tells the story.

All this to say, the story is what it is. Like Israel, which told this story over and over again, looking back to their ancient beginnings, and wrote it down as part of the unfolding of God's plan in human history, the story simply describes what the people of faith have seen take place.

God was in the midst of dysfunctional families and thoughtful households, working through wise decision making and deceitful actions. Working through this mystery basket of ingredients called Isaac and Rebekah and Jacob and Esau. And for us that is tremendous good news. Individual stories could've unfolded differently – with different choices and decisions along the way – but somehow God would've used those too to accomplish God's purposes.

For us – for you and me – a mix of wisdom and ignorance; fear and courage; and maybe even one or two dysfunctional families in here today. Somehow, both because of us and in spite of us, God is working God's purposes out.

It's a theme that is throughout Scripture – and it's a theme that I'm sure is what led the grandfather of Presbyterianism, John Calvin, to emphasize the profoundly comforting doctrine called **providence** – that God's plan will come to pass – and thankfully, there is nothing you and I can do to ultimately thwart it. Heaven forbid if any one of us in here could defeat God's plan. And joyfully, the amazing thing is that there are sometimes things we can actually do to advance it. God has made us partners, our decisions have effect, but God's overarching purposes hold the final sway.

The call of this text is to live our lives so God can use us, and our job is to do our very best with each decision, each action – knowing there are times when we will be very much aligned with God's plan, and likely times when we will be working at cross purposes with God, and God's plan will prevail in the end.

Which actually takes me back to those original Sunday School understandings. This is the way it is. I can see God's hand in this. We cannot answer all the reasons why. But we can affirm and rejoice that as we look back, we see the hand of God at work. And if God can work with THIS family – then God can work with ANY mystery basket of ingredients – any one of us – any family; any household, and that is Good News. For all of us! Thanks be to God!! AMEN.

1. Walter Brueggemann, Interpretation Commentary on Genesis