

Hespeler, 12 July, 2020 © Scott McAndless

Genesis 25:19-34, Psalm 119:105-112, Romans 8:1-11, Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

When the ancient people of Israel gathered around their campfires, they did what all ancient people did: they told stories. And the stories they told taught them who they were, who their God was and about the peoples who were their neighbours. The stories were remembered and passed down and some of them were eventually even written down and preserved in the Bible.

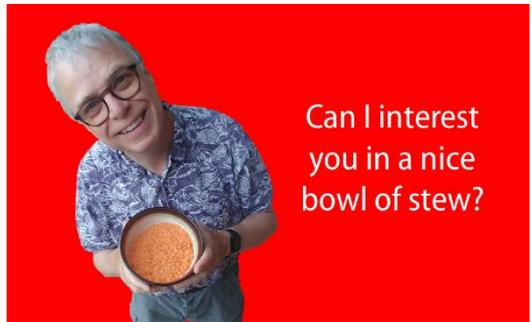
We read one such story this morning in the Book of Genesis – the story of two brothers – twins – Jacob and Esau. The Israelites told stories about Jacob because they saw him as their common ancestor. In Jacob's actions and heroics, his adventures and mistakes, they saw indications of who they were and who they were supposed to be. Esau, for his part, was claimed as the ancestor of another people, the Edomites, who lived in the land just southeast of the ancient Kingdom of Judah.

The Israelites clearly felt that they had a close kinship with the Edomites. Why else would they picture the founders of those two nations as twin brothers? And the connections were quite clear. The two peoples spoke a very similar Semitic language. They had very similar customs and even religion. The chief God of the Edomites was called Qos, a God who is described in very similar terms to Yahweh, the God of Israel, leading some to speculate that maybe Qos was merely another name for Yahweh.

The Israelites knew that the Edomites were a proud, strong and noble people, but, for a long time, they also saw them as a subjugated people. The Judahites ruled over the Edomites and there are some indications in the Bible that the Judahites may have mistreated the Edomites, so much so that the Edomites celebrated Judah's destruction at the hands of the Babylonians.

And I believe that, when people do that, when they demean, mistreat or exploit another people group on the basis of their race, creed or identity, something inside them at some deep level tells them that this is wrong. Something creates a desire to justify such an attitude and so what they do is tell stories. Every racist, for example, has a stock of stories that they can tell you that, in their mind, proves that all people of a certain race are dirty or devious or lazy or whatever vile thing they happen to believe. Racists need those stories to justify themselves. If they lose those stories, their racism will be undermined. That's how powerful stories are.

Well, I believe that the stories of Jacob and Esau, for at least some Israelites, fulfilled that kind of role. These stories convinced them that those blasted Edomites deserved every bad thing that happened to them. But all stories, including racist



stories, can be seen from another angle. And that made me wonder. If what we have in Genesis is the story that the Israelites told each other about the Edomites around their campfires, what stories did the Edomites tell around *theirs*?

Exhausted after another long day, the Edomite tribespeople settle in around their evening cook fire. They are a tough people and have never minded hard work but these days there is plenty of grumbling because they see so little of the fruits of their own labour. They also grumble over the food that they share. It consists mostly of a stew made with the rations that are provided to them by their overlords – rations that mostly consist of lentils. The stew is nutritious and gives them the strength they need to continue to work, but the diet is monotonous and red lentils are a food mostly considered to be fit for slaves.

Eating together like this always reminds them of the noble heritage that they have, but also of the sovereignty over their own affairs that they lack, but no one wants to dwell on the grimness of their situation. So, before long, voices begin to clamour for some diversion. The best storyteller in the tribe is besieged with requests. “Tell us the story of our great ancestor. Tell us the story of Edom, whom the Judahites call Esau.”

As storytellers are wont to do, the old man demurs, insists that surely there must be somebody else who has a story to tell, but, in the end, he gives in as he always does and the people fall silent as the story begins.

“Edom was the firstborn son of Isaac by his wife Rebekah. He was born to be a prince among men, but, even before his birth, his way was troubled by his brother. For there were two children in the womb of Rebekah and Edom’s brother, though he was always a scrawny and skinny little thing, harassed and harried Edom as he grew. The contention between them became so violent that their mother could barely stand it and she feared that she might die.

“That was when she went and inquired of the Oracle of Qos, whom the Israelites call Yahweh. And the Oracle of Qos answered her saying: **‘Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided.’**”

The faces that shine in the firelight all nod at the familiar words of the oracle. The words of the poem are often repeated to explain the enmity between the two nations. But the people then visibly lean forward to listen to the next words, knowing full well that there are two different versions.

“‘The elder shall be stronger than the other,’ the storyteller continues to the murmured approval of the people. ‘But watch out for that younger one, he’ll be a tricky bastard.’” That line always brings forth a peal of derisive laughter.

“When the time came for the twins to be born, Mother Rebekah brought them into the world. The firstborn was strong and had a red complexion and so Rebecca called him Edom, the red one. He was all covered in hair even as he left the womb, surely another sign that he would be powerful and manly. But

even that moment of triumph, the moment of his birth, was marred by his brother who came after him grasping his heel and so they called him Jacob, the grasper, and so he remained.”

“Edom grew and became a powerful man. He was a hunter who ranged far and wide. There was no beast that he could not take down with his spear and his bow. He was the mightiest of all hunters since Nimrod.

“His twin brother, the grasper, for his part would not risk the dangers of the hunt. He remained in safety close to his father’s tents. He watched over flocks and gardens while his brother faced down lions and bears, antelope, wild ox and deer, ostrich, crocodile and hippopotamus. Esau was lord of the wilderland, while Jacob ruled over the kitchens.

“But Edom knew not that he had chosen the wrong place to establish his domain. He knew not that there was more power in the kitchen than on the hunting range. Again and again, Edom would bring back the finest game and hand it over to the servants in the kitchen tent but then he was always given some bogus reason for why he couldn’t have any to eat himself and he was only offered a tiny barley cake and a little bowl of gruel to fill his growling stomach. Jacob used his influence to starve his brother half to death so that he grew desperate.

“And then came that day – and I know you have heard of that day. You have heard the story as the Judahites tell it, saying that *our* ancestor despised his birthright, the honour of his place as the firstborn son. They rub our faces in it, tell us that we are deserving only of this red stew that we eat because our ancestor sold everything for it. But we know the truth.

“Edom had come back from the hunt. He was exhausted for he had chased the antelope all day long and, for once, they had evaded his spear and he had brought home nothing. It was something that never happened, but this time, for once, it had happened. Jacob had watched his brother approach the camp empty-handed. And he knew that Esau would be both discouraged and famished. He knew that this was his chance.

“The potage that Jacob prepared that day was different, unlike any that Edom had seen before. He made it with onions and red lentils that Jacob had cultivated in secret and the family had never seen before. It smelled fabulous and looked so intriguing. And when Edom came into the kitchen tent, Jacob was there alone. Edom rummaged around looking for some bread or cakes or something, but Jacob had taken care that there was nothing of the sort. The only food was in that delicious smelling pot that bubbled on the fire as Jacob stirred it.

“‘My brother,’ Edom cried, ‘you have to give me some of that, uh... some of that red stuff that you’ve got there. It’s making my stomach grumble so much that I fear it shall consume me from the inside.’

“‘Oh,’ replied Jacob, ‘and what will you give me in exchange for my *magic* stew?’

“Edom laughed. He just thought that Jacob was his brother who would only respect his place as the eldest child. He did not see the evil glint in the man’s eye. ‘Ha, ha, ha, I’m about to die here and you’re asking me what I’ll give you. What wouldn’t I give you? You’re about to save my life!’

“Jacob laughed too, but if Edom had really listened, he would have heard the sinister undertones in the laughter. ‘Heh, heh, heh, fine, then how about you give me your right of first born.’

“‘Done!’ laughed Edom without a care as he grabbed a bowl and a ladle.”

The storyteller cast his eye around the circle of his listeners. “You know how the Judahites remind us of this tale and how they hear it. They throw the jars filled with red lentils at us from their carts. They laugh at how much they say that we love them. They tell us that our father despised his birthright and sold all of us out for the sake of a bowl of lentils. But we know better and we will not forget. And we believe that the day will come when Qos will remember the firstborn son of Rebekah.”

Have you ever heard a story or an anecdote about somebody who belongs to a particular race or group – a story that implies something about all of the people who belong to that group? It might even have been a true story, or at least a story that had some truth behind it, but the problem with such stories is that they have this way of making us look at a particular group that can make us justify the way that we treat them as if they were all drunks or cheats or lazy or whatever.

You have heard such stories, I know that you have. I wanted to tell you the story of Jacob and Esau the way that the people of Edom might have told it because it was a story that was used to treat a whole people with injustice.

In the 137th Psalm, the psalmist complains specifically about the people of Edom to God. “**Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites,**” he says, “**the day of Jerusalem’s fall, how they said, ‘Tear it down! Tear it down! Down to its foundations!’**” The Edomites, Judah’s closest neighbours and their close ethnic kin, hated them enough to cheer their destruction by Babylon.

My friends, that kind of animosity does not come from nowhere. It is not okay, obviously, to cheer somebody else’s destruction, but, man, the people of Edom must have had some legitimate grievances. When people start crying out for the defunding or even the abolition of some established institution, you should maybe listen to where that level of outrage is coming from.

I think it’s kind of instructive to consider that the stories we tell about other peoples – and in particular the stories we tell to justify the way that we treat other people – absolutely matter. So, the next time you hear a story that seems to paint all people of a certain ethnic group or social group with one broad brush, maybe just ask yourself, how would the people who lived that story from the other side of it have heard it?