The story of Esau and Jacob is one of the most fraught stories in scripture; which actually saying a lot, given some of the these stories.

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It begins before the boys are even born, nods at their birth and developmental years, and, in the bit of it we have in today’s reading, takes a pause at the “birthright” incident.

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The “birthright” belonged to the eldest son.

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It included the rights and responsibilities of having a double portion of the father’s inheritance, the spiritual leadership of the family, and the final voice in tribal decision-making.

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It is astonishing enough to read that Esau sold his – at any price – but truly shocking to think he did so because he “thought so little of” – or in some translations, even “despised” – it.

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What are we to make of this?

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Well, it depends – a lot – on who you ask.

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And because – very weirdly, in my opinion – our Sunday readings never tell us what happens in-between today’s anecdote and the story of Jacob’s dream which we will hear next week, I want to go a little further into the story of these brothers, as interpretations of their respective characters and experiences diverge more and more radically as their story progresses and human intervention in it increases.

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At some point after the boys’ birth, there was a famine, and while we don’t know if Esau and Jacob accompanied them, Isaac and Rebekah headed toward the land of the Philistines.

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Isaac pulled his father’s trick of trying to pass Rebekah off as his sister, which didn’t go down well with the Philistine king, but eventually he and Isaac signed a treaty and the family lived in peace.

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Time passed. The boys turned 40. Esau married two local girls, that is, Canaanite women. We aren’t told how, but we read that “they made life very difficult for Isaac and Rebekah.”

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More time passed. “Isaac had grown old and his eyesight was failing.” He summoned Esau, asked him to go hunting and make “the delicious food that I love,” so “I can eat then bless you before I die.”

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Rebekah overheard this conversation.

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She ran to Jacob – as we know, her favorite son – and said, in essence, “Look, your father is getting ready to bless your brother. That doesn’t work for me. Let’s trick him into blessing you instead.”

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Jacob’s response was along the lines of “Uh … I’m all smooth and clean and Esau is all hairy and, well, smells like sweat and dead animals. I don’t see this being a successful ploy.”

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To which Rebekah said, “Hush. We’ll put some goat skins on your arms, I’ll swipe your brother’s favorite clothes for you to wear, I’ll cook the perfect food, and you’ll be good to go.”

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Jacob said … “OK.”

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When Jacob appeared at Isaac’s bedside smelling and feeling like goats, carrying a bowl of stew, Isaac was skeptical.

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He wondered aloud how “Esau” had managed to find and prepare the game so quickly, and why he was speaking with Jacob’s voice.

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But he felt the arms and smelled the clothes and came down on the side of “this is Esau,” and blessed him – “him” being Jacob.

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Just then Esau came back, made the “delicious food” his father requested, and brought it to Isaac who “was so shocked that he trembled violently.”

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Isaac told Esau that Jacob had “already come deceitfully and has taken your blessing – I’ve already made him more powerful than you, and the blessing cannot be undone.”

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At this, point Esau burst into tears and asked if Isaac really had only one blessing, at which point Isaac gave him what he could, which wasn’t really much.

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Perhaps not surprisingly, Esau “was furious at Jacob” and said to himself, “When the period of mourning for the death of my father is over, I will kill my brother.”

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Rebekah got wind of this, too, and so told Jacob hustle off to her brother Laban, to “live with him for a short while until your brother’s rage subsides.”

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She finessed this by saying to Isaac “I really loathe these Canaanite women and can’t bear the thought of Jacob marrying one as Esau has done, so let me send Jacob back to my brother;” Isaac agreed, and told Jacob to go, which Jacob did.

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The next time we see the two of them together, Jacob, who had decided to return to Canaan, has sent a fortune’s worth of livestock ahead of him as a gift for Esau, not unreasonably anticipating big trouble when Esau learns his brother is back in town; but when they meet, Esau tries to decline the gifts and throws his arms around his brother in welcome and forgiveness.

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This is such a prickly story that we human beings who seem increasingly insistent that all things must be reduced to “yes or no, never maybe” – “good or bad, never ‘it’s complicated’” – simply *must* decide that either Esau or Jacob had to be “evil” for things to happen as they did.

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So, which twin is it? Who is the victim here, and of what sort of injustice?

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Well, it depends – a lot – on who you ask.

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Perhaps you are certain that God would not allow the twelve tribes of Israel to descend from a sociopath, in which case you decide Esau must have been evil for Jacob to act as he did.

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But you still have to make meaning of the story.

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So you conclude that the reason “the boys were pushing inside” Rebekah was because every time she walked past a place of idol worship, Esau tried to jump out to join in the abominable heathen practices.

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You opine that while innocent Jacob sat in the tent righteously studying Torah, the wild, worldly Esau was out hunting game, women, and gold, his expertise at “trapping” really meaning he knew how to “trap” his father into believing he was a righteous child.

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That Isaac loved Esau because he perceived that God had actually given Esau the greater soul, greater potential, and greater capacity to elevate the world; but that he went blind from grief when he realized that Esau had succumbed to his baser nature and “sold” his “birthright” to idols and wanton living.

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That while their grandfather Abraham lay dying, the God-fearing Jacob set about preparing the customary mourner’s lentil soup, while Esau was out violating young brides, and committing murder and other atrocities.

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That God’s *intention* was that Esau and Jacob would personify the two types of perfection one can achieve in this world – the ascetic Torah scholar, removed from the world and impervious to its goings-on, and the practical man tasked with taking care of the world’s affairs as *his* means of godly service – but once Esau went full-tilt over to the dark side, poor Jacob was left with no recourse other than to shoulder both burdens and take up his brother’s mission as well as his own.

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That God led Isaac to bless Jacob, if unwittingly, because it was only by adding this blessing *to* Torah that Jacob would have the strength to persist in all the good works necessary to slowly but surely hack away at the terrible darkness of Esau’s evil until, at last, the world would be elevated.

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And that brotherly embrace years later? Well, you reason that the embrace was actually Esau’s attempt to bite Jacob’s neck, a malicious act of vengeance God thwarted by miraculously turning the neck into marble.

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On the other hand, perhaps you are certain the story makes it clear that Jacob – albeit with significant help from his manipulative mother – is the evil one.

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But you still have to make meaning of the story.

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So you conclude that from the moment he was born “grasping onto his brother’s heel,” Jacob spent much of his life striving to be like Esau, while Esau was perfectly content as he was created, with what he had.

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You opine that Esau presents as a classic parental child in a dysfunctional family, protecting his passive father, recognizing his father’s limitations, and devoting his life to care-taking of both his physical and emotional needs, while his brother is oblivious to anything but his own comfort and interests.

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That Isaac loved Esau because Esau was the active, assertive he-man his half-blind, traumatized father could never be, while Rebekah loved Jacob because he was a tabula rasa she could mold into her own scheming image.

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That Esau came in from a day’s hunting, in a famine-and-dehydration induced state of delirium, asked his brother for a dish of stew, and in his weakened state conceded to Jacob’s outrageous demand.

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That Jacob, blatantly lying to his father using God’s name as a witness, committed the gravest sort of sin, but that Isaac, sensing something was amiss, blessed him anyway because his own father’s deceit in the near-sacrifice incident resulted in his never again being willing to trust his own instincts.

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That in spite of all the pain his parents have caused him, Esau’s remarkable sense of honor is seen in his refusal to disturb his father’s peace by killing his brother, despite his rightful anger; and that he manifests his extraordinary love for his father by going off to marry one of Uncle Ishmael’s daughters, once he hears his father telling Jacob not to choose a Canaanite wife.

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And that brotherly embrace years later? You note how chivalrously, generously, and gracefully he forgave his brother, and wonder how he could possibly have managed to achieve that extraordinary psychological growth.

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Do you see any evidence of this sort of polarization in today’s world? I’m afraid I do.

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Are you willing to persist in refusing to buy into such a “this way or that way, no middle way” world-view? I’m afraid I find it increasingly exhausting, and my willingness often flags.

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I need to keep reminding myself that any hope of success in this regard requires giving up the illusion that my essential self is simply a separate entity defined by my own ego; because when I understand myself to be an isolated creature, by definition I live in self-centeredness.

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I need to keep reminding myself that I must strive – or struggle – to keep myself open to unity with God, because it is only by giving myself over to the infinite divine that dwells within me that I can be truly able to welcome broad diversity and multiplicity.

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I need to work – endlessly – on developing a patience that can withstand the relentless barrage of enticement to instant gratification and its accompanying theology of scarcity.

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You know maybe, just maybe, God’s prophecy to Rebekah could have been realized without quite so much drama and irreparable harm if the human beings involved hadn’t decided they needed to take charge and make it happen by themselves, according to their timeline.

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The heart that is focused on the self cannot live in harmony with God.

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Fortunately, we *are* more than our individual selves; we *are* part of God and therefore of each other; the infinite *does* dwell in us, offering resilience, wisdom, and strength for the challenge.

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As Paul says, we are “as good as dead” because of our ego's compulsion to live as separate things that require a “you” to stand in opposition to “me.”

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But we can be assured that our essential, true selves are unquenchably alive, because the Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead is in us, raising us from this death by living within us.

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And knowing, believing, accepting that we are, now and forever, alive in Christ can give us the confidence, patience, and fortitude to live in the “it’s-complicated, us-oriented, maybe” space that helps *others* live. Amen.