



All of us have had the experience in a family, a classroom, a sports team or a work place of the favoured one. Usually the favoured one is looked on with disdain, unless of course you are the favoured one.

The story of Jacob's ladder is an iconic story in the Jewish and Christian traditions and it is foundational to the salvation narrative of the Bible.

You remember the background.

Jacob and Esau are the twin sons of Rebekah and Isaac. Esau is the eldest, but Jacob, the younger, is the one who holds the heel of his brother as he comes out of the womb. His name means "to follow, over reach, supplant."

Remember, Rebekah quite likes Jacob.

Isaac, now very old and blind, is preparing to die; and putting his affairs in order he is offering a blessing to his eldest son Esau. However, Rebekah conspires with Jacob to deceive his father, Isaac, by claiming to be Esau. "Are you Esau?" Isaac asks. "I am," Jacob responds. "Come near to me that I might touch you. You smell like Esau, but you sound like Jacob."

It is a sad narrative of clear deception and abuse, enough to fuel the text for any Shakespearean drama: concealed appearances in order to steal an older brother's birthright and gain a father's blessing. As soon as the words of blessing are off Isaac's lips and Jacob leaves the room, Esau arrives to receive his father's blessing, but it is too late. "*Is there nothing left for me?*" Esau pleads. Nothing. Esau is furious and plots to kill Jacob.

Rebecca says to Jacob, "Your brother Esau is consoling himself by planning to kill you. Flee at once to my brother Laban in Haran, and stay with him until your brother's fury turns away."

So, on the run from Esau, Jacob is in the wilderness; and as night sets in he finds only a stone for a pillow and he falls asleep exhausted.

This is the context for the dream of Jacob's ladder.

In the dream Jacob sees a ladder reaching up to heaven from earth and the angels of God ascending and descending on the ladder. Most significantly God Almighty stands beside Jacob and offers *His* blessing, with the assurance that this land on which he lies will be Jacob's land, and Jacob's offspring will be like the dust of the earth from all four directions, and all the families of the earth will be blessed through him.

Jacob awakes and says, "Well, surely God is in this place! This place is the house of God and the gate of

heaven.” So he names the place Bethel, meaning house of God.

On so many levels this is a troubling story of a classic family system: how the youngest is the favoured one, and how the youngest receives a blessing through deception and trickery. There are similar dynamics in the parable of the Prodigal Son. But primarily what I find troubling is that the deceiver and supplanter is the one who becomes the recipient for the promises of God. What’s that about?

Fast forward, centuries later, to the gospel of John when Jesus calls Andrew, Philip and Nathaniel. Jesus sees Philip and says “Follow me.” Philip says to Nathaniel, “Come and see the one whom Moses and prophets wrote.” Nathaniel asks, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” “Come and see,” Philip responds.

Jesus sees Nathaniel coming toward him and says “Truly, here is an Israelite *in whom there is no deceit.*” “How did you come to know me?” Nathaniel asks. “I saw you under the fig tree.” Nathaniel falls down and says, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God. You are the King of Israel.” And Jesus says, “You will see greater things than these. You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending *upon the Son of Man.*”

In other words, Jacob’s dream of a blessing to all peoples is now being fulfilled in your midst. The heaven will be opened, and the angels of God will ascend and descend on the ladder known as Jesus. Jesus will bring heaven on earth, and the body of Jesus will become known as the dwelling place of God. The dream of Jacob’s ladder is revisited in John’s gospel and claimed to be fulfilled through the event of the incarnation.

So, Jesus says, leave the weeds and the wheat alone, because you never know when God is going to see an unsightly, God-forsaken weed, like Jacob, and bless him. And you never know when a forsaken passover lamb, like Jesus, condemned on cross as the cursed one (the weed who needs to be destroyed), will become a vehicle of blessing for the world.

Honestly, it goes against every fibre of my gardening aesthetic to leave a weed and let it grow, but Jesus says, “leave them be. I will deal with the weeds and the wheat, and I will redeem them all so they don’t overwhelm you.”

In the meantime, know that clearly this: there is nothing, absolutely nothing - no weed, no cursed one, no deceiver, no one that you or I so often (like Esau) want to destroy - that is beyond the power of God’s redemption and blessing. Apparently not even Jacob. If there’s hope for Jacob, then there’s hope for you and for me, and hope for the world.