

Biblical Twin Trouble

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at St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Bedford, New York
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Twins! Now, this is a subject I should know something about right? I have a set, my mother-in-law is one part of a set – twins are very much part of my immediate, close American family. You may have seen my two daughters-in-arms running around like a whirlwind through coffee hour as Tracy and I do our best to defend the cookie table from their hungry paws. Yes, so twins are something I know at least a little about.

We have the most famous set of biblical twins born in today's Old Testament reading – Jacob and Esau. Twins who through deceit, selfish ambition, familial dysfunction and potentially murderous intent compete to outdo each other and destroy the other sibling's chances in life. I'm glad Alice and Milly do not reflect their relationship much – well, not quite yet at least.

Jacob and Esau. Even in utero these two cause their mother considerable pain. Rebekah, unaware she is carrying twins, did not understand what was going on in her womb as the boys fought for advantage inside her. She pleads with the Lord, "If it is to be this way, why do I live?" She had had enough.

And we all know how the birth went, with Esau, the red and hairy boy born first, with Jacob coming up literally on his heels – grabbing one of Esau's feet as he helped propel himself out. Life began for these two in competition, and so it would remain, with Jacob conning Esau out of his birthright and deceiving his father Isaac to gain Esau's first-born blessing. These two characters, one a hunter, sportsman and brash outdoor-type – the Alpha Esau, and the quieter, smarter, stay-at-home cook, the supposed Beta Jacob – could not be more different. And in their teenage years, after Jacob's stealing of the birthright, Esau vows to murder his brother and Jacob is forced to flee.

Now, I seem to recall the incidence of twins is something around the 2/3% mark. And while most probably closer to 2% in biblical times, it still strikes me as odd we only have two other definitive twins in the entire biblical narrative. One is Doubting Thomas from the Gospel of John, known to the apostles as Thomas the twin – although his twin never makes an appearance. And the other set takes us back to Genesis, after the time of Jacob and Esau. They are Perez and Zerah, twin sons of Judah and Tamar – and therefore twin grandsons of the slippery and wily Jacob. These two have a very interesting conception story, in what some may say is a typical Old Testament tale. Tamar, a widow who no man will go near as all who do tend to end up dead with God striking them down, finds herself childless, and hearing her father-in-law, Judah, is coming to visit, dresses up as a harlot in order to deceive him. Judah sees her on the side of the road, and as she is veiled does not recognize her – but recognizes an opportunity to carnally engage for a fee. Which he does. And as he prepares to fetch a kid in payment from one of his flocks, Tamar convinces him to leave his staff and seal as collateral for the debt. As he leaves, so does she – and he cannot find her afterwards to make the payment. Fast-forward three months, and the word is out that this most-probably Canaanite woman, a prostitute, is pregnant from her work – and when Judah hears of this he demands she is bought out and burnt. And as she appears to be tried and executed, she presents him with his staff and seal, and says, "these belong to the father."

Judah, in a tight spot, decides she must not be burnt! And so, six months later, twins Perez and Zerah are born, and like Jacob and Esau, at the time of birth compete to come out first. Zerah sticks his hand out, and the midwife ties a crimson thread around his wrist, saying, “This one came out first!” But that hand is withdrawn, and Perez pops out first, followed by Zerah.

Three twins, with three different stories, and with varying degrees of detail. We have Jacob and Esau, with their story of mistrust, deceit, murderous intent and acute family feuding. We have Perez and Zerah, again fighting it out at birth, competing for selfish advantage and the products of deceitful intercourse. And then we have Doubting Thomas – who, well, simply, doesn’t want to, and will not, believe.

Not entirely inspirational stuff is it? But perhaps very human stuff. And yet, in all three instances, there is hope, and joy and divine meaning when we consider what eventually comes to pass.

In the case of Jacob and Esau, we have, in the end, a powerful and remarkable reconciliation. Years since Jacob’s deceit, Esau approaches his camp with 400 warriors – and the wily one fears the worst. But, that is not what Esau has in mind, and the hairy brother runs up to Jacob, embraces him and kisses him – and together they weep tears of a new-found peace within a new world of remarkable forgiveness.

Perez, one of the twins of Tamar, a woman who uses her considerable wits – and her ability to deceive – to get along in a man’s world – he goes on to father children himself, and is included in the ancestral lineage of the House of David – and in both the Gospel of Matthew and Luke is listed in the genealogy of Jesus Christ himself. The product of an immoral union in the eyes of the Law then, is directly related and genetically-replicated within the physical body of our Lord and Savior. Perez is literally part of the divine plan!

And finally, in Thomas, we have the example of one who doubted but came to believe. Thomas, despite his hesitations and struggles with faith, becomes a convinced and faith-filled convert. Doubting Thomas becomes faithful Thomas.

In our own messy lives, these twins can teach us good lessons on how we can aspire to live positively and follow the Christ. In their early development and struggles in life, these twins can mirror our own complicated and competing struggles. We find ourselves torn between the good and the bad and hesitate on a decision, we discover we are perhaps unwittingly part of a complex jigsaw puzzle of family strife and dysfunction – we struggle with our personal belief or we live through a time when our faith is being acutely challenged by the events of everyday life around us. Or we feel caught up in a web of deceit, and lies and selfish behavior that we reluctantly admit to ourselves puts us first and others a distinct second.

We can perhaps relate to all of these twin traits in the Bible. And yet these children as they grow and mature and live through life show us new ways of living. They teach us to strive always for reconciliation, they encourage us to get on the divine train and work at becoming part of the divine solution in this life regardless of our beginnings or previous track record – and they teach us to believe, to keep the faith – and to trust in our good Lord. And, as per the examples of these three sets of twins, we can hold on to all of this – the chance to reconcile, the chance to live into the divine plan, and the chance to retain and hold our faith up as an example to others – because they came through multiple challenges and strife – and in the end, all was well. And for us, regardless of our challenges we may be facing today, we can with confidence also say, in time, and with faith in God, all will most certainly be well for us too.