

Jacob and Esau Behind Bars

Resisting Rejection by the "Elect" in Genesis 25-27

By Bob Ekblad

People who are truly on the margins do not expect to receive benefits legitimately. Accustomed to being rejected by the powerful, they learn to survive by hook or by crook. If Scripture is to be relevant to today's "damned" it must be freed from dominant theological paradigm that assumes that blessing in this world is a reward for good behavior and exclusion a punishment for bad. I encounter people at many levels of marginalization as chaplain of Skagit County Jail and director of Tierra Nueva and The People's Seminary- an ecumenical ministry to migrant farm workers and study center for Scripture study with people on the margins.

I first met Andres in the jail when he was 22. He participated in my weekly Spanish Bible studies there over periods of 3-4 months while he did time on at least three occasions, and was deported by the Border Patrol to Mexico and returned illegally each time. Andres is short and muscular, with dark skin and hair that have earned him the nickname "el Negro" (the black one).

Andres was an orphan at an early age, learning to fend for himself on the streets of Mexico City. He has scars on his face and elsewhere on his body to show a life marked by struggle. He crossed the border illegally in his late teens to work in the fields in California. Eventually he made his way to Washington State and found work on a construction crew. His eyes reveal both a life of suffering and a readiness for unlimited levels of illegal adventure. He looks expectant and prepared to face any kind of fun or trouble and can invent brilliant lies, which he tells unflinchingly to police detectives, judges and also to public defenders that are ready to represent him-whom he does not trust. At the same time he weeps the moment he talks about the ones he loves. He adores his partner Maria and their four young children, though he is constantly separated from them due to his perpetual troubles with the law.

Maria was also in her early twenties when I first met her. She has a dark, beautiful face and long black hair. In spite of her difficult life she is unusually quick to smile, revealing slightly crooked, protruding teeth that do not detract from her beauty, but give her a slightly mischievous look. She had two young children when she met Andres. Together they had a one year old when and Maria was pregnant with their second when I first visited her. She

lived on the second floor of a rickety cockroach infested house beside the railroad tracks with her children, struggling to make it with no income since Andres was in jail.

Maria herself is one of nine children, born to a once street worker in Tijuana, who carried her across the border when she was several months old. Maria has lived her entire life moving from farm labor camps to flop houses and the lowest level apartments, eventually earning money in questionable ways that have led some to gossip. Andres' adoration makes him ready to pick a fight with anyone who questions her past or shows the slightest disrespect. Since she has spent all but three months of her life in the United States, she speaks English better than Spanish, and considers herself more American than Mexican. Yet since her mother never applied for her permanent residence, she is in the U.S. illegally, and has already been deported once.

Her problems are compounded by the fact that she has no Mexican papers. Her mother has no memory of having a birth certificate for her, cannot remember in which poor barrio in Tijuana Maria was born and is unsure whether she ever officially registered her. Consequently Maria has no identification of any kind. When she and Andres came to me asking me to perform their wedding, I could not legally marry them because she lacked the necessary ID to obtain a marriage license.

I worked long and hard with Maria to pull together documents that might work to prove her identity so she could measure up to the demands of the law. The only proof we could dig up was her mug shot and personal information on file in the jail from an arrest the year before. Maria was unwilling to request a copy of this herself for fear that the Sheriff's office would notify the Border Patrol that she was back. Her false immigration papers and social security card would have to do until someone figures out a way to help her become an official person.

Andres and Maria are somewhat typical of people on the margins with whom I read Scripture. They, like so many others from places all over the world are accustomed to rejection by the powerful. Their spiritual outlook is subsequently impacted, as they do not naturally expect God to call them or give them any special attention. They have accurately observed that their race, social class, nationality and other factors destine them for what they consider irremediable, eternal exclusion.

In my Bible studies and one-on-one conversations I engage people like Andres and Maria in theological reflection by helping them see themselves in the stories of struggle and liberation in the Scriptures. I seek to formulate questions that draw people out about issues that directly

affect them. Most often I begin with a question about people's lives, and then introduce a Biblical story and ask questions that help uncover the deeper truths of the text. Other times I begin with the text as in the following description of a Bible study on the birth of Jacob and Esau and their subsequent power struggle.

Jail guards usher me through two thick steel doors along tan cinder block corridors in the jail's multipurpose room. Tattered, coverless books lie strewn about on the table. I collect the ones I recognize as Bibles and arrange plastic blue chairs in a circle as guards usher red-uniformed inmates from their cells and pods into the room. After an opening prayer calling on God's Holy Spirit to show us the deeper meaning of the story I invite a volunteer to read Genesis 25:19-23, which introduces the larger narrative.

These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean. Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. The children struggled together within her; and she said, "If it is to be this way, why do I live?" So she went to inquire of the LORD (NRSV).

"Who are the characters in this story so far?" I ask, to get people looking into their Bibles.

"Abraham," someone says.

"No man, it's Isaac, Abraham's son," another guy corrects. "Then there are the twins, the Lord and finally Rebecca."

"Who has power in this story and who doesn't?" I continue.

"The Lord has the power," someone responds, assuming this to be the right answer. "The Lord answers prayers and Rebecca gets pregnant." A few heads nod. Everyone looks to me for my reaction.

I agree with them that Isaac and later Rebecca both pray to the Lord, and the Lord grants their prayers. Since God is in the story, we assume that God has all the power. I suggest though that we look closely at the story again to see what it is about. "Who has power among the other characters?" I ask.

"These are the descendants of Isaac," someone reads. "Isaac has power."

"Okay, that's true. He alone is certainly getting the credit for descendants. Why doesn't the story begin "these are the descendants of Isaac and Rebekah?" I ask, trying hard to free up the men to question the power relations in the narrative rather than assuming they are God-ordained.

Since four of the eight men are migrant farm workers I suggest that this may be like someone presenting some beautiful strawberries or blueberries as harvested by Sakuma Brothers (the biggest grower and employer of Mexican farm workers in our area). "How would this make you feel?" I ask.

"Bad, man, like shit. We're the ones who sweat out there in the fields doing all the work, not the bosses."

We observe together that between Isaac and Rebecca, Isaac clearly has the power. Isaac takes Rebekah, praying to the Lord for his wife because she was barren. We observe together that Isaac's name is mentioned five times, while Rebekah is only mentioned twice in Genesis 25:19-26. Rebekah is a weak even powerless figure, defined in terms of her relationship with men (Isaac takes her, she is referred to as "his wife," Bethuel's daughter and Laban's sister) and in terms of her inability to conceive. The Lord's answering Isaac's prayer shows that God stands behind him.(1) When Rebekah finally conceives as a result of Isaac's prayer she is once again acted upon, experiencing her future "descendants of Isaac" struggling in her womb to such an extent that she does not want to continue living.

"Who are the Rebekahs in our society?" I ask.

"Nosotros (we are)," says Jose, an undocumented man who claims he is innocent of the kidnapping and assault charges against him.

"The Mexican people here in the U.S.A.-immigrants," says another.

"Who are the people who have power over you in your life?" I ask the men.

"The judge," someone immediately replies. "And the prosecutor," says another.

The guards, the migra (the INS) and drugs are all subsequently mentioned.

We look together at Rebekah's problem. An internal struggle between two children in her womb is making her life difficult. She asks God about the nature of this struggle, which is unbearable. Jose Luis reads Genesis 25:24 to see how the Lord responds.

And the LORD said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger."

We talk about how the Lord tells only Rebekah, the one who is powerless in the story, a special word that only she and we the readers know. The stronger, older son who normally would have the power will serve the weaker, younger son who normally would be powerless.

"So God told Rebekah some information about Isaac's descendants that only she knows," I say. "Let's read on to see how that surprising word actually gets realized in real life?" I say.

The man who has been reading continues by reading Genesis 25:25-28.

When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them. When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob.

"So, What do we know about these brothers? What does the story tell us first about Esau?" I ask the men, once the reading is done.

"He was the firstborn," someone said.

I talk briefly about how in the Mesopotamian cultures of that period, the firstborn son had all the rights. Esau being the firstborn had the birthright.

Someone mentions that Esau was red, and covered with hair, a man of the country, a very macho man who hunted animals for his father.

"Esau was his father's favorite," says another. "His father liked to eat meat."

We observe in contrast that Jacob is the second born. He grasps Isaac's heel. He is a smooth man who lives in tents. Most importantly, he is the preferred of his mother, the one who has no power. Compared with his brother Esau, Jacob has no rights. He is not favored by his father, who has all the power.

"Since Isaac does have the power that Jacob needs, he is like God to Jacob," I suggest. "If Isaac reflected who God really is, what would God be like?" I ask.

"Unfair-- a God who loves the stronger and ignores the weaker," says Jose Luis.

"Powerful, old and wealthy," says another. A God who shows favorites, who blesses only some."

"Isaac likes only the strong, the skilled. He discriminates, preferring Esau because of his race, his skin color," says another.

We talk at length how if Isaac reveals God, this is a God who is distant and hard, even impossible to please. Isaac reveals a God who has his favorites and loves because of what is brought him (i.e. meat). This image of God as sustainer of the status quo is all too familiar to the underclass in North America and in Mexico and Central America.

"What does Jacob lack that Esau has that would bring him his father Isaac's favor?" I ask.

The men repeat the list of Esau's distinguishing attributes: red color, hair, being a skillful hunter, a man of the field who gets game. Jacob also lacks being the first-born and most importantly his father's love.

"What do you lack to have the power to do what you most want?" I ask the men, hoping people now will talk about their own lives.

"In Mexico it would help to be the son of a politician or rich person," says Armando, a Mexican man in his mid twenties.

"Lots of money so I would not have to work," says another man.

I ask the men what nationality would be ideal? What race or skin color?

"It would be better to be an American, a U.S. citizen," says Jose Luis.

"If we were white, we would definitely have more opportunities," says Armando.

"Not necessarily," insists Dominic. "I'm white and I don't have any power. To be white and to have money is to have power."

"No, there are still more benefits to being white," counters Armando. "White people get paid more than we Mexicans. Mexican children are made to work when they are very young. We are used to hard labor and are hired to do jobs that white people would never do. And we are paid less."

Dominic sees his point and nods in agreement.

Clearly the closest example there in our jail Bible study of a modern equivalent of an Esau (one who has favor, power, etc) would be me: a white, male, American.(2)

"So, who are you in this story?" I ask, inviting people to look back at the text. While people were slightly embarrassed to be associated with the tent dwelling, cooking, momma's boy Jacob, they readily state that they most closely resemble Jacob in the story.

"So, was there any way for Jacob to win favor?

Would there be any way for you to be white, Americans?" I ask.

"No, Jacob is trapped. The only thing he can do is take advantage of his brother. He stole his birthright by taking advantage of Esau's hunger," one of the men notes.

"There is nothing we can do either. We are brown skinned. We are Mexican. Unless the laws change we will always be illegal. We are screwed," he mentions.

"But you have to do something," I say. "What do you do to get what you want?" I ask.

"Rob, break into homes, sell drugs," says Dominic matter of factly.

"Not me, man," responds Jose, insulted. "I have always worked hard. It is the only way."

"Yeah, but you steal jobs from Americans," says Dominic, getting a rise from the Mexicans. He smiles and says he's just kidding.

"What other kinds of things do you do?" I ask.

"We cross over the border without papers," says Felipe. "We walk over the hills, paying coyotes, risking our lives so we can come here to work."

"We use false papers that say we are legal," says Jose Luis.

"I do that too, man," says Dominic.

"Really?" I ask, wondering if there is some rivalry going on about being the baddest dude.

"Yeah, I have to work under a false name. Otherwise my wages would all be garnished to pay child support, fines and shit," continues Dominic.

"Some of us sell drugs, steal car stereos and do other illegal things to make more money," says another man.

Everyone laughs at this blunt assessment of each of their lives. They, like Andres, Maria and countless other undocumented and other underclass people find themselves in legally-impossible situations. I think back to Andres and Maria.

Andres has been arrested, jailed, deported and returned at least three times in the seven years that I have known him. Each time in the jail he progressed further in both his self-understanding and his faith and love for God. He participated actively in the Bible studies, talked honestly about his temptations and failings. He welcomed any good news he could get in ways that were contagious for the others. Each time he returned illegally to Maria, their relationship became more committed. Each time he returned to warrants for failures to appear in one court or another, which we helped him quash with the required \$50.00 cash.

This beautiful, young couple and their children were "damned" to an underground life, driving without driver's licenses, working with false papers-always on the lookout for law enforcement agents of every variety who could temporarily end their happiness at any time. Many of the twelve men around me there in the heart of the jail had similar stories which emerge in response to questions and discussion in the jail Bible study.

"Do you ever feel guilty before God when you have to do these things?" I ask the men at this moment of honesty and vulnerability.

"Tell me honestly, do you sometimes think that God might punish you, that God might someday make you pay for all this?" I ask.

We talk about the Mexican mothers oft-repeated threats: "Behave yourself my son, otherwise the good God will punish you."

"Do any of you see God as punishing you now through this experience in jail?" I ask.

At least half the men are nodding and saying "si."

"Yes, whatever our mother (jefita) says, has to be fulfilled," says Jose.

Most of the men and women with whom I work view God as siding with the righteous, moral types and punishing the "bad guys." When they open their Bibles they assume that any characters that God in any way favors must be chosen because of their goodness. Jacob,

though he is the youngest they assume is good and deserving-even a moral hero. Esau in contrast must have been rejected because he is assumed to be evil.

Moralism and heroism are characteristics of the dominant theology in which contemporary underdogs are immersed. Yet this theology is ancient, as can be seen in the following quotes from early Jewish sources.

And... Rebekah bore to Isaac two sons, Jacob and Esau, and Jacob was a smooth and upright man, and Esau was fierce, a man of the field, and hairy; and Jacob dwelt in tents. And the youths grew, and Jacob learned to write; but Esau did not learn, for he was a man of the field, and a hunter, and he learned war, and all his deeds were fierce. And Abraham loved Jacob, but Isaac loved Esau (Jubilees 19:13-15).

And the two boys grew up, and Esau was a skilled hunter, a man who went out to the fields, and Jacob was a perfect man who frequented the schoolhouse (Targum Onqelos Gen 25:27).**(5)**

...the righteous Jacob, who observed the entire Torah, as it is said, "And Jacob was a perfect man, dwelling in tents" (Sifrei Deuteronomy 336).

When she passed by houses of idol-worship, Esau would squirm about, trying to get out, as it says, "The wicked turn astray [zoru] from the womb" (Ps 58:4); when she would pass synagogues or study-houses, Jacob would squirm to get out, as it says, "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you" (Jer 1:5)(Genesis Rabba 63:6).

Assumptions of Jacob's worthiness **(6)** in these commentaries and within today's dominant reading community rob this story of its relevant meaning for those most in need of its message. A careful read of the text with the dominant theology in mind can help take the text back from its usurpers and return it to its rightful contemporary beneficiaries.

There are clear connections between people on the margins and Jacob, who exhibits the ethics of survival. I invite the men to look at how Jacob and then Rebekah and Jacob deal with their powerlessness.

Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!" (Therefore he was called Edom.) Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

The men are quick to label Jacob an opportunist who takes advantage of Esau's desperation for food to get the birthright. I remind them that Jacob's name means heel grabber, deceiver or even trickster.(7) But he still lacked the most important thing that would guarantee success for him and his descendants: his father's blessing.

"Where is God in this story?" I ask the men. We observe that God is absent or at least silent. God does not stop Jacob from his scheme.

I remind the men that the Lord had given Rebekah the secret, that the stronger, older one would serve the weaker, younger one. Yet in the story this looks like an impossibility.

"Let's see how Rebekah and Jacob deal with these obstacles? I invite the men to turn to Genesis 27, and ask someone to read the entire chapter.

As Armando reads the story the other men follow closely. They appear surprised by Rebekah's bold scheme to deceive her husband.

As we read we overhear with Rebekah Isaac's special arrangement with his favored son, Esau, that he hunt for wild game, make him a meal and come for the blessing before Isaac dies (27:1-4). The men are intrigued that Rebekah is listening in, and acts with such bold cunning, ordering and coaching Jacob to change his identity, imitating Esau before their blind father to deceptively steal the blessing (27:5-9). The inmates are amazed that Rebekah helps Jacob so much (27:9), even to the extent of taking any curse upon herself should Jacob be discovered (27:13). The details of Jacob's counterfeit identity: the skins of the kids on his hands and neck (27:16), the savory food that his father loved (27:17). Jacob's bold-faced lies about his identity (27:19) and even about God helping him get the game quickly (27:20) shock the men. They are expecting failure, and grow increasingly sure that powerful Isaac, though blind, will discover the trickery.

The men I am reading with have all been caught for their crimes in varying degrees. Their very presence in jail, impending courts or sentencing are constant reminders. Yet many have succeeded numerous times. They can see that Jacob's crime was no easy feat. Isaac's command that he come near so he can feel whether or not he is really Esau reminds Armando of a time when the police pulled him over, running a background check on a false name he gave at the spur of the moment hoping to escape arrest due to a warrant he knew he had. The trick worked that time, as Jacob's ruse succeeded.(8) I think to myself of Andres' most recent adventures.

Andres' most recent return involved crossing alone through the desert of Arizona, since he and Maria had no way to pull together the \$1,400 needed to pay a coyote. He tells the story of praying without ceasing as he crossed the border, and of how the Border Patrol drove right past him without stopping as he entered a border town on foot.

It was like God made me invisible or something," said Andres. "It was a miracle Roberto! God helped me."

Would Andres' next close encounter with the law be similarly successful? Would Jacob's next moment with his blind but intelligent father lead to detection? Suspense grew among the men as Jacob's success is achieved step by agonizing step. These are men who know firsthand Jacob's stress, as Isaac notices the voice of his lying son is Jacob's and not Esau's (27:22) and he asks him one more time: "Are you really my son Esau?" (27:24) and his final request: come near and kiss me, my son" (27:26).

"Is this mika (permanent residency card) really good?" I ask, pretending to be an employer or a Border Patrol agent. Everyone laughs.

To sum up our findings so far I ask the men how the powerless, discriminated against people in the story, Jacob and Rebekah get the power and favor they lack? How do you get favor if you are damned by the one with power? What means did Jacob and Rebekah use that allowed them to succeed?

Together we make up a list with ease, as criminal minds are quick to see the survival wisdom of the Bible's underclass. Trickery, lies, using false identities, counterfeiting, fraud are all mentioned as part of Jacob and Rebekah's arsenal. I remind the men that Jacob's name actually means trickster or deceiver. They smile uneasily, looking surprised to encounter a character they can so easily identify with and such a real life story in the Bible.

I remind the men that Rebekah was driven to help her son Jacob by a word from God in a dream that the stronger and older would serve the younger. We still do not know how God feels about Jacob and Rebekah's criminal behavior, though they have clearly succeeded in the world of power-struggling humans.

"So, how do you think God looks at these kinds of actions?" I ask. "How do you think God will respond to Jacob and Rebekah?"

"Probably God was not in agreement," says Armando.

"God will probably punish them later," says Jose Luis.

After briefly telling the story of Esau's angry discovery of Jacob's crime, plot to kill his brother and Jacob's escape to a foreign country, I invite someone to read the story of the Lord's first encounter with fugitive Jacob after this incident. One of the men reads the story of Jacob's dream at Bethel in Genesis 28:11-16.

He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the LORD stood beside him and said, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

After reading the story of the Lord's encounter, I ask the men again how God responds to Jacob's crime.

"God doesn't say anything. It's like it didn't matter," says one of the men.

"God blessed Jacob, promising that he would be with him," says another man in amazement.

"God is different than we expect here," I comment. "If we were to look at Jacob's life, what does Jacob do that makes him worthy of God's presence with him and promise of blessing?" I ask. "Was Jacob a religious person? Was he a person who prayed, went to church, read his Bible?"

The men look down at their Bibles. Hesitantly they begin to comment.

"He wasn't a religious man. He didn't do anything good," says Armando. "He took advantage of his brother, stealing his birthright. He had just lied to his father and stolen his brother's blessing."

"He wasn't seeking God when God came to him. He was escaping his brother," says Jose Luis. "He committed a crime and fled."

"He was sleeping when God visited him," says another man, stirring everyone to laughter.

"So is this story telling us that it is okay with God if we commit crimes?" I ask.

"Maybe God is not worried about every crime. Some crimes are okay," someone says.

"Maybe this story is telling us that even when we commit crimes, God can still come to us and bless us."

"I don't know man. This don't feel like a total blessing to me," says Dominic. "Jacob has to flee. He has the birthright and the blessing, and God is with him and shit, but he's on the run, he's separated from his mom and dad, his brother and his country. This looks like a hard road."

I think back to Andres and Maria. I did not doubt Andres' perception that God had helped him. He was full of faith wrought from the furnace of his recent suffering, which always burned away all the distractions and left him glowing.

I had visited him and Maria in the months after this incident. I watched him struggle with the temptation to do unnecessary illegal actions, which he carefully sought to distinguish from the necessary illegalities. Being caught driving without a license for his fifth or sixth time would most certainly land him in jail and into the hands of the Border Patrol. Yet when his ride did not show up for work he would take the calculated risk rather than lose his hard-to-come-by construction job. Working with counterfeit immigration papers and social security number was no different than Jacob's covering his arms and neck with goatskins and lying to his blind father.

One afternoon when I showed up unexpectedly to Andre's marijuana-smoke filled apartment living room, I began to worry that he might be slipping into an old pattern that included justifying more and more unnecessary and risky behaviors. Andres was eventually arrested on suspicion of knowingly using and selling counterfeit twenty-dollar bills and possession of stolen property-crimes for which he may well have been guilty.

After the prosecutor was unsuccessful in convicting him, the jail turned him over to the INS for deportation. Since he was undocumented and had numerous prior deportations, the INS decided to prosecute Andres for illegal reentry, and sentenced him to two years in Federal prison. Andres called me collect from prison on numerous occasions. He was going through a dark period of worry and doubt. He asked me how Maria was doing, since she had long since had her phone service disconnected due to her inability to pay her phone bill.

Meanwhile, Maria surprised him by preparing to move back to Mexico to start a new life with hopefully fewer troubles. When Andres was recently deported, Maria left the country she considers home to join him in Mexico, where they now are reunited with their four children. God is with Andres and Maria, whether in the land of their dreams or in exile, as God is with my inmate brothers in Skagit County Jail.

I look around at other immigrant men like Andres in a big circle, Bible's open upon their red, jail issue panted laps, plastic thongs planted on the brown cement floor of the jail's multipurpose room. I encourage the men to take the story of God's appearance to and blessing of fugitive Jacob as a clear announcement of God's love for and willingness to bless the underdog - the ones who have no legal rights to benefits who often feel paralyzed by the restrictions and enforcement imposed on them by the principalities and powers.

I suggest that we look together at Jacob's reaction to God's appearance to him. We read together Jacob's vow Genesis 28:17-18, 20-21(22):

Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place--and I did not know it!" And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it (28:17-18)... Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, 28:22 and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one tenth to you."

We end the study by talking about how Jacob recognizes after his dream that God was there with him even though he did not know it - a reminder to all of us that God's presence is perhaps hard to discern and unexpected. The men notice the unbelief of Jacob too, and his vow full of conditions: "If God will be with me and protect me, and feed me and bring me back home in peace, then the Lord will be my God."

The men are delighted. They feel like there is room for them and their unbelief. I encourage them to not believe too quickly, but to look for signs of God's presence with them and to not be afraid to ask God to demonstrate God's presence and care for them.

"So who is God according to this story? What is God like?" I ask, wrapping things up before our closing prayers.

"God is with us and cares for us even when we are doing bad things, like committing crimes," someone says.

"God comes to people and blesses them, even when we are not looking for him. God came to Jacob when he was running away."

We talk about how God works through other people like Rebekah. Rebekah had a special word from the Lord that the younger, undeserving son is the chosen one. Her response to this word represents her becoming a separate subject, an actress in her own and another's liberation. God's word to her freed her to break allegiance with the dominant theology / culture and help her son, taking risks by serving as an accomplice in Jacob's crime.

The men appear to be encouraged as we gather in a circle and hold hands. We pray the Lord's Prayer as brothers. I feel some peace and can see that the men are more hopeful. Armando approaches me with a smile and says he is really excited and needs to talk right away. I press the buzzer for the guards, and ask them to bring Armando up to the front of the jail where I wait for him in a small visiting cell. After the guard locks us into the privacy of our cell, Armando excitedly tells me his plan.

"This study was incredible. I feel free to do something now and want to know what you think," he began. "The narco detectives (drug task force police) visited me this week and want to make a deal with me. You see, I was very active dealing drugs here, and I know lots of people who sell drugs— big dealers who they would like to catch.

They told me that if I work with them on the street to point out and help them arrest seven to nine people, they will drop charges and let me return to Mexico. Otherwise, they want to give me 36-48 months in prison. I can't go to prison Roberto. I have a wife and three kids back in Mexico. They need me. I want to go back to be with them. After this study I feel like I am free to cooperate with the narcos. What do you think?"

I sit there stunned, feeling my friend's predicament but at the same time resisting his interpretation. I have little sympathy for the destruction wrought by drug abuse, but I see no wisdom in the State's strategies of incarcerating offenders in its unsuccessful war on drugs.

Drug task forces often make use of desperate people who are facing delivery of controlled substance charges and almost certain conviction. They release them on condition they cooperate in undercover sting operations, buying and selling drugs while the police videotape

or listen in through their planted microphones. “Turn in three and go free” is a dangerous deal that some cannot refuse.

I ask Armando some careful questions about the risks involved in telling on other drug dealers. He responds in a way that surprises me all the more, pushing the ethical implications of our Bible study to new levels of complexity.

“No Roberto, don’t get me wrong, continues Armando. “I couldn’t tell on my brothers. I’m not a rata and never would actually do what they want. What I want to talk with you about is this. I need your help. You see, the name I am using here is not my real name. I am wondering whether you think it would work if my family sent you my real Mexican ID, with my real name. With this do you think I could buy a plane ticket and fly to Mexico?” he asks.

“Yes, I do not see any problem with this. If you have any kind of identification with your photo that says you are a Mexican citizen, you can get a plane ticket and fly,” I responded, still not clear about what Armando wanted from me.

“Okay, good. What I want is your help. I do not have an address in Skagit County. Could my family send you my papers? Would you then be willing to do me the favor of buying me a plane ticket to Mexico for the day that I get out? I need to know whether on the day that the drug task force lets me out to work for them you would be willing to pick me up and drive me to the airport so I can get away from here. Maybe you cannot, but I have to ask you anyway,” he said in a calm but urgent voice.

What should I do? The story of Rebekah and Jacob playing back in my brain. Armando had interpreted this story well, seeing implications that went far beyond my vision for this story’s relevancy. Armando saw himself as Jacob, and me as Rebekah. Indeed I had received the Word from God over and over that God sides with the weak, advocates for the least and gives his life for the sheep. Was I willing to serve as a Rebekah for Armando?

I thought about the cost of Rebekah's advocacy for herself. She had told her son, "Let your curse be on me, my son" (27:13).⁽⁹⁾ Rebekah's success meant enmity between the two brothers and permanent separation from her beloved son. I pointed this out to Armando, and told him that I would need to think about the risk and potential cost of this sort of aiding and abetting an escape for myself and my family. I told him that if we were caught I would face time in prison and separation from my wife and children.

I told him that I opposed my government's treatment of drug dealers with long prison sentences and wished I could help him rejoin his wife and children, but that I was not ready

to take the risk helping him would involve. I warned him that if he were caught he could face as much as six additional years for escape. I offered to look more into the consequences and the probabilities of him being apprehended, so he would have a clear idea about the risks. I prayed with him and left, amazed and deeply unsettled by yet another night in the jail.

I think back to the man who visited me at our first farm in Honduras, where my wife and I worked with peasants for six years beginning in the early 80's. He had asked me for money to take a bus to the capitol, followed by a shirt so he would look more presentable for a job. I had freely given him these things, only to be hit up for a pair of pants and finally my own shoes.

I am deeply aware of the limits of my love both in Honduras and here in El Norte. I am both inspired and unsettled by my encounters with people like Armando and the Scriptures, which together push my faith and understanding to places I would rather not go. I recently came upon one of the sayings of the Desert Fathers that speaks to one of my ongoing questions, which I now quote in full:

Going to town one day to sell some small articles, Abba Agathon met a cripple on the roadside, paralyzed in his legs, who asked him where he was going. Abba Agathon replied, 'To town, to sell some things,' The other said, 'Do me the favor of carrying me there.' So he carried him to the town.

The cripple said to him, 'Put me down where you sell your wares,' He did so. When he had sold an article, the cripple asked, 'What did you sell it for?' and he told him the price. The other said, 'Buy me a cake,' and he bought it.

When Abba Agathon had sold a second article, the sick man asked, 'How much did you sell it for?' And he told him the price of it. Then the other said, 'Buy me this,' and he bought it.

When Agathon, having sold all his wares, wanted to go, he said to him, 'Are you going back?' and he replied, 'Yes.' Then said he, 'Do me the favor of carrying me back to the place where you found me.' Once more picking him up, he carried him back to that place.

Then the cripple said, 'Agathon, you are filled with divine blessings, in heaven and on earth.' Raising his eyes, Agathon saw no man; it was an angel of the Lord, come to try him.**(10)**

I feel continually tested through my encounters with people on the margins. I, like Rebekah, have heard the word: the older will serve the younger, the last shall be first, by grace you have been saved. I am continually seeing that God has chosen what is foolish in the world to

shame the wise; God has chosen what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God has chosen what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God (1 Cor 15:27-29).

Am I willing to follow Rebekah's bold path of resistance, breaking allegiance with the dominant religion and mainstream culture in my solidarity with the underdog? In Armando's case the drug task force never ended up making a deal with him. He was convicted of dealing drugs and sentenced to 36 months in prison. Still I have no sense of having passed the many tests that come my way. Rather I am humbled by my limitations and pushed to pray and discern more clearly God's voice and presence to me as I am met and challenged by people on the margins.

Isaac's unwitting and unwilling part in Jacob's blessing, in spite of his role as representative of the dominant theology and mainstream, comes strangely as a word of grace to me. Maybe his violent trembling when he discovers he's been tricked represents a sort of conversion (27:33).

Finally, this story assures me that God's will can be done on behalf of others both when I am a willing accomplice like Rebekah and when I am a blind and unwilling actor in people's liberation like Isaac. My faith and my lack of faith can both serve God's purposes. This is good news for the damned and good news for me.