

St. Bartholomew, Apostle  
St. John 1:43-51

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

The man is in the wilderness. He has grown weary and tired from the chase. The day has grown long and the sun is beginning to set. There is no one and nothing else around, and he has no provisions for the night. In his weariness, however, he lays on the ground and falls asleep. For a pillow, he uses a stone.

Of course, with that last line, you know of whom I speak. Jacob, the youngest son of Isaac and Rebekah, the younger of the set of twins with Esau. Jacob was born clutching his brother's heel. Esau was born first, and he was born covered in red hair, hence his name Esau, which means "hairy." Jacob, ever in conflict with his brother and desiring what he had, was born with his hand on Esau's heel, as if trying to trip him up coming out of the womb and gain the advantage for himself. Therefore, he was given the name Jacob, meaning "he cheats." Esau won the race out of the womb and won the inheritance of his father by right—birthright. (cf. Genesis 25:19-26)

What a family, huh? "Meet my sons, hairy and cheater."

Jacob wanted this birthright. Esau, who had been hunting in the field all day, returned exhausted. Jacob was cooking some lentil stew, and Esau, being exhausted and hungry, demanded some. "Sell me your birthright now," Jacob said, in return for some stew. Seeing no use for his birthright as he was about to die (perhaps an exaggeration), Esau agreed and ate. "Thus Esau despised his birthright." (cf. Genesis 25:29-34)

That wasn't the end of it. Isaac had grown old and was losing his eyesight. It was time for him to bless his sons. Rebekah concocted a scheme by which Jacob would receive Esau's blessing and birthright from their father. At his mother's bidding, Jacob put on the fur of young goats in order to feel hairy when his father touched him and put on Esau's clothes in order to smell like his older brother and trick Isaac. Rebekah prepared Isaac's favorite meal, and Jacob brought it in to him, pretending to be Esau back from the hunt. Isaac blessed him:

See, the smell of my son  
is as the smell of a field that the LORD has blessed!  
May God give you of the dew of heaven  
and of the fatness of the earth  
and plenty of grain and wine.  
Let peoples serve you,  
and nations bow down to you.  
Be lord over your brothers,  
and may your mother's sons bow down to you.  
Cursed be everyone who curses you,  
and blessed be everyone who blesses you!

As soon as Jacob received the blessing and left, Esau came in with his prepared game and bids his father eat. Isaac, trembling violently wondered who he blessed and said that that man will indeed be blessed as the firstborn, and not Esau. This infuriated Esau, and he sought to kill Jacob, chasing him into the wilderness. (cf. Genesis 27)

What a family, huh? A conniving wife and sons named hairy and cheater!

That's what led up to that bit I began this sermon with. Although, he was not just on the run from his brother, but also in search for a wife. He was in the wilderness, weary from the chase, and falling asleep on a rock for a pillow. Interestingly enough, he slept at the place which would be Jerusalem, specifically where Solomon's temple would be built, according to what Luther once wrote.

There, he dreamed, and saw a ladder so high that its top reached into heaven. The angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And YHWH stood above it and spoke to Jacob:

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. 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 in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Behold, 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.

Waking from the dream, Jacob exclaims, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." (cf. Genesis 28:10-17)

Later on, Jacob would receive a new name: Israel. He would give that name to the nation he would father, and they would also bear his legacy, being a nation of cheaters and deceivers.

Now, here's the thing about Jacob. Even though he was the younger brother, it was foretold that the older brother would serve the younger. Even Isaac repeated this when he spoke to Esau after giving Jacob the blessing. Jacob was God's choice to be the patriarch of His chosen people; He didn't need Jacob to cheat and deceive his way into this position. Mercifully, his cheating and deceiving did not nullify God's promise. Through Jacob—through Israel—would come the promised Seed of the woman.

About 2000 years later, the Seed took on flesh and was born of a descendant of Jacob: a young maid from Nazareth betrothed to a man named Joseph, named after Jacob's youngest and favorite son. This Jesus had just been baptized by His relative and spent 40 days in the wilderness being tempted by the Accuser. In today's Gospel, He's back at the Sea of Galilee and calling his first disciples. Peter, Andrew, James, and John followed Him; then Philip from Bethsaida. Philip found Nathanael, who is otherwise known as Bartholomew, and told him, "We have found Him of whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."

Now, Nathanael was a knowledgeable man. He was well versed in the Law and the Prophets. He asked, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Based on what Jesus said of him, you can safely assume that Nathanael asked this question innocently, not to berate Jesus or to doubt what Philip said. He expressed that what he had heard was unexpected. "Nazareth? That's such an insignificant little place. The Law and the Prophets declare that the Messiah was to come from Bethlehem."

"Come and see."

As Jesus saw Nathanael walking toward Him, He declared, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!" Jesus numbered Nathanael with the nation of cheaters and deceivers, but said there is no deceit in Him. Here was a descendant of Jacob the cheater who is blameless and upright. You could read Jesus as saying, "He is all Israel, and no Jacob." Nathanael followed Philip because of the faith that he had been given. He was expecting the Messiah, and Philip said that the Messiah had come. And to confirm this faith, when Nathanael asked how Jesus knew him, Jesus replied, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." "Rabbi, You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"

"Because I said to you, 'I saw you under the fig tree,' do you believe? You will see greater things than these. Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." Just like his ancestor Jacob, Nathanael would see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending. Jesus made no mention of a ladder, but the vision Nathanael would have is the same as that of Jacob. However, the ladder Nathanael would see is Jesus

Himself, crucified. This ladder has one rung—Jesus' hands nailed to it. And His feet are nailed to the ladder's post. Jesus' death opens heaven to all who would believe.

Jesus' death opened heaven for Nathanael. Even though he was declared an Israelite without deceit, he was still a descendant of Jacob and was unable to free himself from the birthright due him for his fallen flesh. Try as he might, Nathanael was a sinner in need of God's grace. It is possible that he thought highly of himself for being called an Israelite without deceit; that by this proclamation he must have a right to salvation. I mentioned earlier that he was a knowledgeable man, knowing the Scriptures. It would be tempting for someone of this knowledge to claim a right to salvation because he knows the law and keeps it, much as the rich young man had done before Jesus. (cf. Matthew 19:17-22)

As it turns out, there is only One Israelite—only One Man—who is or ever was without deceit. He really is all of Israel and none of Jacob, and His life echoes that of the nation out of which He was born. As Israel fled to Egypt to stay alive, so did Jesus when the ruthless Herod sought the life of the young boys in Bethlehem and the surrounding region. Israel spent 40 years in the wilderness leaving Egypt, being cared for by God though rebelling against Him before crossing the Jordan into the promised land. Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness being tempted by the devil but without sin, after being baptized in the very same Jordan River and having fasted. Jesus is the perfect Israelite—unlike every other Israelite and every other man—who committed no sin and in whom there was no deceit, as the prophet declares, and St. Peter echoes. (cf. Isaiah 53:9; 1 Peter 2:22)

But not so with all of Israel. Not so with all of creation. Not so with you, dear hearers.

In a sense, you are a member of that family with the conniving wife and mother, and brothers cheater and hairy. You cheat your way past your rivals, deceiving others in order to get ahead. You're born this way, thanks to your father Adam. Surely, you see or saw this in your own children, who did not have to be taught how to be this way—it comes naturally—blaming others for their mistakes and misbehavior, cutting in lines, taking a toy from their sibling, trashing and destroying your property, etc. And let no one deceive you that they are not accountable for their sins at such a tender, young age, even as you must discipline them for misbehaving.

And like Jacob, this scheming and deceiving and cheating only continues as you get older, only you're more cunning at it, now. And you probably add a new tool to that deceptive arsenal: self-deception. It sounds something like this: "I'm good enough the way I am, God loves me the way I am, He made me the way I am, so He has to accept me this way and save me." You go so far as to call your pet sin no sin because "that's the way God made you." "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." (1 John 1:8)

So, look at that cross, dear hearers, and see the wrath due you. You should be hanging up there, dead for your trespasses—for your cheating and deceiving. But do not look at the cross merely as the wrath that you should deserve, but as the wrath that you do not receive. Because, on that ladder to heaven, Jesus, the Son of God, received the full wrath of the Father for your sin in your place, leaving for you the blessings of the Father that you do not deserve, but that you receive fully and only by His grace. Jesus Christ crucified opens heaven to you!

Jesus does this for you, fulfilling all of the Scripture and being sinless and without deceit, in order that He would take your sinfulness—all of your sins and the sin you are born with in your flesh—and all of your deceit, and have it nailed with His flesh upon the cross. There He left it, on the cross, in the grave, dead and gone from you forever, as He rose from the grave. There, on the cross, Jesus Christ becomes for you the gateway of heaven, and it is open for you here and now in this place, and wherever you go for the Lord your God is with you always in Christ Jesus, His Son. Dear baptized, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!"

Dear baptized, here you stand, in the presence of God and one another, confessing your sins by God's grace, and receiving Holy Absolution, the forgiveness of your sins. Heaven is open for you at the cross, and the angels of God are ascending and descending upon the ladder of Christ crucified to bring you to Jesus and Jesus to you.

The same thing happens wherever the Word is proclaimed and the Sacraments administered. Martin Luther wrote,

Now Christians see heaven opened, always hear God the Heavenly Father conversing with them, and behold the dear angels continuously ascending and descending upon us. The Heavenly Father still addresses these words to us: "This is My beloved Son!" He will continue to do so until the Day of Judgment, nor will heaven ever be closed again. When you are baptized, partake of Holy Communion, receive the absolution, or listen to a sermon, heaven is open, and we hear the voice of the Heavenly Father; all these works descend upon us from the open heaven above us. God converses with us, governs us, provides for us; and Christ hovers over us—but invisibly. And even though there were clouds above us as impervious as iron or steel, obstructing our view of heaven, this would not matter. Still we hear God speaking to us from heaven; we call and cry to Him, and He answers us. Heaven is open, as St. Stephen saw it open (Acts 7:55); and we hear God when He addresses us in Baptism, in Holy Communion, in confession, and in His Word as it proceeds from the mouth of the men who proclaim His message to the people. (Luther's Works 22)

Dear baptized, behold the Lamb of God nailed upon the cross: He is the ladder to heaven. Jesus Christ crucified is given to you not that you would climb it and make your way to heaven, but provided for you as a means of grace. Upon this ladder are carried your cries for mercy and your pleas for grace—all of it through Jesus Christ your Lord. Upon it descends to you every blessing that the Father gives you by way of the Son in Word and Sacrament—what Jesus has earned for you on the cross. And this is namely the forgiveness of all of your sins. And where there is forgiveness, there is also life and salvation.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.