

Good morning. My name is Sue Sweeney and I'm part of the preaching team here at Catalyst.

My family was visiting my sister and her family recently. They live in Colorado so we like to go out there every summer so we can leave the soupy humid heat of Dallas in favor of the cool dry weather of the western Rocky mountains. My sister and I have a tradition whenever we get to visit one another. We leave our husbands home for the evening and the two of us slip out after our kids go to bed to see a movie together, properly with bags of buttered popcorn and a theater where they have recliners for seats. I think this opportunity is so important to us because we're both moms of little kids, so we don't get to go out to the movies WE want to see as much as we would like. During this recent visit, my sister and I went to see *Oceans 8*, which is the first in this franchise to feature an all female cast of capers. It was alright. We enjoyed it. I'd say it was a serviceable heist movie.

Who doesn't love a good heist movie? The loveable protagonists task themselves with some crazy plan with the purpose of stealing millions in cash or some outrageously expensive jewelry or work of art. The characters buck the system and bend the rules and we find ourselves cheering them on, hoping they pull off the heist in the end. Sure, these characters may be greedy in their endeavors. I mean, they are technically stealing, but the person they're stealing from is usually a character who is painted by the narrator to be even more of a scoundrel than our heroes. So, that makes it ok? I guess?

Another heist movie where the story really stuck with me was *A Place Beyond the Pines*. In it, the actor Ryan Gosling plays a down-on-his luck motorcycle stuntman with no family connections and a shady past. He falls in love with Eva Longoria's character and he unexpectedly becomes a father. Upon discovering he has an infant son, he is determined to step up and be the father he never had. He wants to provide for his family, but he lacks employable skills and motorcycle stunt work doesn't seem to bring in enough money to buy the things a young mother with with a baby needs. So, he resorts to robbing banks. He's able to evade arrest by the police with relative ease, thanks to his motorcycle skills. Even though he's a bank robber, which is bad, he's not really the bad guy in the story. The real villain appears to be a corrupt police captain with a tendency to steal money from citizens and wage violence against innocent people. So, you end up sort of rooting for the bank robber who thinks he is just trying to be a good father.

These movies follow protagonists who seem to do bad things for good reasons. They are typically attractive and affable people that you just can't help but cheer for, even if what they're doing is not exactly on the up and up. It almost seems like the ends justifies the means.

I want to talk to you this morning about another story In the book of Genesis, toward the beginning of the Bible. This one could also make for a pretty good heist movie. One one side, we have Jacob and his mother Rebekah, with some seemingly shady tricks up their sleeves when it comes to bringing about God's will. On the other side, you have the father, Israel and another son, Esau who are painted by the narrator of the story to be a couple of pretty unsavory characters.

When it comes to separating the bad guys from the good guys, this story gets pretty messy.

How do we know if we should take a risk for something we know is right even if other people might think the way we're going about it is wrong? How do we choose to act when the law of God and the law of man aren't the same? We've all felt trapped and suffocated by societal structures, systems, and obligations. These can be as global as the evils of human trafficking and as local as the policies in your workplace. The Gospel seems to show us God favors those who have a bias toward action when cultural systems or norms urge us to do nothing. How do we know if we're headed in the right direction? What if we mess up?

The Good News is, God is always with us. You may feel constricted by social obligations, norms, and rules imposed by others that seem at odds with your God-given calling, but be encouraged! God put you in that place, so do something! This is the story of God's people - of imperfect people carrying out God's perfect plan for the world.

Would you stand with me this morning as we sing and celebrate this God who is making the world good?

### **Message**

We are in our summer series, which we're calling "The Way, Way Back". This series is all about the things we learn when we're willing to leave home - aka our comfort zones. It's a spiritual road trip.

We're in the book of Genesis, following the patriarchs and matriarchs of our faith as they follow God on road trips of their own. We first met Abraham, who God called to leave everything and set out in faith. We spent three weeks following his ups and downs, hearing how God continued to be faithful. Last week, we heard the story of how Abraham's son, Isaac, met his wife Rebekah. We learned that God works in the ordinary, everyday things as well as the big, flashy miracles.

[Scripture Slide] Our Old Testament heist story begins in Genesis 25 Verse 23. If you borrowed one of the Bibles from the back table, it's on page ###. Isaac is one of the patriarchs we probably know the least about in the Old Testament. We know he was the son of Abraham. Last week, we heard from Tommy about Isaac's marriage to Rebekah. When he was about 40 years old he married his wife, Rebekah. For years, the couple struggled with infertility, Just like Isaac's parents Abraham and Sarah before them. The inability to have children is a common theme with the patriarchs. Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife that they might finally have a child. The scriptures in Genesis says the Lord answered Isaac prayer and Rebekah conceived twins. Her pregnancy was a difficult one. It seemed the two babies in her womb fought with one another constantly. Rebekah called out to God, asking why this was happening to her. God responded in verse 23:

The Lord said to her,  
“Two nations are in your womb,  
and two peoples from within you will be separated;  
one people will be stronger than the other,  
and the older will serve the younger.” -- Genesis 25:23

When Rebekah gave birth, the first baby to come out was a hairy and ruddy complexioned little boy whom they named Esau. After Esau came another baby boy whom they named Jacob. Jacob was born holding onto his brother's ankle...almost as if the two boys had been wrestling to be the first one out of the womb- to be the firstborn, but since Esau was technically born first, according to tradition, he held the “birthright.”

This is significant. For these ancient Hebrew peoples, being the first born son meant you held the birthright for the family. You took rank over the rest of your brothers. In this patriarchal society, sisters didn't matter since women were not permitted to inherit wealth or own property. The birthright meant you would become the head of the family after your father died. You would inherit at least a double portion of the family's wealth and property. Not only you, but your descendents would benefit as well. It would be your responsibility to care for any widows, orphans, or unmarried sisters in your family. The birthright was considered by God to be a sacred honor and was considered by the culture to be a prized and lucrative social position.

As you can probably imagine, assigning birthright to the firstborn was particularly tricky in the case of twins boys. According to Hebrew law, the midwife present at the birth and the mother could only make an initial claim on which child was actually firstborn. After that, it was the privilege of the father to make that determination, even if he wasn't present at the birth. The father gets the final word.

So, this was likely the case with the birth of the twins, Jacob and Esau. Isaac granted the birthright to Esau, but Rebekah thought it should belong to Jacob, because that is what the scripture says the Lord told her.

[Scripture Slide 2] So, at the beginning, I promised you a heist story. So here it comes. Turn over to Genesis chapter 27 starting with verse 1.

Now, as they grew up these two brothers couldn't have been more unlike. Their differences only served to fuel their intense sibling rivalry. Esau was a hunter, spending great lengths of time away, prowling the wilderness. His father, Isaac, seemed to admire this lifestyle, so Esau was his favorite son. Jacob was more of a homebody, like his mother Rebekah, so she favored him. She also kept with her what the Lord said when she was pregnant- that to her, it seemed like Jacob, the younger brother, was the one God preferred, the one who was meant to be the next patriarch even though it was his brother Esau, who had been granted the birthright.

When I was studying this passage, Rebekah's experience was particularly interesting to me. As we read this passage, I want you to put yourself in Rebekah's shoes. What do we do when we

feel sure of what God wants, but the man-made systems and structures of our culture and society stand in our way? Rebekah knew that God said Jacob would have the birthright. The scripture shows that the Lord had clearly spoken to her and her desire is to be faithful. But, her husband insists that the birthright belongs to Esau. In a culture where only men hold wealth, property, and sole decision-making power, what choice does Rebekah have? It's not like she can hire a lawyer and contest the will. She's a woman. The whole political and legal system in this ancient society is designed to exclude her.

I guess she'll have to plan a heist...

Genesis chapter 27 reads:

When Isaac was old and his eyes were so weak that he could no longer see, he called for Esau his older son and said to him, "My son."

"Here I am," he answered.

**2** Isaac said, "I am now an old man and don't know the day of my death.**3** Now then, get your equipment—your quiver and bow—and go out to the open country to hunt some wild game for me. **4** Prepare me the kind of tasty food I like and bring it to me to eat, so that I may give you my blessing before I die."

**5** Now Rebekah was listening as Isaac spoke to his son Esau. When Esau left for the open country to hunt game and bring it back, **6** Rebekah said to her son Jacob, "Look, I overheard your father say to your brother Esau, **7** 'Bring me some game and prepare me some tasty food to eat, so that I may give you my blessing in the presence of the Lord before I die.' **8** Now, my son, listen carefully and do what I tell you: **9** Go out to the flock and bring me two choice young goats, so I can prepare some tasty food for your father, just the way he likes it. **10** Then take it to your father to eat, so that he may give you his blessing before he dies."

**11** Jacob said to Rebekah his mother, "But my brother Esau is a hairy man while I have smooth skin. **12** What if my father touches me? I would appear to be tricking him and would bring down a curse on myself rather than a blessing."

**13** His mother said to him, "My son, let the curse fall on me. Just do what I say; go and get them for me."

**14** So he went and got them and brought them to his mother, and she prepared some tasty food, just the way his father liked it. **15** Then Rebekah took the best clothes of Esau her older son, which she had in the house, and put them on her younger son Jacob. **16** She also covered his hands and the smooth part of his neck with the goatskins. **17** Then she handed to her son Jacob the tasty food and the bread she had made.

**18** He went to his father and said, "My father."

"Yes, my son," he answered. "Who is it?"

**19** Jacob said to his father, "I am Esau your firstborn. I have done as you told me. Please sit up and eat some of my game, so that you may give me your blessing."

**20** Isaac asked his son, "How did you find it so quickly, my son?"

"The Lord your God gave me success," he replied.

**21** Then Isaac said to Jacob, “Come near so I can touch you, my son, to know whether you really are my son Esau or not.”

**22** Jacob went close to his father Isaac, who touched him and said, “The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau.” **23** He did not recognize him, for his hands were hairy like those of his brother Esau; so he proceeded to bless him. **24** “Are you really my son Esau?” he asked.

“I am,” he replied.

**25** Then he said, “My son, bring me some of your game to eat, so that I may give you my blessing.”

Jacob brought it to him and he ate; and he brought some wine and he drank. **26** Then his father Isaac said to him, “Come here, my son, and kiss me.”

**27** So he went to him and kissed him. When Isaac caught the smell of his clothes, he blessed him and said,

“Ah, the smell of my son  
is like the smell of a field  
that the Lord has blessed.

**28** May God give you heaven’s dew  
and earth’s richness—  
an abundance of grain and new wine.

**29** May nations serve you  
and peoples bow down to you.  
Be lord over your brothers,  
and may the sons of your mother bow down to you.  
May those who curse you be cursed  
and those who bless you be blessed.”

**30** After Isaac finished blessing him, and Jacob had scarcely left his father’s presence, his brother Esau came in from hunting. **31** He too prepared some tasty food and brought it to his father. Then he said to him, “My father, please sit up and eat some of my game, so that you may give me your blessing.”

**32** His father Isaac asked him, “Who are you?”

“I am your son,” he answered, “your firstborn, Esau.”

**33** Isaac trembled violently and said, “Who was it, then, that hunted game and brought it to me? I ate it just before you came and I blessed him—and indeed he will be blessed!”

**34** When Esau heard his father’s words, he burst out with a loud and bitter cry and said to his father, “Bless me—me too, my father!”

**35** But he said, “Your brother came deceitfully and took your blessing.”

**36** Esau said, “Isn’t he rightly named Jacob? This is the second time he has taken advantage of me: He took my birthright, and now he’s taken my blessing!” Then he asked, “Haven’t you reserved any blessing for me?”

**37** Isaac answered Esau, “I have made him lord over you and have made all his relatives his servants, and I have sustained him with grain and new wine. So what can I possibly do for you, my son?”

**38** Esau said to his father, “Do you have only one blessing, my father? Bless me too, my father!” Then Esau wept aloud.

**39** His father Isaac answered him,

“Your dwelling will be  
away from the earth’s richness,  
away from the dew of heaven above.

**40** You will live by the sword  
and you will serve your brother.

But when you grow restless,  
you will throw his yoke  
from off your neck.”

**41** Esau held a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing his father had given him. He said to himself, “The days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob.”

So, I told you this would get messy. We see some problematic behavior here. In Rebekah’s circumstance, it appears she didn’t have any tools at her disposal when it came to carrying out God’s will through more “culturally” or “socially” legitimate means. She was stuck. So, instead of giving up and doing nothing, she decided to do SOMETHING. She cooked up a plan for her and Jacob to pull the proverbial wool over her husband’s eyes, so to speak, or in this case the goat skins. What Rebekah did was the right thing to do...right? Maybe?

We don’t really know what was going through Rebekah’s mind. We have some theological commentary to help us interpret this ancient story, but that only takes us so far. I’m sure a few of us could certainly spend a lot of time debating the ethics around what Rebekah did. Which, I’m open to if you want to come over to my house sometime and do that. Let me know. We hope that Rebekah interpreted God’s will correctly. Maybe she did the wrong thing for the right reason?

What speaks to me in this passage of scripture is the idea that Rebekah had a bias toward action. She knew what God wanted, and she was prepared to make it happen, even though the deck was stacked against her. She was persistent even though the man-made social constructs in her time stood in her way. She made a plan and acted on it.

Social and cultural systems and structures are made by humans and therefore likely to be sinful, because we’re sinful. Look at Rebekah, she wanted to follow the Lord but she was also

potentially perpetuating a broken family system by playing favorites with her sons. Two steps forward for Rebekah, one step back. I think we can relate. In case you haven't noticed, we, as humans beings, have a knack for taking something good from God and really screwing it up. This is why the church is not perfect. Because we're all a bunch of folks who are trying constantly to die to our selfish desires and be the people God intended us to be. It's messy work.

But, this doesn't mean we should just give up and throw in the towel. We have an obligation to resist systems that dehumanize people. We don't just have religious duty. In many cases it's a civil one too. God put us here to be God's Light in the darkness found in the world- whether that includes working to dismantle international slavery and systemic poverty or it's standing up against one of the millions of little injustices that happen every day in our workplaces, schools, and homes.

A lot of times, it's easier to do nothing. These cultural and societal structures and systems seem like insurmountable hurdles. We're tempted to dim our light in the presence of the persistent darkness. But then we have to ask ourselves, what is the consequence of doing nothing? Think about the abolition of slavery, women's' suffrage, the civil rights movement, and so on. What is the price of doing nothing? It can be more than we're prepared to pay.

What does it look like to follow God's calling in a world that makes us feel like we're wasting our time?

When I was a classroom teacher, two of my colleagues and I who taught the same course noticed that many of our students were struggling with the textbook reading in our AP classes. We came across a study guide resource published by a well respected individual in the education field. When compared to the college-level textbook being provided to these 9th graders, the study guide made the content much easier for struggling students to digest compared to the study guides from the better, well-known book publishers. We knew we had to get these study guides for our students. Unfortunately, the Texas Education Agency has a policy where you can't just you know, buy books to give to students with funds from your own school district. All public school textbooks in Texas have a "Review and Adoption" process. We get it. The state government doesn't want its public schools adopting whatever textbooks they feel like and potentially indoctrinating our children's minds with false or biased information. Sure, we can get behind that. But, these books weren't textbooks. They're just study guides. They're not controversial. The answer from our school and district leadership was still a firm, "no."

Left with no other recourse through the school district, we decided to order and pay for about 250 books in bulk out of our own pockets and then sell them to the students at cost. We would let the parents know each student could bring the \$20 to school and reimburse us as soon as their parents could get the cash together. If some kids never reimbursed us, it was fine. As teachers, we're so used to paying for materials out of our own pockets, we would just deal with it.

Then we found out, “nope!” we can’t do that either. We can’t just buy things for students and have them reimburse us if they can. We’re not allowed to accept cash in the classroom from students. We could create some kind of “club” or “organization” and funnel the money through there, but there is also a lengthy approval process to do that, and it probably wouldn’t hold up to scrutiny because it would soon be obvious that this student club was basically kind of a way to launder money for study guides. We were ready to give up.

Finally, someone came up with the idea that we could ask a local university bookstore to order the books and sell them at their store (for a small markup on the price.) Some of the lower income families did not have the transportation to get to the bookstore and purchase the book for their student. Some families just didn’t have the money. It wasn’t an ideal solution.

So, you know what we did? Most families went to the university book store and bought the book for their students. We, as teachers, still bought a handful of study guides on our own and some students brought to school the few dollars they could pull together, even though we weren’t supposed to do that. In the end, every student ended up with a study guide. One parent even bought a couple extra copies and donated them for students who couldn’t afford one.

The next year, the school district bought us several “shelf” copies of the study guides to have in our classrooms. I don’t know why it was suddenly ok to do that when it wasn’t ok the year before. Whatever.

So, what does it look like to follow God’s calling in a world that makes us feel like we’re wasting our time? It might look like a few high school teachers going above and beyond to make sure students have equity of access to educational materials, no matter their social or economic status. It might even look something like Rebekah’s plan to return the birthright to its rightful owner.

Mother Teresa said, “I used to pray that God would feed the hungry, or do this or that, but now I pray that he will guide me to do whatever I’m supposed to do, what I can do. I used to pray for answers, but now I’m praying for strength. I used to believe that prayer changes things, but now I know that prayer changes us and we change things.”

The Good News is, when we are faced with a huge injustice or a bump in the road toward doing the right thing, we have the Holy Spirit to help us discern our next right step. I can’t promise you that you will always know exactly the right thing to do. What I can promise you is that God is always with us and we know God’s Word tells us in Romans 8:28:

**We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. -- Romans 8:28**

Catalyst, we are imperfect people called to carry out God’s perfect plan for the world. We’re called to be a Light in the darkness. The Gospel encourages us to have a bias toward action- to DO SOMETHING.

If you are willing to ask God for the courage to live out your God-given calling... to DO SOMETHING INSTEAD OF NOTHING despite the man-made obstacles that stand in your way, I want to invite you to the table this morning.

### Communion

[Communion Slide] We come to this table this morning because, in the face of our sinfulness, God did not sit comfortable in heaven. God did something: came to earth as Jesus and showed us the way to life. Gave his life to break the power of sin and death that we might share in his victory. Jesus died to heal all those broken structures and systems, too.

This meal is the meal Jesus shared with his disciples the night before he was killed. At that meal, Jesus broke bread and gave it to us as his body, saying, “Take and eat; it’s broken for you.” Later in the meal, he gave us a cup of wine, saying, “This is my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sin. Drink it all.”

When Jesus was about to face down the evil of the world, he shared a meal with us. Something so small and simple. So too, we come to the table today as a small act of faith, trusting that as we follow God, as we do what we are called to do, God will continue to work.

You don’t have to be a member of Catalyst to receive communion with us today. If you are hungry for freedom, thirsty for dignity and worth, if you’re willing to respond to God’s call to take the next right step in your week, then you’re invited to the table.

### Prayer of Examen

I’m going to lead us in a prayer of examen before we come to the table. I’ll ask you four questions and give you space to reflect prayerfully on them. Then I’ll pray for us all, and as you’re ready, you can come to the table.

1. What small acts of faithfulness have you done in the last week?
2. When in the last week were you silent or still when you know you should’ve spoken up or taken action?
3. When in the next week might you be tempted to be silent or still?
4. How can you act and speak in faith this week?

God of Sarah and Rebekah,

You have gathered us together today in a world that often feels overwhelming. We see the systems and structures that rob us and our neighbors of dignity and worth, and we wonder how we can make a difference. You have showed us this morning in the story of your daughter, Rebekah. We approach your table this morning to receive your meal. We ask these wafers and juice become a spiritual food. We ask for eyes to see the ways we can act for justice, peace and mercy every day this week. We ask that you stir our imaginations, that we might see more clearly your kingdom and how we can act to bring it here on earth as it is in heaven.

Send us from this place as world-changers, peace-makers, justice-doers.

We offer these prayers and approach your table in the name of your son, Jesus.

**Benediction:**

Thank you to those of you who are regularly supporting Catalyst through your giving and serving. Thank you for making what we do possible!

And again, if you're a guest with us, welcome! We know it can be hard to connect to a new congregation, and we wanted to make it easy to do that. We created an experience called the Newcomers' Lunch that we do once a month. The next one is on July 22. It's right after this, and in about 45 minutes, we feed you, tell you who Catalyst is, and what God is doing here, and we give you a next step to get connected. If you'd like to sign up, just check the top box on the Next Step Card and drop it in the box by the door on the way out!

Now, Catalyst, as you're going, remember that God calls us to act. We live in a messy, complicated world. Don't let that stop you from doing what you can for justice, peace and dignity. Rebekah may not have made the \*best\* choice, but she did the best she knew how. And God worked in her choices to accomplish God's purpose and plan. Go in faith today, trusting that God is working with you and ahead of you. Be faithful to the God who is faithful to us always.

Go in the grace and peace of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit!