

¹⁰ Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Harran. ¹¹ When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. ¹² He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³ There above it ^[d] stood the Lord, and he said: “I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. ¹⁴ Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. ^[d] ¹⁵ I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”

¹⁶ When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it.” ¹⁷ He was afraid and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.”

It was the last place Jacob expected God to be. He’s leaving home in Beersheba and heading 450 miles north to where his mom is from, Harran. A few days and 50 or so miles into the trip, he stops at a certain place for the night. One day, that place will be a town that Jacob’s descendants call Bethel, because that’s what Jacob called it - “house of God.” But for now, it’s in the middle of nowhere.

Of course, that’s not what made it the last place Jacob expected God to be. That had less to do with where he was, and more to do with why he was there.

He and his twin brother Esau had always been rivals. Even in the womb, Rebekah could feel them wrestling. Esau came out first, which in his day meant he’d get the birthright and the blessing. But God had told Rebekah he was reversing the order in their case. Jacob would be the one blessed – and the bearer of God’s promise of a Savior.

But as the boys grew up, their parents started to play favorites. Rebekah loved Jacob, but Isaac preferred Esau. And Jacob got worried that dad would end up giving Esau what was his. So he decided to take matters into his own hands. First, he tricks his brother into signing over his portion of the inheritance – and all for a bowl of soup.

Then, when Isaac thinks death is near, it’s looking like he’s gonna give the blessing to Esau. So Jacob and his mom come up with a plan to fool the blind man. Disguise yourself as Esau and tell Isaac you’re him. Jacob’s only qualms about the lie are, “What if I get caught?” But he doesn’t. He carries out the plan, weaves God’s name into the deception, and dad buys it – Jacob gets the blessing, too.

And it seemed like Jacob had gotten everything he wanted. But then his sins come back to haunt him. Esau is livid that Jacob robbed him of dad’s blessing, too; the only thought that

Christ the Lord Lutheran Church
Second Sunday in Lent
February 25, 2018

Pastor Abram Degner
Genesis 28:10-17

“The Last Place You’d Expect God to Be”

gives him any peace is, “Once dad’s dead, I’ll kill him.” And just like that, everything Jacob has is slipping through his fingers. He’s gotta leave. His home, his mom and dad, his inheritance...all he has now is the clothes on his back, the staff in his hand, and the rock under his head.

Are you starting to see why it was the last place Jacob expected God to be? As he tried to sleep that night, what do you think was going through his mind? The look of hatred in Esau’s eyes? The stunned look of betrayal on dad’s face when he found out? His mom’s tears as she said, “Jacob, I think you have to leave?” The guilt of knowing that all that hurt and heartbreak was his fault? His lies and deceit had caused it?

It was the last place he expected God to be...because, well, *Jacob* was there. And why would the God he had failed so miserably want anything to do with him? Wouldn’t he just let him alone to suffer with his sin and the well-earned consequences? He had every right to. Jacob deserved nothing less.

You know, the other lessons this morning, they talk about suffering for doing what’s right. Suffering for following Jesus. And we experience that sometimes - point out someone’s sin in love, and we get hated. Live your faith, and get made fun of. We can rejoice in that kind of suffering, because Jesus has our back, and God uses it to produce patience and perseverance and hope.

But Jacob wasn’t suffering for doing what was right – quite the opposite. And I think that’s what makes this lesson so precious. Because often – maybe more often? – our suffering is self-inflicted, like Jacob’s. Not for doing what’s right, but because we’ve done what’s wrong. Not for following Jesus, but because we walked away from him. Hurt and heartbreak we bring on ourselves by our own sins.

Maybe as you heard Jacob’s story some of yours came to mind. The look of betrayal in a loved one’s eyes when they catch you in a lie, and the distrust it left in its wake – the relationship will never be the same. The harsh or angry words that left someone who was once a dear friend looking at you with all the anger of an Esau. A sinful choice leaves a lasting mark on your reputation; disobeying your parents means discord and disgrace for your family.

We’ve all been there with Jacob, with the guilt of knowing that the hurt and heartbreak is our fault. Maybe your there now – you walked away from God into sin, and are suffering the consequences. And when we’re there with Jacob...well, that place feels like the last place God would be. Like God has left us alone to suffer with our sin and its consequences. He has every right to, after all – we deserve nothing less.

It probably didn’t surprise Jacob that his deception left him in the middle of nowhere with a rock for his pillow. But what happened next certainly did. Listen: ¹² **He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.** ¹³ **There above it^[c] stood the Lord, and he said: “I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your**

Christ the Lord Lutheran Church
Second Sunday in Lent
February 25, 2018

Pastor Abram Degner
Genesis 28:10-17

“The Last Place You’d Expect God to Be”

descendants the land on which you are lying. ¹⁴ Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. ¹⁵ I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”

God shows Jacob a stairway reaching to heaven, angels moving up and down it to take care of it, and at the head of it all, God himself. Repeating his promises to him, giving him more promises still. Did you notice what surprised Jacob so much about it all? **When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it.”** “My sin has brought me to the lowest place in my life – and God’s here with me in the depths. Because of what I did, my loved ones are gone – but God hasn’t left me. My family might never forgive me, but God already has. This is the worst place I’ve ever been, but even here God is giving me heaven.”

It was the last place Jacob expected God to be, and yet there he was. And the only reason he could be was the **offspring** God promised him who would bless all nations – Jesus. A few weeks ago, you heard a lesson from John 1 where Jesus likens himself to this stairway: “I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” In other words, how could God bridge the gap caused by Jacob’s sins and forgive him? How could he be there, with Jacob, giving him heaven, when he deserved the opposite? How can he do the same for us? Because of Jesus.

It might seem like the last place God should be. In human flesh, nailed to a cross. The author of life is breathing his dying breaths. The holy one is standing in the place of sinners. The one who belongs in heaven is suffering there our hell. It might seem like the last place God should be. Yet it’s where God promised he’d be all along. It’s where he chose to be, because he loved us. Utterly alone, abandoned by God the Father, suffering the dreadful eternal consequences of our sins, to bridge the gap for us. To win us forgiveness. To open heaven for us.

To make the last place we think God should be the very place he’s promised to be: With us. And not just when we’ve followed faithfully – even when we’ve made a mess of it all. So that even when our sins bring us to the lowest points in our lives, God is with us in the depths. Even if our loved ones leave us, God doesn’t. Even when others can’t forgive us, God does. Even in the worst of places, God still shows us the heaven Jesus won for us and says to us, “I will not leave you until I’ve done what I’ve promised you.” And because of that, even there, we can still say with Jacob, **“How awesome is this place!”** Amen.