

SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT  
Genesis 28:10-22; Mark 8:31-38  
The Stairway to Heaven

Sometimes we can get the wrong impression about the patriarchs and saints of old, assuming they were some special breed of individual immune to the temptation and invincible in trial. But nothing could be further from the truth. They were just like you and I, battling the same sinful flesh, bearing the same crosses, walking the same narrow and bumpy road of faith, all too often colliding with the curb. Last week we stumbled upon Abraham, “the father of many,” as he was about to kill “laughter,” Isaac. Now we meet Abraham’s grandson Jacob, see why his name means “heel grabber,” and are reminded that the patriarchs’ families were dysfunctional before dysfunctional was the rage—real reality show material.

Jacob and Esau were twins, but Esau was the firstborn. As Rebekah was giving birth to Esau, Jacob grabbed his twin brother’s heel in what appeared to be an attempt to come out first. Why would Jacob want to be born first? The birthright went to the firstborn and, in the case of the patriarchs, who had been given God’s unique promise and blessing, the blessing seemingly belonged to the firstborn as well. The Savior would come from the line of the son who received the blessing. There was a lot at stake and already at birth it seemed that Jacob was determined to chase God’s promise and blessing at all costs. And isn’t that what the saints have always done?

Esau was his father’s firstborn and favorite. Esau was a manly man, hunting, fishing, camping—a poster boy for Gander Mountain. Esau would have felt out of place in the big city, but right at home here in Shields or Hemlock. Give him a gun, a six-pack, and some four-wheel drive, and he was happy. He was the kind of son with whom a father could sit in a fishing boat and tell the kind of jokes that guys tell in fishing boats. And there was nothing wrong with Esau being a good old boy. The problem was that Esau was a little too distracted by all the manly pleasures of life to truly appreciate the promise and blessing that should have belonged to him.

One day, as Isaac was nearly blind and dying, Esau went out to shoot some grub for pa. While he was gone, Rebekah made some tasty food just the way dad liked it, strong and gamey. Since Esau was a hairy fellow, the kind that makes you squirm a bit at the beach, Rebekah covered Jacob’s hands and neck with goatskins. She sent Jacob into his father with the food and, after pretending to be Esau, he received Esau’s blessing. He finished what he started at birth, grabbing at God’s promise and blessing at all costs.

You can guess Esau’s reaction when he rolled back up on his four-wheeler, 12-gauge slung over his shoulder, hairy and smelling like death from a long day of hunting, and heard the news. He immediately set to consoling himself with the thought of killing his brother. Jacob, smooth-skinned, sensitive, cerebral, and sophisticated, hardly stood a chance, so mom sent him away to her brother Laban. Just like that, Jacob’s newfound promise and blessing led him into the wilderness, scared and alone with the accusing thoughts of his conscience.

Exhausted, Jacob rested his weary head on a rock. Some blessing he had. Some promise he had. Here was God’s patriarch, a rock for a pillow and ground for a bed, a fugitive hated by his own brother, sent away by his mother. Welcome to the theology of the cross, Jacob! Welcome to the Christian life! Angels and the cross—that is what Jacob got to see. Angels and the cross, that is what Jacob inherited: a cross to bear by faith in suffering and angels to strengthen and protect him along the way.

Stairways are funny things. Sometimes we just take them for granted, but, if you’ve ever seen a child on a stairway for the first few times, you know just how big of a deal stairways can be. One of the most amusing things about watching children on stairways is that they learn to go up before they learn to go down. When they get near the top and start to realize how high they are, they get scared and cry, unable to help themselves. They climbed the stairway without knowing what they were getting into.

Some of us grow out of that—some of us. When Tricia and I went to Boston we walked the Freedom Trail. We were pretty beat by the afternoon, but stumbled upon a big tower on a big hill from the Revolutionary War that we thought it would be pretty awesome to climb. When we entered the tower there was a big sign warning how many steps there were. You see, the stairway was narrow, and there was little room for turning back if it was crowded. The number of steps seemed small and unimposing at first glance, until we started to climb them. About halfway up, when my knees started to lock up and Tricia was huffing and puffing pretty well herself, I started to think I should have counted the cost of this endeavor a little more carefully before taking the first step.

Lots of people wonder about what the stairway in Jacob's dream means, but there is little need for speculation. Jesus tells us what the stairway represents in the beginning of the Gospel according to St. John: "I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." Jesus is the stairway to heaven. Jesus, true God and true Man, is where heaven and earth meet, where God and Man are reconciled, the means through which God speaks to us and we in turn in prayer speak back to God. Jesus is our stairway to heaven—Jesus, the source, object, and content of God's promise and blessing to the patriarchs, to Jacob. And just as Jacob craved and sought after God's promise and blessing at all costs, let us do the same, only without the heel-grabbing deception.

Stairways are funny things. You have to get to know what you are getting into before you set to climbing them or else you'll end up terrified like a child or short-winded like a pastor, as much as that might seem an oxymoron. St. Peter today needed to be reminded to count the stairs, to count the cost. Just before our Holy Gospel, he'd made a wonderful confession of faith for which Christ praised him. Now, a short time later, he questioned the necessity of the coming cross of Christ. One second Jesus tells St. Peter the wonderful confession of faith he made was not revealed to him by flesh and blood but by God. The next moment Jesus tells him he does not have in mind the things of God but the things of men. Jesus reply to St. Peter's objection to His approaching suffering and death was unequivocal: "Get behind me, Satan!" A crossless Christ is a stairway to nowhere, of little use to anyone, bringing neither God to earth or men to heaven. Only the cross can connect heaven and earth and restore friendly converse between the two.

The Son of God had to suffer and die so that we might suffer and live, so that, while His cross cost Him everything, leaving Him stricken, smitten, afflicted, and forsaken by God, our crosses cannot rob us of what Christ won for us. St. Paul says as much in our second lesson: "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us." Rather than robbing us of peace and weakening our faith, the crosses we now bear, by the grace of God, actually serve to increase our confidence in God's love and strengthen us in our walk on the stairway to heaven.

Jacob got up in the morning and kept walking his difficult road through every setback, doubt, and new challenge and, in the end, God brought him where he promised He would: the Promised Land. And He will bring you to the same place. Christ is your stairway to heaven. His cross had bridged the gap between heaven and hell, and opened conversation between God and man through the Word and prayer. Count the cost of following, but then, when and if you become terrified or short-winded, remember that unlike Jesus, you have angels to attend you under your cross, and that the One you follow would never lead you into something through which He could not carry you. Thanks be to God for our stairway to heaven! Amen.