

Scripture Reading: Genesis 35:

“Then God said to Jacob, “Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there; and make an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you fled from the face of Esau your brother.” 2 And Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, “Put away the foreign gods that are among you, purify yourselves, and change your garments. 3 Then let us arise and go up to Bethel; and I will make an altar there to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me in the way which I have gone.” 4 So they gave Jacob all the foreign gods which were in their hands, and the earrings which were in their ears; and Jacob hid them under the terebinth tree which was by Shechem. 5 And they journeyed, and the terror of God was upon the cities that were all around them, and they did not pursue the sons of Jacob. 6 So Jacob came to Luz (that is, Bethel), which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him. 7 And he built an altar there and called the place El Bethel, because there God appeared to him when he fled from the face of his brother. 8 Now Deborah, Rebekah’s nurse, died, and she was buried below Bethel under the terebinth tree. So the name of it was called Allon Bachuth. 9 Then God appeared to Jacob again, when he came from Padan Aram, and blessed him. 10 And God said to him, “Your name is Jacob; your name shall not be called Jacob anymore, but Israel shall be your name.” So He called his name Israel. 11 Also God said to him: “I am God Almighty. Be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall proceed from you, and kings shall come from your body. 12 The land which I gave Abraham and Isaac I give to you; and to your descendants after you I give this land.” 13 Then God went up from him in the place where He talked with him. 14 So Jacob set up a pillar in the place where He talked with him, a pillar of stone; and he poured a drink offering on it, and he poured oil on it. 15 And Jacob called the name of the place where God spoke with him, Bethel.”

'Jacob Returns to Bethel'

It is good to be back in the pulpit and we will return once again to the Book of Beginnings.

I want to thank Steve and Michael and all those who assisted them for the time of rest this summer... And with Michael’s new call to Grand Junction we are in for a season of change here at Church of the King and I hope we are all looking forward to what the Lord has planned!

It was good to be with many of you at our Family Camp this year and I am sure we will be taking in much of what Pastor Lusk shared for many weeks and months to come. [mention sermon audio] Pastor Lusk reminded us of the importance of spending much time in the Gospel accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus, and it reminds us that even when we study the Old Testament, as we are in Genesis, that our goal is always to see Jesus and His work in our lives!

With that in mind, we come to the place where Jacob finally keeps his promise to return to Bethel and I hope this week and next will leave us with much to think about regarding how Jesus uses times and places in our lives to encourage and challenge us and that we will properly heed some of the important warnings that are given.

So with that let us dig into our text:

“Then God said to Jacob, “Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there; and make an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you fled from the face of Esau your brother.”

- Jacob had promised to return to Bethel, which means house of God, & now God commands him to keep that promise!**

We should always be thankful that we serve such a faithful God Who keeps us faithful! He is the Good Shepherd Who really does shepherd we sheep who love to wander!

- **Jacob had gotten himself involved in a bunch of unnecessary distractions and troubles by simply not doing what he should have done!**

But God is faithful and now commands him to do what he should have done years ago: Return to Bethel!

Bethel was the place where Jacob wrestled with God, where God gave him a new name and where I would argue Jacob was converted or began to walk faithfully with his God. We can relate this to our own experiences of when we were baptized if that happened later in life, or to the worship services where many of our younger members have always known that God meets with them each week.

This is why the writer of Hebrews stresses that we should NOT forsake our gathering together for worship and when we do it does have negative impacts in our lives as we saw with Jacob...

- **BUT we also know that God is faithful to call us back from such times of wandering!**

And we can see how we should approach worship each week in the way that Jacob responds to God's call to Bethel...

- **God has called Jacob to come into His presence at Bethel just as he does us each week as we gather for worship!**

2 “And Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, “Put away the foreign gods that are among you, purify yourselves, and change your garments. 3 Then let us arise and go up to Bethel; and I will make an altar there to God, who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me in the way which I have gone.” 4 So they gave Jacob all the foreign gods which were in their hands, and the earrings which were in their ears; and Jacob hid them under the terebinth tree which was by Shechem.”

God does not want divided loyalties: He wants you and He wants all of you!

- **We are not to serve other gods or idols six days and then show up for church on Sunday!**
- **We are to give those things, and anything that leads us to those things, over to Jesus so He can hide them away!**

We know that Rachael brought one of her father's idols with her on the journey and apparently others were brought or acquired along the way because now Jacob commands them to give up their gods, plural! The earrings could well have been spoils plundered from Shechem that God knew would lead them into further temptation and thus they were given up as well. *[mention Aaron & the Golden calf]*

I doubt that any of us today have any silver or golden idols in our homes and most of the earrings worn today would not melt down very well! So what are some of the Idols that we might have today: Herbert Schollossberg wrote an entire book called *Idols for Destruction* and it was one of the most convicting books I have ever read! John Calvin makes an important point here when he says the only way to recognize a false god is to know the True God well! *[this was Pastor Lusk's encouragement!]*

Think of the classic example about the foolishness of idolatry that God gives us through the Prophet Isaiah: As God warns Israel about idolatry he turns to craftsmen and hardworking people who sadly fall into such foolishness:

Isaiah 44: “14 [the Craftsman] cuts down cedars for himself, And takes the cypress and the oak; He secures it for himself among the trees of the forest. He plants a pine, and the rain nourishes it.

[working with God's provisions] 15 Then it shall be for a man to burn, For he will take some of it and warm himself; Yes, he kindles it and bakes bread; *[so far so good, but then we read...]*

Indeed he makes a god and worships it; He makes it a carved image, and falls down to it. 16 He burns half of it in the fire; With this half he eats meat; He roasts a roast, and is satisfied. He even warms himself and says, “Ah! I am warm, I have seen the fire.” 17 And the rest of it he makes into a god, His carved image. He falls down before it and worships it, Prays to it and says, “Deliver me, for you are my god!”

Now of course it is easy for us to think, ‘well I would never...’ but we must remember that the key lesson here is the pride that preceded the fall of this craftsman... Rather than give God the glory for the provisions of wood and rain, this man looks to his own skill and craftsmanship which of course leads to his forgetting God and in a very real sense worshipping the work of his own hands!

God speaking through Isaiah goes on to explain this truth...

“18 They do not know nor understand; For He has shut their eyes, so that they cannot see, And their hearts, so that they cannot understand. 19 And no one considers in his heart, Nor is there knowledge nor understanding to say, “I have burned half of it in the fire, Yes, I have also baked bread on its coals; I have roasted meat and eaten it; And shall I make the rest of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?” 20 He feeds on ashes; A deceived heart has turned him aside; And he cannot deliver his soul, Nor say, “Is there not a lie in my right hand?”

- And finally God calls them to repentance just as Jacob has done with his family telling them to put away their gods:

“21 “Remember these, O Jacob, And Israel, for you are My servant; I have formed you, you are My servant; O Israel, you will not be forgotten by Me! 22 I have blotted out, like a thick cloud, your transgressions, And like a cloud, your sins. Return to Me, for I have redeemed you.”

- All of this should remind us why the Apostle John finishes his first letter with “ Little children, keep yourselves from idols.”

Each of us must be reflective and honest about where we have turned from the living God to other things in our lives: Little gods that must be cast out...

It could be that bad habit that we refuse to give up or it could be something as noble as our own family!

We must remember that whatever turns our attention away from our Savior and His calling in our lives or keeps us from gathering with His people must be put away.

Jacob and his family do this with their gods, along with what might have tempted them in the future... They are buried and left behind!

- We next see a reminder that should be encouraging as we consider the places in our lives where we have made a mess of things!

Remember, that when last we were here Jacob’s boys had deceived and then killed and plundered the men of Shechem. Jacob was rightly concerned about the other tribes there in Canaan taking revenge on Jacob’s family or just destroying them to prevent other such treacherous actions... And now Jacob would have been in even greater fear, from a human perspective, with the prospect of now taking a journey where they would be even more vulnerable. And yet in verse 5 we read about the care and protection that God gives them:

5 “And they journeyed, and the terror of God was upon the cities that were all around them, and they did not pursue the sons of Jacob.”

- In the Scriptures, we often see God putting fear into the hearts of the enemies of His people and it is NOT because they have perfectly obeyed, but rather simply because they are His people!

So whenever we fall into sin and reach a point where we just know that God can no longer use us or even love us...

- This is often when we see His care and protection in our lives at its best.

6 “So Jacob came to Luz (that is, Bethel), which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him. 7 And he built an altar there and called the place El Bethel, because there God appeared to him when he fled from the face of his brother.”

So Bethel, the house of God is now called ‘God in the house of God’ as

- **Jacob rejoices in his remembrance of how God met him here years ago and I am sure reflected on the care and blessings he had received over the last thirty or so years!**

And of course that appearance by God at Bethel, with the angels ascending and descending from heaven and God wrestling with Jacob & making promises to him and giving him a new name are all a foretaste of the work of Jesus...

- **Work described in great detail by the author of Hebrews, who then comes to this conclusion which should clearly be used to relate Jacob’s return to Bethel with our gathering for worship each week.**

Hebrews 10: “19 Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, 20 by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, 21 and having a High Priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, 25 not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.”

The writer of Hebrews went to great lengths, almost ten chapters, to explain the finished work of Jesus...

- **And that is the confession that gives us hope and why we should rejoice to be together in worship each week!**

Next we are given a small detail that I will address a bit more next week when we learn that the Christian life is not all peaches & cream even when we are walking faithfully as we should.

“8 Now Deborah, Rebekah’s nurse, died, and she was buried below Bethel under the terebinth tree. So the name of it was called Allon Bachuth.”

- **For this morning I want to focus on how God meets us when we gather to meet with Him.**

Jacob has been obedient and come back to Bethel as he promised and now God reminds Jacob of the promises that he made to him, to his father and to his grandfather:

9 “Then God appeared to Jacob again, when he came from Padan Aram, and blessed him. 10 And God said to him, “Your name is Jacob; your name shall not be called Jacob anymore, but Israel shall be your name.” So He called his name Israel. 11 Also God said to him: “I am God Almighty. Be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall proceed from you, and kings shall come from your body. 12 The land which I gave Abraham and Isaac I give to you; and to your descendants after you I give this land.” 13 Then God went up from him in the place where He talked with him. 14 So Jacob set up a pillar in the place where He talked with him, a pillar of stone; and he poured a drink offering on it, and he poured oil on it. 15 And Jacob called the name of the place where God spoke with him, Bethel.”

God has been faithful even with Jacob’s shortcomings and now he reminds Jacob that He will continue to be faithful, leading of course to the work of Jesus that Pastor Lusk focused on so well this past week!

- **A King of Kings who will inherit all the nations of the whole earth!**

It is this work of Jesus that we remember and celebrate each week, both in Word and Sacrament.

It is the story that God is telling, a story that is foretold in the OT and then seen and explained in the NT!

Yes, we should see Jesus and His work everywhere in the Bible and that is why we should study to show ourselves approved everywhere in the Bible! [explain my devotions & church calendar]

So I would like to close with a quick reflection on Psalm 26 which those of us following that calendar would have read this week: First I want us to consider the boldness of King David in the opening verses: [keeping that admonition in Hebrews in our minds]

“1 Vindicate me, O Jehovah, For I have walked in my integrity. I have also trusted in Jehovah; I shall not slip. 2 Examine me, O Jehovah, and prove me; Try my mind and my heart.”

I suspect that many of us would be a little nervous about being so bold... Who among us would want God to actually judge all that took place in our hearts and minds this past week, no less our actions? Did we always walk in integrity?

You see, King David was one who knew that his right standing before God was NOT because of the pureness of his heart or actions, but rather the righteousness of God. He knew the promise of the Garden that the Seed of the Woman would prevail and the promises made to Abraham that God would provide Himself a sacrifice would one day come true!

And this is just what King David continues to reflect on...

3 “For Your lovingkindness is before my eyes, And I have walked in Your truth. 4 I have not sat with idolatrous mortals, Nor will I go in with hypocrites. 5 I have hated the assembly of evildoers, And will not sit with the wicked. 6 I will wash my hands in innocence; So I will go about Your altar, O Jehovah, 7 That I may proclaim with the voice of thanksgiving, And tell of all Your wondrous works.”

➤ **And what are those wondrous works? That Jesus would come to save His people from their sins!**

➤ **And then the King again sounds just like the writer of Hebrews...**

8 “Lord, I have loved the habitation of Your house, And the place where Your glory dwells.

9 Do not gather my soul with sinners, Nor my life with bloodthirsty men, 10 In whose hands is a sinister scheme, And whose right hand is full of bribes. 11 But as for me, I will walk in my integrity; Redeem me and be merciful to me. 12 My foot stands in an even place; In the congregations I will bless Jehovah.”

Jesus said that the wise man builds his house, or his life, on the solid rock: That even place that David references or Bethel where Jacob returned to be with God or to the teachings of Jesus which we as those living in the fullness of times have access to each and every day, if we are willing to turn from all the busyness of the idols that surround us to hear what God has to teach us!

Communion Meditation: Nehemiah 9

““You came down also on Mount Sinai, And spoke with them from heaven, And gave them just ordinances and true laws, Good statutes and commandments.

14 You made known to them Your holy Sabbath, And commanded them precepts, statutes and laws, By the hand of Moses Your servant.

15 You gave them bread from heaven for their hunger, And brought them water out of the rock for their thirst, And told them to go in to possess the land Which You had sworn to give them.

16 “But they and our fathers acted proudly, Hardened their necks, And did not heed Your commandments. 17 They refused to obey, And they were not mindful of Your wonders that You did among them.”

We must mind the wonder before us here on this Table this morning!