



Unexpected Places

Genesis 28:10-19a

Seventh in a sermon series on Genesis

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There was a man named Chuck who ended up in an unexpected place. This was a shock to him and to those who knew him because he was raised by parents who cared for him and taught him that hard work is good work. He grew up during the depression years and he saw many of his neighbors receiving government supplied food. As a boy he told himself he wouldn't ever end up like those people. Chuck was a fair student, but he navigated his way through high school with the political savvy of a seasoned senator. After high school, he went on to Brown University. With some more studying, he became a lawyer. He was an outspoken lawyer and his exploits grabbed the attention of President Nixon. At the age of 38, Chuck became a special counsel to the White House. Life was going just as Chuck thought it should. He had a high paying job, he had a well known reputation, and more than that, he had the ear of the most powerful person in the nation. Life was exactly how Chuck expected it to be, but that was all about to change because he had made some bad decisions along the way.

Chuck was known within the White House as a "hatchet man." He would get things done, but the way by which they were accomplished were questionable. Chuck's role at the White House was to be the creator and perpetuator of "imaginative dirty tricks." Oh and was he a good hustler. He masterfully manipulated, illegally spied, sneakily stole, and boldly lied. As a result of his missing morals, Chuck ended up in an unexpected place, prison.

Just like Chuck, Jacob, the brother of Esau ended up in an unexpected place. We are told by the word of God that Jacob was loved by his mother. In fact, Jacob was Rebekah's favorite son and I imagine he rarely, if ever, went without. He also lived in a comfortable home. It had all the amenities that a home ought to have (back in the day). A place to prepare food and to eat. A bedroom with a comfortable bed to sleep on and a pillow that was just right. Jacob also had the family birthright, which is to say, he

had special privileges and advantages compare to other family members. When his father passed he would become the patriarch of the family. That meant he would be the judge, jury, and executioner of familial matters. It also meant that he got a double portion of the inheritance. The birthright was of great importance to the Israelites and to Jacob. Life for Jacob should have been exactly as he expected it to be, he had the advantages, but he made some bad decisions along the way.

Jacob was not the first born in his family, and so the birthright was not intended for him. It belonged to his older twin brother, Esau. However, Jacob was cunning and saw an opportunity to deceive his brother and get the birthright. That is exactly what he did. He stole the birthright, which rightfully belonged to Esau. Jacob did not stop there. One day he covered himself with wool from a sheep and went to see his dad Isaac. Now, Isaac was getting old and could not see very well. All fuzzy with wool Jacob conned his dad into giving him the blessing designated for Esau. Well, Esau found out he had been swindled out of all that was rightfully his so he planned to kill Jacob. Rebekah, their mother, knew what was going on so she warned Jacob and told him to flee. Jacob did just that, he left his home and family.

Far from home life did not look anything like it was supposed to for Jacob. He was alone. He was in the middle of nowhere, the Bible calls his location a “certain place.” The reason it was not named in the Bible is to point out that Jacob had wandered into a completely unknown area, an unexpected place. All the comforts of home were gone. His mom was not there to talk to and laugh with. He did not have a bed to sleep in. Instead, the ground was where he slept. That plushy pillow he had back home, well, it did not make the trip. All he had to use for a pillow was a rock. Jacob was in an unexpected place, a certain, unnamed place.

Exhausted from running and hiding Jacob did eventually fall asleep on that rock. During his sleep he encountered God in what theologians call a “theophany.” A theophany is a visible manifestation of God. In other words, God showed up in the unexpected place, that “certain place.” Jacob did not expect to be where he was, but God showed up anyway. There, God told Jacob three key things, which reshaped Jacob and changed the direction of his life. First, God told Jacob that he is always with him. That means that God was with Jacob at all times and in all places. When he was back home in comfort and when he was in unexpected places filled with discomfort there God was with him. God was always with Jacob. Second, God kept Jacob. Being kept by

God means you belong totally to God. You have been created in love and bear God's image. You are sustained by the God of all mercies. You are cared for by the God of grace. That is what it means to be "kept" by God. Third, God told Jacob that he would bring him back. God never lets his children go no matter where they are, even if that place is the last in the world we expect to be, even in those "certain" places. God tenderly brings his children back into the fold like a tender shepherd carefully watching over his flock. Jacob was in an unexpected place and that is precisely where God showed up.

Chuck was in an unexpected place, jail, and God showed up there too. During his time in prison God moved within Chuck's life in such a way that Chuck became a dedicated follower of Christ. Not only that, but the threefold promise God made to Jacob, God also made to Chuck. God was always with Chuck. God kept Chuck. God brought Chuck back. The result of Chuck's time in jail, and God's movement in his life lead Chuck to found an amazing prison ministry called "Prison Fellowship." This ministry has done many terrific things for those who have been incarcerated. None of which Chuck could have imagine as a special counsel to the White House, but God shows up in the unexpected places.

Our stories aren't so different from Chuck's and Jacob's. At various points in our lives we find ourselves in unexpected places. For some of us that place is divorce. For some of us that place is bankruptcy and for others it is middle management. For some of us that place is the radiation treatment center or the operating room. For others, that place is homelessness...or being alone, or even back in our home town after a time away. For some of us that place is in addiction treatment and counseling centers. No matter where your unexpected place is you can be sure that God will show up. God showed up in Jacob's unexpected place. God showed up in Chuck's unexpected place. God shows up in your unexpected place. In all places God promises to always be with you, to always keep you, and to always bring you back into his presence.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.