

Welcome

One thing you should know about me is that I love karaoke. There are a number of songs, in fact, that I learned *at* karaoke. Songs I never listened to on my own that people *love* to sing at karaoke.

Garth Brooks' hard luck anthem "Friends in Low Places" is one such song. I've never been a big country fan, and no one in my family ever really loved Garth Brooks. So while I'm sure I heard the song a few times growing up, I never *really* heard it until I started doing karaoke.

Because people at karaoke bars *love them some* "Friends in Low Places".

The song tells the story of a man crashing his ex's wedding. Apparently, he was never classy enough for her and the night of her wedding finds him having had too much to drink and causing a scene at her reception, ruining her black tie affair.

He insists to everyone listening that he'll be fine because "He's got friends in low places." The song ends with him slinking off to one of his watering holes, a low place where he'll assumedly drown his sorrows surrounded by these friends.

It's a song about a guy who's hit rock bottom. We're watching the worst day of his life unfold. We recognize the hurt, despair and insecurity beneath his bluster and anger. And we love the song not just because that hook is so catchy, but because the old saying is true: Misery loves company.

We've all been at rock bottom, and we know the irreplaceable gift of a friend who'll climb into the pit with you. We all need friends in low places.

We don't imagine God to be one of those friends. In fact, we look at the man in the song and imagine God is none too pleased with his hard drinking and wedding disruption.

We imagine God sitting on high, frowning sternly. We imagine the last place God would be is in that low place with our singer and his other lowly friends.

But what if we're wrong? What if God is in *every* place, not just the high ones? What if God is even in those low places? What if God is one of our *friends* in those low places?

Today, we're going to see that God is God even at rock bottom. That there's no place we can go that's outside of God's love for us. Today is about waking up to the God who is always with us.

Message

Our summer series is called "The Way, Way Back". Hopefully that calls to mind summer vacations, road trips and fights over who got to ride in the way, way back of the station wagon. (I know, no one drives station wagons anymore because we got SUVs and convinced ourselves they're different.) This series is all about the things we learn when we're willing to leave home - aka our comfort zones.

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, and then his son, Isaac. Last week, we met Isaac's twin boys, Esau and Jacob. We saw how Isaac's wife, Rebekah, did everything she could to follow God's commands, even when her husband ignored them.

[Scripture Slide] The results, unfortunately, were catastrophic for the family. Turn with me to Genesis 28. You can imagine that Esau was furious at having been tricked out of his blessing, his place as Isaac's heir. He wanted to kill Jacob, so Jacob did the only thing he could:

He ran.

Today, we're going to meet Jacob on the road. He's lost everything - his family, his home. He's fled with only the clothes on his back. And we're coming to his rock bottom moment (pretty literally, as you'll see). But Jacob's going to find out he hasn't lost *everything*. Because God is still with him, even though he didn't know it.

Jacob left Beersheba and traveled toward Haran. At sundown he arrived at a good place to set up camp and stopped there for the night. Jacob found a stone to rest his head against and lay down to sleep. As he slept, he dreamed of a stairway that reached from the earth up to heaven. And he saw the angels of God going up and down the stairway.

At the top of the stairway stood the LORD, and he said, "I am the LORD, the God of your grandfather Abraham, and the God of your father, Isaac. The ground you are lying on belongs to you. I am giving it to you and your descendants. Your descendants will be as numerous as the dust of the earth! They will spread out in all directions—to the west and the east, to the north and the south. And all the families of the earth will be blessed through you and your descendants. What's more, I am with you, and I will protect you wherever you go. One day I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have finished giving you everything I have promised you."

Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I wasn't even aware of it!" But he was also afraid and said, "What an awesome place this is! It is none other than the house of God, the very gateway to heaven!"

The next morning Jacob got up very early. He took the stone he had rested his head against, and he set it upright as a memorial pillar. Then he poured olive oil over it. He named that place Bethel (which means "house of God"), although it was previously called Luz. -- Genesis 28:10-19

I love Jacob's response to his dream: "Surely the LORD was in this place and I, I didn't know it!"

Jacob was at rock bottom, on the run, having lost everything, sleeping on *an actual rock!*, and God was there with him.

Jacob's dream is fascinating in its own right: the word we usually translate 'ladder' is probably better rendered as 'ramp'. It calls to mind the ziggurats Babylonians built, with stairways and ramps running up the sides. The idea was that, when a priest reached the top, they could commune with God.

Out in the middle of nowhere, Jacob finds such a ramp to Heaven, and this ramp leads directly to the heavenly court of Yahweh. He sees angels ascending and descending the ramp - in other words, going to and from the throne room on God's business. And of course at the top of the ramp stood God.

Jacob's experience *is* pretty amazing. Imagine if the singer of "Friends in Low Places" had finally slinked off to whatever dimly lit bar he could find to drown his sorrows, only to find a pair of escalators that led straight from his rock bottom to God! That's the *last* place you'd expect to find God.

Or is it? The focus of the story is on Jacob's ignorance. When Genesis tells us that Jacob arrived at "a good place" to set up camp, the Hebrew word is *makom*. It's a word that usually refers to a sacred site, like a temple.

And there was a practice in ancient Near Eastern religions called "incubation", in which a worshiper goes to sleep at a sacred site, hoping for a revelation.

Genesis wants us to know that Jacob does all this. He falls asleep at *a makom*, as any hopeful worshiper would. And he receives a revelation that any worshiper would hope to receive.

Except Jacob didn't do it on purpose. He just passed out at the first decent place he could find.

And it turned out God was in that place. It turned out the site was sacred. Jacob had lucked into a *makom*.

Except, was it luck? The Rabbi Rashi didn't think so. In his commentary on this story, he interprets Jacob's exclamation to mean, "If I had know that God would be here, I wouldn't have gone to sleep in such a holy place!"

I would have stayed awake, paid attention, been alert. Rashi understood that every place is a *makom*. God is everywhere. But we're far too often asleep. For Rashi the first movement of faith is to wake up, to pay attention, be fully present where we are and find the God who has been here all along.

Even at our rock bottoms.

Can you imagine that to be true? That God is with you at your loneliest? That God is with you at your worst?

That, when you've made every mistake and alienated every ally and you don't have any friends left even in the low places that *even then* God is still with you?

[Scripture Slide 2] For that, let's turn over to John 1. One of the reasons I love John's Gospel so much is because of how often he plays with the stories from the Old Testament. This is a story where Jesus is calling his first disciples. John the Baptist has sent two of his disciples to follow Jesus, and then *they* get some of their friends.

As we read this story of how Nathaniel became Jesus' disciple, you'll hear references to our story of Jacob. One particular wordplay I want to make sure you catch: Jacob's name means 'trickster' or 'deceiver'. Several years after he had the dream of the ladder, God changes his name to Israel (we're going to get to that story in a couple of weeks). When God's people call themselves the nation of Israel, it's because they're looking back to Jacob the deceiver who became Israel.

Here we go!

Philip went to look for Nathanael and told him, “We have found the very person Moses and the prophets wrote about! His name is Jesus, the son of Joseph from Nazareth.”

“Nazareth!” exclaimed Nathanael. “Can anything good come from Nazareth?”
“Come and see for yourself,” Philip replied.

As they approached, Jesus said, “Now here is a genuine son of Israel—a man of complete integrity.”

The Greek here actually reads, "Here's a true son of Israel in whom there is no deception." Do you catch the wordplay? "Here's a true Israel, not a Jacob." It's a nice complement. But Jesus didn't just summon thoughts of Jacob randomly. Watch what he does next:

“How do you know about me?” Nathanael asked.

Jesus replied, “I could see you under the fig tree before Philip found you.”

Then Nathanael exclaimed, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God—the King of Israel!”

Jesus asked him, “Do you believe this just because I told you I had seen you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than this.” Then he said, “I tell you the truth, you will all see heaven open and the angels of God going up and down on the Son of Man, the one who is the stairway between heaven and earth.” -- John 1:45-50

Do you hear the reference to Jacob's dream? Jesus is claiming to be the very ramp to heaven. Jesus is the bridge between heaven and earth. He is the one who will accomplish God's work.

And when will he be raised up as that bridge, that ladder linking Heaven and Earth? This is a foreshadowing of his crucifixion. That moment in history when the wound between Heaven and Earth was healed.

That moment when Jesus hit rock bottom.

It's while he's on the cross that Jesus cries out, as Mark tells us, "At three o'clock Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" -- Mark 15:34

In this moment, on the Cross, Jesus is in his lowest place, his rock bottom, where he experiences abandonment by God.

But how is that possible? Jesus *is* God, and God is one, perfectly indivisible. So how can God be divided from God? How can God be abandoned by God?

It's *not* possible. God cannot be abandoned by God.

This is a great mystery at the heart of salvation: on the Cross, God becomes the God-forsaken. God breaks the laws of possibility.

Why?

To prove that God is with even the God-forsaken. To demonstrate once and for all that there is no low place where God is not our friend.

Every rock bottom is a *makom*. God is in every place, even our rock bottoms.

The first time I experienced this was as a teen. I had learned a few weeks prior that my parents were divorcing, and I was devastated. I was lost in fear, anger, anxiety. And to say I didn't have the tools to process everything I was experiencing is an understatement.

I was walking along the road one day, headed home from something (probably church, actually). I remember crying out to God, asking for some sort of help. I didn't know what to ask for, even. I was just broken and scared and sad. And there, on the side of a state highway running through a small town, I felt God's presence descend and surround and flood through me.

Much like Jacob, nothing in my circumstances changed. There wasn't a big miracle. But I knew suddenly that God was in this place. That that roadside was a *makom* (though I didn't know what a *makom* was then, of course). That every place in my life was a sacred place, a *makom*.

That experience has carried me through many a hard day, from losing jobs to losing loved ones to struggling with anxiety and fear. I've had my share of rock bottoms since that first one, and I'm sure I haven't seen my last rock bottom.

But I've never forgotten the lesson of that roadside. The lesson of Jacob's ladder. The lesson of the Cross:

Every place is a *makom*. God is in every rock bottom. God is our friend even in the lowest places.

How would that change your circumstances? How does it change your home, if it is not merely where you rest your head, but it's a *makom*, a place where God dwells?

How does it change your work, if it's more than post-its and computers and classrooms, but it's a *makom*, a sacred site?

How does it change the dark corners of your spirit, the low places where you're sure you have no friends at all? What if even those places are *makom*, known and beloved by God?

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Wake up and notice God with you!

Prayer: Grab a rock

Assignment/Blessing

Place this rock somewhere this week. Mark a place God is that you didn't know until you woke up!