

Jacob's Ladder

Genesis 28:10-19

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North Decatur Presbyterian Church

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Our children are hearing the stories of the Bible in Sunday School, and many of them are hearing them for the first time. These stories are wonderful. And, let's be honest—they're often strange. It's important that adults be reading the stories with our children. So that when they have wonderings to share with us, we will have our own wonderings to share with them. Our kids have been reading about the matriarchs and patriarchs of our faith, including this story of Jacob and a ladder to heaven.

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. 11He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. 12And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. 13And the Lord stood beside him and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; 14and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. 15Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." 16Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!"

Like the stories of Noah and the ark full of creatures, Daniel in the lion's den, and 3 men in the fiery furnace, the story of Jacob's ladder captures the imaginations of many who hear it.

Jacob lies down under the stars and falls asleep. As he sleeps, his unconscious mind opens and he begins to dream. In his dream, Jacob sees something that starts on the earth and goes up. Most English Bible translations call this thing a "ladder," but that may not be quite *right*. This Hebrew word appears only once in scripture—right here. Many think Jacob sees a giant staircase—steps going upward from where he lies. And where do these steps lead? He peers up, upward... they seem to go all the way—as far as the eye can see... as far as the human mind can imagine—to that place that is farthest away from where we live here in the dirt and the grime and sadness and the suffering. These steps lead to a place of light—a place of beauty, a place of peace. This ladder, these stairs are a sign that heaven and earth are not separate realms—they are joined! It is not impossible for flesh and blood bodies to reach heaven, nor is it impossible for the goodness of heaven to come to us where we are, on earth.

The essential gift of this story is its hopefulness. It has spoken to Christians in many places and times in the depths our grief and struggle; it has been hope for slaves and spiritual seekers of all kinds. Jacob's dream reveals a connection between our realm and the realm of the eternal. Between this world—so full of meanness and cruelty ... and the place human beings have always been able to imagine: the realm of joy and justice, the home of God.

Have you seen it, too, this ladder, these stairs? Surely, something must connect us with God.

The late British Rabbi Jonathan Sacks observes that Jacob's circumstances when this dream occurs help us to understand its meaning. If you don't remember Jacob from Sunday School, Jacob is, to be polite, the least virtuous of all the characters we meet in Genesis. Whether Jacob is truly bad, or just shifty, or simply easily influenced is the subject of endless midrash. Very few consider Jacob a moral pillar. He is best known for stealing his father Isaac's blessing straight from under the nose of his elder brother, Esau. In fact, the reason Jacob is out between Beersheba and Haran is that he is running away. He's running from his brother, running for his life. Rabbi Sacks says of Jacob, "afraid and alone, he finds himself in what the anthropologist Victor Turner called *liminal space*." Do you know what liminal space is? It's the space between—it's space that is neither here nor there. It's the space between where we have come from and where we are going. Between what we know and what is unknown. Between our past and our future. Between earth and heaven. Liminal space is uncertain.

Jacob's dream comes when his life is in a liminal space. He is unsure of his future, where he is going, but he is unsure of himself as person—he betrayed his brother, his father. His life is chaos and confusion. Can I go back? No? But where can I go? Will my decision—to take what was not mine—will it haunt me forever? Will I be cut off from all that I love? That's where Jacob is, on this night, under the stars, with his head on a rock. That's where he is when he dreams of a ladder. And he hears the voice of the Lord saying, as it had to his grandfather Abraham, "This land is yours. You and your children will bless the earth. Jacob, I will be your God, always."

[IMAGE: Fire Ladder]

This story is a sign of hope. No matter who you are, no matter what you have done, no matter what is broken that cannot be mended, no matter if you were the one who broke it—in our moments of confusion and chaos, there is even there a ladder for you to climb that leads up.

The Church Mothers and Fathers, who established the contemplative, mystical parts of our faith in the early centuries of the church, loved this Ladder. They saw in it the basic metaphor of the spiritual quest—the possibility for human beings to ascend to God. If you have patience, self-discipline, intention, you can leave the muck of this life. One of the most famous written accounts of the path of spiritual growth is called *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, by John Climacus in the 600s. There are 30 rungs on the ladder, John says, one for every year of Jesus' life; on each rung we find an ascetic practice—obey, repent, give up anger, lying, lust, and greed. Take up generosity, simplicity, humility, prayer. John's ascent up the ladder is nothing less than a heroic struggle—one with eternal consequences.

The picture you see is of the work of an extraordinary Chinese artist, Tsai Guo Chong (Cai Guo-Qiang.) He works with gunpowder—fireworks. This piece--this ladder—is over 1500 feet tall and took him 21 years to produce. Has there ever been a more beautiful—or obvious—example of our human desire to ascend to the heavens?

There is, of course, one major problem with this image of ascending to heaven. What if God is not up? Contemporary Lutheran theologian, the late Gerhard Ford, wrote,

The difficulty with the idea of [ascending a] ladder is that it sends us off into the wrong direction. It tends to make us concerned with works of pious sublimation; it involves us in the task of ascending to heaven when we should be seeking like our Lord to come down to earth, to learn what it means to be a Christian here...

I feel this—and I hope you will embrace the both-and-ness of these stairs. There is merit in imagining ourselves ascending to God. There is value in your quiet study of scripture and your prayer; there is value to retreating; to fasting; to moral improvement; to the intentional act of simplifying your life. But Forde is right. We cannot simply imagine ourselves going up—either to heaven when we die or the ascent of spiritual purification. The gospel message is not that we go up but that God comes to us. To follow Jesus is to go where Jesus goes. To bring bread where people are hungry and to warm and shelter those sleeping outside. It is to be a calm presence with someone who is scared. To walk with someone who is lost until they know the way home.

Yes, the stairs go all the way up to where God is. And they come all the way down to where God is.