

A Ladder to the Heavens  
 Genesis 28:10-19  
 July 19, 2020

Do you remember Jacob? He is a man on the run. Jacob was a schemer. He had coerced the birthright from his brother Esau, and tricked his father Isaac into giving him the blessing that rightfully belonged to his brother Esau – a blessing that would have given him a double share of the inheritance.

Then, when Esau discovered Jacob’s treachery he was furious, and Jacob fled for his life. Perhaps out of familiarity, Jacob’s flight took him toward the old family homeplace at Haran. His grandfather Abraham had left Haran many years before at God’s command.

Now Jacob was headed back that way, hoping to stay with his mother’s family and to seek a wife. The family drama stopped briefly when Jacob came to a certain place called Luz as the sun went down. The place at which Jacob camped that night was a hilltop of barren rock, and its barrenness seemed to represent Jacob’s life at that moment.

He was a fugitive. He was a disgrace to his family, and he was afraid. He found a stone, placed it under his head for a pillow, and lay down to go to sleep. Whether it was a fitful night’s sleep, we do not know.

But Jacob had a dream – one of the most memorable and vivid dreams in the Bible. He entered into one of those thin or liminal places – the in between, or on the threshold. In his dream angels are ascending and descending on a ladder between heaven and earth. Then God appears, right next to Jacob, reminding him of who he is, just in case there was any doubt.

Jacob declared, “Surely the Lord is in this place.” And he “rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it.”<sup>19</sup> He renamed the place ‘Bethel,’ which means the house of God.

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The ancient world and the biblical tradition knew a lot about dreams and took them very seriously. Concerning dreams and visions, the Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman noted, “The ancients understood that unbidden communication in the night opens sleepers to a world different from the one they manage during the day.

The ancients dared to imagine . . . that this type of communication was one in which the holy purposes of God, perplexing and unreasonable as they might be, come to us.”<sup>1</sup>

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Jacob’s dream becomes one of the most lasting and captivating images of the connection between heaven and earth. Jacob’s ladder has been painted, carved into stone, and set in stained glass. We sing of the ladder in old spirituals. It is a song you might have sung in Sunday School-- We Are Climbing Jacob’s Ladder.

And have you ever been in a guitar store and heard someone playing Led Zeppelin's stairway to heaven? It was popular when I was in high school, and was a true test of whether you were a good guitarist or not. I never mastered it! Jacob's Ladder is even a popular wooden folk toy. Do you remember it as a kid? How many Bible passages have their own toy?

We are fascinated by this image of Jacob's ladder and the sense of God's connection to earth, where the infinite and the finite touch. "Thin places" the Irish call them. Some of you have experienced this thinness. Do you have a sacred spot? A place you return to? I have a few.

One of course is the island of Iona, just off the west coast of Scotland. It is one of those "thin places" as they say, where heaven and earth meet. For 1500 years, saints and ordinary folks have worshipped and prayed there, experiencing God in deep and lasting ways.

Legend has it that St Columba went to the Hill of the Angels on the island, and one night while he was praying, a brethren slipped away to spy on the holy man. It is said that he spotted angels ascending and descending on the hilltop. Thus it got its' name. There is a numinous presence there still today. Jacob would have been at home there.

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Another sacred spot for me would be Laguna Beach in Orange County. I don't remember whether I mentioned about a trip to see family there while we were still living in New Jersey. We really wanted to move to California for both spiritual and practical reasons, but we were feeling discouraged because the way was not clear. No doors were opening.

While we were walking high upon a vista above the beach one evening, we sat down on a bench to watch the sunset. About the time we got up to head back to the car, I felt this warm presence beside me, and a voice inside my head spoke clear as a bell and said, "You'll be back. You'll be back." It was a thin place. A liminal space that caused me to say, much like Jacob, "Surely God is in this place."

A year and a half later through adventurous and surprising circumstances, we moved to Orange County. A year after that we ended up here in Marin. It wasn't quite the journey Jacob had between Beer-sheba and Haran, but it was a trek across the country nonetheless.

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We need to keep paying attention to things like Jacob's ladder today, and intuitions where holy messengers walk alongside us. Call them spiritual innuendos. There are old, worn paths and places in our lives that may lead us to God.

There are also new trails to be discovered and surprising roads to travel that might lead us to ladders that bridge heaven and earth. But don't miss what Jacob says when he wakes up. He said, "Surely God is in this place and I did not realize it." How often do we not realize? How often do we miss God?

Or, on the other hand, we assume we know where to find God, but she keeps ignoring our road maps and our GPS systems, while showing up where we least expect. Jacob's ladder often touches down in unfamiliar territory. Jacob was in the wilderness, miles from nowhere when he experienced God.

Of course God might be lurking right beneath our noses, and we fail to notice. Sometimes we nearly trip over the ladder connecting heaven and earth because we do not see. But there are numerous ways we might notice.

Here are a few starters: Read a little bit about Buddhism and notice what comes up for you. Read Rumi's poetry or Mary Oliver. Try some yoga. Practice mindfulness. Take a walk and leave your phone at home. Feel the ground beneath your feet.

God can also be found in the most surprising places, like a bar or a restaurant. Take time to connect with your waiter or waitress, which admittedly, is more difficult to do in this time of covid. Even so, order out and leave a large tip when you do take out. Pay attention to the check out clerk next time you are at the grocery store. Make eye contact. Ask them how their day is going, or what they are going to do for fun when they get off work.

Sometimes we need to step out of our customary habits in order to make "thin places" come alive where we live. Who would have thought a grocery store could be a thin place? Who would have thought God could be spotted in the frozen food aisle? Think about some of the people you see. How might they be coping during this time of pandemic? How many are sweating just paying for their groceries that day?

When you consider Jacob and how angels and even God were ascending and descending to earth on a holy ladder, it changes everything. Jacob's ladder is an archetypal image for the connection between heaven and earth, divinity and humanity.

What if you were to climb that ladder yourself and peek into the sacred realm? What would you see or feel? Every moment and every place can become sacramental. Matter itself becomes sacred. Think about the earth next time you take a walk. There are "angels unaware" and experiences that come into our life, as the book of Hebrews suggests.

Today those angels might say, "Behold, I perceive that it doesn't matter about the color of a person's skin. Be kind.

It doesn't matter if they speak another language or travel in different social circles. Be kind.

It doesn't matter if they come from a red state or a blue state. Be kind

It doesn't matter what their sexual orientation is. Be kind.

It doesn't matter. They are a child of God. Treat them that way.

Maybe Jacob would have that kind of dream today. Maybe you will have that kind of dream. God is not only in a place. Sometimes God is known in an action. Pretty soon you begin to see that ladders are everywhere. It changes the way you see other people and treat them when you realize we are all spiritual beings, walking around in sneakers all day long. When a person takes their final breath, God carries them up the ladder to the eternal realm of love and union with the divine. I will never look at ladders in the same way again.

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God wasn't done with Jacob. The dream was only the beginning. When God appears next to Jacob, God reminds him, *"You are the son of Isaac, the grandson of Abraham. I made promises to your grandfather that he would be the father of a great nation, that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. Look up, Jacob. Out here in the wilderness, look at all of those stars. The promise is now yours. And wherever you go, I will be with you."*

Jacob marked the spot where he slept as holy ground, and he promised to live his life differently from that moment on. He even promised to tithe. "God, I will give you one-tenth of whatever you give to me from now on," he prays. At that spot God and Jacob speak covenants to one another. There would even be a reconciliation with his brother and father, and later his sons. Jacob learned to climb the ladder himself when he prayed. Back and forth he went. I don't know if he ever had another dream like that one, but it changed his life.

So here we are at the end. Where do the ladders lead in your life? What is it that thrills your heart? That should be a clue. I hope you experience thin places where God is always on the brink of breaking through. Let Jacob be your guide. Amen

#### Jacob's Dream at Bethel

<sup>10</sup> Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. <sup>11</sup> He 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. <sup>12</sup> And he dreamed that there was a ladder<sup>[b]</sup> set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. <sup>13</sup> And the LORD stood beside him and said, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; <sup>14</sup> and 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. <sup>15</sup> Know 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." <sup>16</sup> Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!" <sup>17</sup> And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."