

July 23, 2023
“Ladders, Circles and Heaven on Earth”
Song of Songs 2:8-13 / Genesis 28:10-19a
Pastor Tim

Ladders, Circles and Heaven on Earth. That's the sermon title today.

The ladders and the heaven and earth parts are clear enough from the Genesis text that Carl just read for us. You may be wondering how the circles got in there, what they have to do with anything?

We'll get to that soon enough.

For now, let's start with the ladders. Or in this case, THE ladder that appears in Jacob's dream – reaching up from earth to heaven, with angels ascending and descending.

I don't love ladders. I suppose love is too strong a word to associate with ladders. Other than maybe those who make and sell them, or those who otherwise rely on them to make their living, does anyone LOVE ladders?

Some variation of them has been around for at least 10,000 years, with simple rope-like ladders depicted in cave drawings. The wooden ladder was officially invented and patented in 1862, by a guy named John Balsley, a master carpenter born right here in Pennsylvania – though the invention came when he was living in Ohio.

Ah, the things you learn when preparing a sermon!

Ladders remain the simplest way to get from point A to a higher and otherwise unreachable point B. But I don't love them.

I can handle being up about my height off the ground. I CAN go beyond that. I HAVE gone beyond that, but I get less and less comfortable the higher I go.

I feel the same way about roller coasters. I'll ride most of them, but you'll recognize me as the guy holding on as tight as I can, with my eyes closed on the parts that go down and around and upside down. I HATE that initial ascent – you know, the slow, cranky part before the first drop.

That's about how I feel when I go above my height on a ladder.

When we lived in Philly, a couple blocks from here, we painted the outside of the second and third floors on the back of our house. We borrowed a neighbor's ladder because I could never imagine owning an extension ladder that reached three floors.

I had never been on a ladder that high before. I somehow managed to get the job done, but let me tell you, it was a long, slow, and VERY careful process.

When I was a campus minister at Drexel, we did one of our annual Alternative Spring Break trips in Washington, DC – working primarily with Habitat for Humanity.

I spent most of the week on the roof of a two-story townhouse, laying shingles. We had to climb up a ladder, of course, to get to the roof – and shaky as I was going up and over the top, the worst part was coming down.

Stepping out, with some kind of faith, or mainly sheer will since there was no other way to get down. Stepping out over the top of the ladder into absolutely nothing, until my foot found the top rung. Double- and triple-checking my footing. Trying not to look down.

I did not dream about ladders that week. I had nightmares – you know, of the falling variety. But I did not fall. The ladder proved itself to be the simplest, if not most comfortable, way to get from point A on the ground to the otherwise unreachable point B on the roof.

So there you have it. More than you ever wanted to know or thought you would learn about ladders or my relationship to them.

But stay with me here. I say all that because the ladder, a not-uncomplicated tool for someone like me, is also a not-uncomplicated metaphor in Jacob's dream.

Interpretations about Jacob's ladder and its significance are all over the place. Much has been claimed, and much written – including, of course, the famous African

American spiritual, *We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder*. A version of which we heard earlier as our Prelude.

It's a song, as most of you know, about ascending higher and higher, on the sure path to a far-off heaven, to the promised land. A song emerging, of course, as an act of resistance and resilience and hope by enslaved Africans in the face of centuries of horrific violence oppression and exploitation.

When life on earth is hell, heaven as far away from earth as you can imagine becomes an understandable and irresistible refuge. A place where only the faithful will dwell. No room on the ladder, or in heaven, for the oppressors.

The spiritual traditionally concludes each verse with the rather militant language of going to war for Jesus, climbing toward heaven as "soldiers of the cross." In that sense, the path to heaven would seem to be, at best, hard and even competitive. Combative within a combative real-world context.

Ladders, after all, are generally meant for one person at a time.

It's worth noting in the Genesis text that Jacob's ladder may not even be a ladder. The original Hebrew word, *sullam*, is unclear, not found anywhere else in the Bible. Maybe it's more like a staircase? Or a ramp? Maybe something else? I'm not sure it matters.

It's also worth noting that the ladder or staircase or whatever, reaches to heaven, with no mention of height. We're the ones who imagine heaven as an actual place so desperately far away, out of reach or at least hard to reach – a theology which necessarily puts God so desperately far away and out of reach, or hard to reach, if we understand heaven as the place where God dwells.

But heaven is not a place, it's not a destination. It's an experience. An experience Jesus came to help foster in reminding us that the kin-dom of God, the kin-dom of heaven, is found within each of us. Like the angels descending the ladder, heaven comes to us.

The ancient pagan Celts, and later, Christians, used the term 'thin places' to refer to those mysterious, mystical, transcendent locations, actual places, where the distance between heaven and earth was at its thinnest.

As the Celtic saying suggests, heaven and earth are only three feet apart.

And that, for me, is the primary point of the ladder in Jacob's dream. A visual reminder for Jacob, and for us, that heaven isn't as far away as we might imagine. God is not as far away as we might imagine.

In fact, God is not far away at all. Ever.

You may know Jacob as grandson of Abraham and Sarah, son of Isaac and Rebekah, brother to Esau. At this point in the narrative, Jacob has bribed his brother's birthright away from him as the first-born, and then stolen the blessing Isaac intended for him. Literally disguising himself as a harrier Esau so their blind father will offer him the blessing instead – and it should be noted, with a major assist from his mother.

Why Isaac had only one blessing to give is a live question in the story, but at this point, Esau HATES him. Esau wants to kill him.

Jacob is a wanted man. He's on the run when we find him on his way from Beer-sheba to Haran – sent by his mother to find refuge with her family.

He is running for his life, afraid. He's been on the road for a week or more, based on the distance traveled by foot. He is literally in an in-between place. He is nowhere, having left the familiar behind, stumbling toward an uncertain future.

Maybe you know that feeling?

Heaven was as far away for Jacob as it could be. So with a stone for a pillow, another striking metaphor for when we long for but can't seem to find comfort, Jacob fell asleep. I suspect we do all know what it feels like, at least at times, to be utterly, even hopelessly, uncomfortable – physically, emotionally, relationally, spiritually. What it feels like to be in-between. To be nowhere. To lose sight of our dreams.

So take heart that in exactly such a place, Jacob had a dream. Only the first dream or vision he would experience.

A dream that even in that in-between place, even in the middle of nowhere geographically and figuratively, heaven was not so far away. Angels were not far away, coming and going all the time. That's its own comfort, to imagine God's messengers coming and going all the time – as needed, bringing heaven and earth together.

And God was not only NOT far away, but right there with Jacob.

Verse 15: "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 promised you." That promise an extension of the promise made by God to Jacob's grandfather, Abraham, and his father, Isaac. The promise of covenant between God and their descendants, as vast as the stars in the sky or the dust of the earth. The promise of blessing extended to all of God's people.

This divine assurance in Jacob's dream is echoed by the famous verses from Psalm 139 we also heard this morning, the one we so often and understandably hear at both weddings and funerals: "You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it. Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast."

We cannot flee from God's presence, from the Divine presence. Even if we try. That's the point I take from Jacob's dream. We are never beyond the covenant, never beyond the blessing, never beyond God. However we understand God.

Heaven, and more precisely, heaven on earth, is always closer than we imagine. Maybe a step stool away at most.

Jacob awakes from his sleep, with the dream still fresh in his mind and heart, and this is what he has to say: "Surely, the Holy One is in this place – and I did not know it!"

He takes the stone that had been his uncomfortable pillow the night before and makes it the base of a pillar of God, a bridge between heaven and earth. From makeshift pillow to foundational pillar.

He renames the place *Bethel*, meaning 'house of God.'" Surely, the Holy One is in this place – and I did not know it! It seems Jacob had not known it for some time before this.

So take comfort in that assurance. The Holy One is in THIS place, and in all the places you will find yourselves, even if you don't know it. Or feel it. Or recognize it.

Those who have eyes to see and ears to hear and hearts to feel ...

The ladder makes its point that there is a way, there is always a way, to get from point A on earth to what may feel like an otherwise unreachable point B, heaven on earth.

Take as much comfort as you can in that assurance.

But the ladder's usefulness as a metaphor stops there. In fact, it becomes problematic beyond that.

Matthew Fox, the Christian mystic, theologian and preeminent champion of so-called "creation spirituality," a heretic in the eyes of the big-c Church, has long made this point. I will continue to push his classic groundbreaking book, *Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality* – as an adult-ed book study.

It is such good stuff, such a powerful reimagining and understanding of the theological framework so many of us have inherited within the Church. Stay tuned.

In an earlier book, *A Spirituality Named Compassion and the Healing of the Global Village, Humpty Dumpty and Us*, published more than 40 years ago now, Fox notes where the ladder FALLS SHORT as a metaphor for reaching heaven on earth.

See what I did there?!

“When one is climbing a ladder one’s hands are occupied with one’s own precarious survival and cannot readily be extended to assist others without putting one’s climb and even one’s life – if one is high enough up on the ladder – into jeopardy.”

Climbing a ladder is ultimately a solo and strenuous, if not stressful, effort. Depending on the height. Depending on how far away, or how unreachable, we imagine point B is.

‘Climbing the corporate ladder’, or the ladder of success, as the saying goes, is ultimately a capitalist set-up. There’s nothing wrong, of course, with pursuing your goals for work or for your life more generally, but such expressions describe what can easily become an insatiable and individualistic quest to always strive for more, better, higher. To advance. To get ahead.

We need to quit looking up the ladder for direction. We need to stop climbing the ladder in search of heaven on earth.

So Fox suggests, instead, the metaphor of a circle. Instead of CLIMBING Jacob’s ladder, DANCING Sarah’s circle – in honor of Jacob’s grandmother.

Circle theology instead of ladder theology. Process theology instead of destination theology. It’s the journey that counts. It’s community that counts.

As Fox puts it, “In contrast (to climbing a ladder), when one dances a circular dance one’s hands are freed to extend to others in assistance and in celebration.” We are free to dance, free to extend ourselves.

And he takes the metaphor further. I’m not quoting here but he makes these observations.

In a circle we are safely on solid ground. In a circle, there is no limit to its size – as we say when we gather for Communion, there is ALWAYS room for more.

There is no hierarchy in a circle – we stand side by side, holding hands or linking arms. Everyone can see everyone else. We can look each other in the eye.

In a circle, as Fox also points out, we find the heart of Jesus' teaching about God's kingdom within and among us that the last will be first and the first will be last.

"How else can one interpret this saying," he writes. "It is precisely in a circle that the first are last, the last are first. And, what is more to the point, who knows who is first, who is last – and above all, who cares." WHO CARES.

What does heaven on earth look like? What does the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven, look like?

When no one cares who is first and who is last. When everyone has what they need to live and thrive in abundance, to be who God created them to be in all their belovedness. When there is peace between people because there is justice among people. When the earth itself is no longer treated as a means to an end, but as the very source of life itself.

That is what the beloved community looks like. That is Jesus' dream because that is God's dream. And God, however we understand God, is not to be found at the top of a ladder but at the center of a circle. Within and between and among us.

As another commentator put it, "We have a choice: to view our world through the lens of separation, competition, distinction and judgment OR connection, cooperation, diversity and acceptance."

We have a choice, always, to make heaven real on earth because heaven is as close as God is.

Heaven is not some distant place up in the sky, a place we hope to reach only after we die, but an experience very much waiting to be realized and experienced on earth, at the center of our circles. It takes root within and between and among us when we make room for it.

Circle theology instead of ladder theology.

"Surely, the Holy One is in this place," and we are called to live accordingly. To claim God's presence in our being and in our midst, and to live together into God's dream for beloved community.

Heaven on earth. Or on earth as it is in heaven is how Jesus taught us to pray.

May our stone pillows become pillars in the house of God.

May it be so.