

Sermon by Eric Rennie
Genesis 28:10-19a
Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
Church of the Holy Trinity
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I only met one person who died and went to heaven, then claimed to have come back from the dead. This happened many years ago, around the time books started coming out about near-death experiences. I remember this woman saying she had gone into the hospital for a routine procedure and had died on the operating table. Doctors worked frantically to resuscitate her. She said she left her body and traveled through a dark tunnel toward a bright light. She found Jesus waiting for her on the other end.

The woman reported that heaven was everything it was cracked up to be. But the highlight, as far as she was concerned, was that she had shed at least 30 pounds. “That was the best part of the whole trip,” she exclaimed brightly. As with most crash diets, the pounds didn't stay off. The woman found her portly frame still waiting for her when she returned to the operating table.

Accounts of near-death experiences go back at least to the time of Plato. St. Paul mentions being caught up to the “third heaven.” He didn't elaborate on his method of entry. Both the Bible and Islamic texts record otherworldly visions in which a ladder connects heaven and earth.

Most ancient civilizations believed the earth was sandwiched between a heavenly realm where God (or the gods) dwelled and an underworld belonging to the dead. To get to heaven, you had to climb; hence, the need for ladders. The popular belief that heaven was located somewhere above the clouds persisted long after the notion of heavenly spheres had been replaced by planets and galaxies. When a Soviet cosmonaut first breeched the heavens in 1961, he triumphantly announced that God was nowhere to be found.

Jacob may have dreamed of a ladder reaching to heaven, but he never sought to climb it. In fact, his head never left the stone he used for his pillow. That stone became a shrine on which he poured out oil for sacrifice. There was no need to look elsewhere for God or to reach for the stars. He now knew that the earth beneath him was hallowed ground.

For Jacob, his vision of God was highly unsettling. Like most of us, he thought God was far away, not near at hand – in this case, altogether too close for comfort, standing right next to him. When he awoke, he was terrified. It didn't matter that he had dreamed the whole thing.

“How awesome is this place!” he said. “This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.” The place was renamed Bethel, meaning “house of God.” It became a center of worship for the Israelites before the temple was built in Jerusalem.

William Blake's watercolor of the “Jacob's ladder” passage depicts the ladder as a stairway. Blake was known to exercise artistic license in his treatment of biblical subjects. However, in this case the Hebrew word *sullam* can mean either ladder or stairway. Blake is believed to be the

first artist to depict stairs. The patriarch Jacob is seen sleeping at the foot of a staircase that spirals upward into the heavens. Angelic figures in diaphanous gowns wend their way gracefully in either direction against a backdrop of stars. The whole tableau bears more than a casual resemblance to a scene in an old Busby Berkeley musical from the 1930s.

From the beginning, Christians attached great symbolic meaning to Jacob's ladder. They saw it as a crucial link between heaven and earth. Jesus himself set the tone when he told his disciples, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man" – by which he meant himself. St. Augustine taught, "Christ is the ladder reaching from earth to heaven, or from the carnal to the spiritual..." St. John Chrysostom suggested his congregation correct one fault a month as if it were a spiritual step on Jacob's ladder to heaven.

It's not clear what Jacob himself would have made of all this. There was as yet no settled belief in an afterlife during Jacob's time -- or at least none that involved going to heaven when you die. He would never have regarded heaven as a human destination. The dream's significance for him was summed up this way when he awoke: "Surely the Lord is in this place; and I did not know it." The revelation was not that there was a God in heaven but that God was *here*.

After Jacob awoke from his dream, he was afraid -- not because God had come to him in the night but because God was here and he hadn't known it. So it is with us. In our normal state of distraction, we are oblivious to things that lie under our very noses. This is especially true of our search for God. We are forever looking elsewhere for something that exists nowhere else but here.

By "here," I do not mean a specific place. Jacob mistakenly assumed that the place where he laid his head that night must be holy, because that's where he happened to be when he had his vision of a ladder to heaven. The problem is that you can then go somewhere else and assume God is not where you are now but over there where God was before. As Jesus told the Pharisees, "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, 'Lo, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is within you."

I once had a dream about Jacob's ladder. There were no angels ascending and descending, but the ladder rose up to heaven. As I watched, it began to pull away from the earth. I realized I had to grab hold or it would soon be out of reach. However, my hands were covered with grease, and I could not get a grip. Just then I woke up. I understood immediately what this dream was trying to tell me. The slippery grip in my dream was the mind's way of sliding past the present moment in search of something else, somewhere else. "The man who is often thinking that it is better to be somewhere else than where he is excommunicates himself," Thoreau wrote in one of his journals. Note the word "excommunicates."

The paradox is that to find God, we have to stop searching. What exactly are we looking for, anyway? Do we think the clouds will part, and a ladder will descend from the sky? We need to

stop looking and to start seeing. When we really learn to pay attention, the ordinary events of life are transformed into sacramental moments. The feel of the spray against your head when you take a shower in the morning. The smoothness of the bannister in your palm as you go downstairs. The crunch of cornflakes in your mouth as you eat breakfast. The play of light and shadow on the wall as the sun streams through the trees outside your window on a breezy day. As long as your attention does not falter, you can luxuriate in every moment. You do not need angels from God to tell you this is the gate of heaven, which always stands open. Amen.

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