

**Jacob's Ladder; Your Ladder**  
**7/19/26**  
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Genesis 28:10–19

**Jacob's Dream at Bethel**

<sup>10</sup> Jacob left Beer-sheba and went towards 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 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.' <sup>18</sup> So Jacob 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> And he called that place Bethel, which means House of God.

John 1:47–51

**Jesus Calls Nathanael**

<sup>47</sup> When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!' <sup>48</sup> Nathanael asked him, 'Where did you come to know me?' Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig tree.' <sup>49</sup> Nathanael replied, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!' <sup>50</sup> Jesus answered, 'Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.' <sup>51</sup> And he said to him, **'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'**

John 14:5-7

**Jesus the Way to the Father**

<sup>5</sup> Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" <sup>6</sup> Jesus said to him, **"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes**

to the Father except through me. <sup>7</sup>If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

### Slide 1

Good morning! It's wonderful to be here with all of you on this lovely, less smokey, day.

I chose this particular Sunday to preach because we had tickets to Hootie and the Blowfish last night, and I knew we'd be in town. Really, it was Hootie *without* the Blowfish, because it was just Darius Rucker. Any Hootie fans here? He was great! His music has shifted away from pop rock to Christian and Gospel.

Anyway, what I didn't know, and happily discovered, is that one of the lectionary choices for today is a favorite of mine: Jacob's Ladder. That was some kind of sign I figured, so I chose *it* to focus on. The full story of Jacob's life as laid out in the Book of Genesis is richly complex with themes of greed and deception, divine election, struggles with God, betrayal and forgiveness, spiritual transformation, and *ultimately* Jacob's ascendance as the foundational patriarch of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. And then, get this, he lives to 147 years old! There must be a million sermons written about the various aspects of his life. Mercifully for you, I will focus just on his dream about the ladder.

### Slide 2

So, today, we pick up Jacob's story kind of in the middle, right after he's been manipulatively deceiving and tricking his family. God decides to intervene through a dream.

As Rich/Andy read so well, Jacob was on the run and finds himself in this non-descript place at night and decides to sleep there, placing his head on a rock. While asleep, 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."** God also appears in Jacob's dream and promises him land, descendants, protection, and blessings. Not bad for a deceiver and trickster.

As you know, this Old Testament story of Jacob's dream and the ladder in Genesis was written thousands of years before Jesus's time. So, now, let's fast forward a bit to the New Testament.

Rich/Andy also read from the Book of John where Jesus tells his disciple Nathanael: **"Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."** The son of man, is, of course, Jesus, and Jesus is saying that he is the ladder to God, using the exact same language, many millennia later, from Jacob's dream in Genesis. In John, Jesus reveals himself as Jacob's Ladder.

A little later in John, Jesus tells his disciple Thomas **“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”** Jesus asserts that he is the only path to God.

Embarrassingly, it was at this moment during my preparation when I realized why we always say at the end of a prayer, “we pray these things through our Lord Jesus Christ...” Jesus is always the ladder to God.

And that makes total sense to me. The angels of God are busily ascending and descending that ladder all day long.

When they are **ascending**, they’re bringing our prayers, petitions, pleas, and thanksgivings to God.

When they are **descending**, they’re bringing God’s comfort, mercy, strength, and peace to us.

When we pray to God, Jesus is our conduit and our path. Jesus, who comes from the line of Jacob, tells his disciples that he is the fulfillment of Jacob’s Ladder. Jesus is Jacob’s Ladder.

### Slide 3

Growing up, I was aware of two references to the story of Jacob. One is a section of the Cog Railway up Mt. Washington called Jacob’s Ladder that has the steepest railroad grade in the world. Have you ever ridden up it? The other is a world-renowned dance center in the Berkshires called Jacob’s Pillow in a nod to where Jacob laid his head the night of his dream. Have you ever been there?

That’s all I really knew about Jacob until I started to become aware of paintings of the dream and the ladder.

For centuries, artists have tried to capture the awe of Jacob’s holy dream. In medieval times, the ladder was often drawn as a rigid tool of stone or wood, symbolizing a strict cosmic order. By the Renaissance and Baroque periods, artists painted the scene with dramatic lighting, turning the ladder into a brilliant, swirling vortex of clouds and heavenly light. In later years, the ladder is depicted through majestic spiral staircases, highlighting the constant movement of the angels transporting messages between the human and the divine.

I understand (now) that there are thousands of artistic interpretations of Jacob’s Ladder from all over the world. It’s one of the most frequently depicted scenes in biblical art. I’d like to share some of them with you — I chose two from each of the last five centuries, along with two structural creations, and two natural formations.

As we look at them together, I pose this question: how do you envision Jesus as Jacob's Ladder? Put more directly, how do you envision your ladder to God?

Here we go.

### **After slides**

The poet Denise Levertov uses the story of Jacob's Ladder to describe how poetry is composed. In her 1961 poem called *The Jacob's Ladder*, "a stairway of sharp angles" against the "doubting night gray" of the sky reinforces a recurring theme in her work: that struggling in the face of doubt is how we experience the divine. In the poem, Levertov eventually acknowledges a light "brush" of angel wings and then "the poem ascends" up the stairway, presumably to God. The ladder symbolizes her individual process of exploration, discovery, and poetic expression.

How do you use your ladder to God? How do you envision it? Is it big or small? Is it colorful or muted? Is it structured or amorphous? Is it permanent or ephemeral? Do you use it sparingly or abundantly? Does it give you comfort?

Jesus tells his disciples that he is Jacob's Ladder, the true ultimate ladder – the only mediator and connector between life on earth and the divine. My hope for all of us is that we can keep the reality of Jesus — the ladder to God — in the forefront of our lives. Whatever that ladder may look like, or feel like, or represent, or however it is used, the connection is secure – always present and accessible to us. Through Jesus, our prayers and petitions are taken up to God, and mercy, peace, and most of all, God's love, travel back down the ladder's rungs to us. What a blessing!

Amen.

### **Benediction**

God, we marvel at the vision of the ladder stretching from earth to heaven, reminding us that you are never out of reach and that your angels are always watching over us. Let us look to Jesus the ladder where God's grace is constantly ascending and descending. Let us take comfort and strength from that ladder and go out into the world to spread God's mercy, peace, and love.