

**Centre Congregational Church, UCC  
The Rev Dr Scott Couper  
Sunday, July 23, 2023  
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost**

**“Step or Extension?”**

**Scripture: Genesis 28:10-19a**



Credit: "Jacob's Ladder" by Lesley Friedmann

In the gospel according to John, we read an account of when Jesus called two disciples, Philip and Nathaniel, to follow him in his ministry. Philip met Jesus first who then reported to Nathaniel. Philip said to Nathaniel, “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth” (John 1:45).

Upon meeting Nathaniel for the first time, Jesus impressed! When Nathaniel expressed his admiration for Jesus’ wisdom, Jesus responded, “Very

truly, I tell you, you will see Heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man” (John 1:51). If we put one and two together, we can realize that in John’s gospel, Jesus quoted the very scripture about Jacob’s ladder that Jenifer read for us this morning. In a dream, Jacob saw “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” (Genesis 28:12).

But, there is more! Any listening Hebrew in the first century would have heard Jesus assert that the same interchange between Jacob and Heaven exists with him. Jesus often referred to himself as the ‘Son of Man’ which is a phrase used in the book of Daniel. Daniel 7:13 reads, “As I watched the night visions, I saw one like the Son of Man coming with the clouds of Heaven ... to him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed”. To us who are not Jews and do not know the Torah by heart, Jesus again spoke cryptically using the phrase ‘Son of Man’. But any Jew then would have clearly understood Jesus’ reference. By quoting from the Jacob’s story at Bethel, Jesus essentially said to Nathaniel, “You ain’t seen nothin’ yet! Just you wait and see.”

If we put one, two, and three together, we understand that according to John's gospel, Jesus proclaimed that the blessing and wisdom of God are with him – that there was an exchange of thoughts, feelings, words, and actions between God and Jesus. Furthermore, by referring to Jacob's ladder Jesus proclaimed that that he received the same blessing Jacob received. Remember that blessing? God promised to Jacob in his dream, "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go ... I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you" (Genesis 28:15). And, it is fair to say, Jesus was accurate. Jesus' teachings are known in all nations, from South Africa where I came before moving to Vermont to El Salvador where I am going next month. The Christian Testament is translated into 1,617 languages!<sup>1</sup> The blessing of Jacob and Jesus as foretold by Daniel came to fruition. We are, with our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters, all inheritors of God's wisdom through (among others) Jacob and Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

As Christians, we take these scriptures a step further than our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters. We interpret these scriptures to convey that Jesus *himself is the interchange*, the great reconciler of Heaven and Earth, the great reconciler of humans to God. In this sense, Jesus is not Jacob *per se*. Instead, Jesus is the actual ladder!

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<sup>1</sup> "Bible Translations", *Wikipedia*. Found at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bible\\_translations](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bible_translations), July 22, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Abraham, Isaac, King David, etc...

Yet, let us understand the scripture as Jesus, a faithful Jew, did. Jesus understood that he, like Jacob, was an inheritor of God's wisdom at the bottom of the ladder ascending toward Heaven. The question we can then ask ourselves is: Is this 'ladder' of faith we are all on a 'step' or an 'extension' ladder? Or, is what ascends to Heaven perhaps longer than an extension ladder? What if the ladder is rather a 'stairway'? If you look at your pew Bible, footnote 'h' indicates that the Hebrew word for 'ladder' can also be translated to be 'stairway' (p. 24). That reminds me of the famous rock song "Stairway to Heaven". Fun fact: Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven" begins with spiritual wisdom. The song is, in part, "a critique on an overly materialistic society, suggesting that spending your entire life collecting material possessions is a fruitless endeavor, as it won't get you to Heaven, and you can't use any of it when you get there, anyway".<sup>3</sup> That sounds like something Jesus preached (Matthew 6:19-21).

In our reading, Jacob's 'ladder' sounded to me more like an 'escalator', with angels going up and down. Fun fact: Russia has the deepest and longest escalators in the world, three at 453 feet long!<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Chris Huber, "The Meaning of Led Zeppelin's 'Stairway to Heaven'", *Extra Chill*, May 12, 2022. Found at: <https://extrachill.com/led-zeppelin-stairway-to-heaven-meaning>, accessed July 22, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Ellen Kutoskey, "The Ten Longest Escalators in the World", *Mental Floss*, May 24, 2022. Found at: <https://www.mentalfloss.com/posts/longest-escalators-in-the-world>, accessed July 22, 2023.

Jesus, I suspect, needed only a step ladder to reach Heaven. When I read Jesus' teachings and I marvel at his wisdom and actions, I sense Jesus was just within arms' reach of Heaven, needing only a step ladder to connect him with the heart and mind of God. I, on the other hand, often require an escalator longer than Russia's longest. It's a long journey for me, several stories, in fact, to get close to the wisdom of God. But *I am* on the escalator, and I'm going the right direction. And even if I sometimes turn around, make mistakes, and walk in reverse (down), with God's grace, I am still, against all odds, ascending in the right direction on that moving escalator.

Many of you may be in-between. Perhaps, on an extension ladder. They are adjustable; they need be extended only as much as necessary. The thing about an extension ladders is that you need others with you to at least hold them steady. At Centre Church, it seems we need to be on ladders quite a bit. I remember how Marion Abell and others were so nervous with Peter in the parlor, high up on the ladder installing our projector screen on the wall. I recall being out on the front lawn in November, holding Drew Kacik steady at the top of the ladder trying to put Christmas lights on our outdoor trees. I know that in two weeks on the first Friday of August, we need volunteers to put the cover on our tent so that we can host The Green@Centre on Gallery Night. If we don't have volunteers, we have no tent,

and we will have no event. (Yes, that is a shameless homiletical plea for volunteers.)<sup>5</sup>

The message of Jacob's ladder is that we are all on different journeys, we all have different heights of spiritual communication and insight – and that is fine! More importantly, we need one another with these ladders. The heights to Heaven are dizzying and anyone of us can fall, and fall hard. Very few of us only need step ladders like Jesus. Some may be on stairways. A few of us are on deep long escalators, perhaps even out of sight or earshot of God. Yet, most of us are on extension ladders. Because we are on extension ladders, we need one another to position the ladder, hold its base, pass-up the equipment, secure our footing, show us where the next rung is, caution us, and steady the ladder when our weight shifts it too much. *We need one another on this ascent to heights divine and to blessings eternal.* That why we give thanks to Centre Congregational Church.

This was the Word of God. And it was spoken to the people of God. And the people of God responded, "Amen".

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<sup>5</sup> Please contact Bonnie Girvan.