

[Genesis 28:10-19a](#)

[Psalm 139: 1-11, 22-23](#)

[Romans 8:12-25](#)

[Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43](#)

PREACHED BY THE REVEREND ALISTAIR SO ON THE TENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, JULY 20, 2008, AT ALL HALLOWS CHURCH, SOUTH RIVER PARISH, IN DAVIDSONVILLE, MARYLAND

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

What is the tallest building in the world now? Is it the Sears Tower, which soars into the skyline of Chicago? Or the Taipei 101 building, which boasts one hundred and one stories of retail and office space on the island of Taiwan? Actually, the tallest building in the world is still under construction. The Burj Dubai, in Dubai of the United Arab Emirates, when completed, will soar 2,087 feet into the sky. The fascination with heights dates back to time immemorial: people attempted to build the Tower of Babel to reach the heavens, according to Genesis. Through the records of the Old Testament, we know that there were many “high places” erected by the indigenous religions in Canaan. Some Israelites even worshipped in those pagan “high places,” thereby incurring the wrath of God. This same desire to be high up and close to heaven may have been the driving force behind the multiplatform pyramids, or ziggurats, built by both the Sumerians and Babylonians. (Geo, p. 82) In our own hemisphere, we also have similar structures, built by the ancient Mayans. Given this universal desire for humans to reach the skies or the heavens, it is little wonder that in Jacob’s dream of God’s abiding presence with him, he has a vision of angels ascending and descending on a ladder or stairway that extends into the heavens. In the Old Testament, angels look after different nations and their territories. They also patrol the earth (Job 1:6; 2:1; Zech 1:81-17; cf. Deut 32:8). According to one interpretation, the ascending angels are those responsible for Jacob’s homeland and those descending are ones responsible for the foreign land to which he is going. (Wenham, 222) In other words, this dream or vision of angels is an assurance of God’s protection of Jacob even though he is leaving home.

“Surely the LORD is in this place. And I did not know it.” Jacob exclaims at the realization of the awesome presence of God in that place. This is his first encounter with God face to face. Previously, he had heard of how God appeared to his father and grandfather: Isaac and Abraham. Now, he experiences his moment of theophany or the appearance of God, up close. And he names this place Bethel, meaning the House of God. He experiences God’s love and protection in the midst of the mess of his life, a vale of tears and sighing. He is on his way fleeing from the wrath of his brother Esau whom he tricked into selling his birthright. Yet, God has not forsaken him. God’s mercy and forgiveness must have overwhelmed him.

Truth be told, God has always been around in Jacob’s life. But it took a major life-changing event to make him realize God’s presence. It took a major, life-changing event such as leaving his family for the first time and fleeing on his own for him to realize God’s presence and providence in his life all along. He now begins to ascend the spiritual ladder of angels to God. Friends, have you begun your ascent to God?

Perhaps, Bonaventure, a mediaeval Christian mystic and scholar can help us. According to him, the first stage of our ascent to God is the purification of the soul. He said, “Prayer, then, is the mother and

source of the ascent."(Bonaventure 60) Prayer indeed undergirds everything we do after we say, "we believe." I myself began this journey by reciting the Lord's Prayer while in elementary school. Years later, my spiritual director would require me to adopt the Daily Office---Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer of the Book of Common Prayer---as part of my spiritual discipline while discerning for the priesthood. I must admit that, at times, I hated it, especially during moments of spiritual dryness. But over time, I have learned to appreciate the importance of the rhythm in our prayer life. Just as most of us cannot go to sleep without brushing our teeth, we should also not let one day pass without talking to God. Praying is talking to God. Praying is the first step of our spiritual ascent to God. Praying can be liturgical and formal; but praying can also be freestyle and informal. You can even pray the Daily Office online: www.missionstclare.com. There are selections from the Bible each day of the year in the Daily Office. Bible reading should always be done in a prayerful manner lest we turn it into a purely intellectual or self-righteous act. A keen knowledge of the Bible should go hand in hand with our Prayer Book tradition. Sometimes, Episcopalians who read the Bible for the first time in detail are amazed to note that the Bible has quoted the Prayer Book. Well, of course, it is the other way around!

With an established prayer life, we can then ascend to the next step on our spiritual ladder to God. The second stage in Bonaventure's ascent to God is illumination. Illumination means a heightened sense of closeness to God. Illumination happens sometimes as a result of the deepening of one's prayer life. At other times, major life events initiate a new perspective from which to view life, a new understanding of God's presence. So at Bethel, the Gate to Heaven, Jacob receives this illumination, this intensified closeness to God in his vision of the angels ascending and descending a ladder to heaven. Illumination is similar to a conversion experience, as some Christians call it. Jonathan Edwards, an early American theologian and Congregationalist minister, noted an interesting pattern of conversion experiences in his congregation, where public witnessing of one's conversion experience was a requirement for full church membership. For the women in his congregation, a lot of them had conversion experiences around the time of childbirth. For the men, their experiences of conversion came around the time of the death of their fathers. In both instances, a major life-changing experience happened: the passing of the generations through childbirth in the case of women and the passing away of a generation in the case of men.

Even though the events that can sometimes lead to our heightened sense of closeness to God might not be most pleasant and desirable, in due course, we begin to taste spiritual sweetness with God's help and by God's grace alone. Our souls "are prepared for spiritual ecstasy through devotion, admiration and exultation ..." (Bonaventure 89) This inner spiritual sweetness can happen in the loftiest of ways like a vision from God in the case of the fleeing Jacob. But it can also happen with a sense of inner peace and thankfulness to God. Personally, I have experienced the awe of God's creation and oceans of mercy when admiring a beautiful sunset over the ocean or in the solemnity of a crypt of an ancient cathedral. My soul was filled with the sweetness knowing that God who created heaven and earth did condescend to become one of us to show us his deep care in our deep need.

With a well-established prayer life and spiritual illumination, we will be well on our way to the goal of our ascent on the spiritual ladder: union with God. The climax of our Eucharistic liturgy is our union with God through Christ: that he may dwell in us, and we in him. Each time we come up to the altar to receive the Body and Blood of Christ, we ascend one more step toward union with God. We, for a moment, leave the profane, and enter into the sacred. Philip Doddridge masterfully captured the essence of this union with God with the following hymn:

O God of Bethel, by Whose hand
Thy people still are fed,
Who through this weary pilgrimage

Hast all our fathers led.

Our vows, our prayers, we now present
Before Thy Throne of grace;
God of our fathers, be the God
Of their succeeding race.

Through each perplexing path of life
Our wandering footsteps guide;
Give us each day our daily bread
And raiment fit provide.

O spread Thy covering wings around,
Till all our wanderings cease,
And at our Father's loved abode
Our souls arrive in peace.

I am talking so much about our interior spiritual walk today because that is the food for our souls as Christians. This food will not only benefit our interior spiritual landscape, but it will also help propel the mission of the Church to follow Jesus to love the unloved, include the unincluded, save the unsaved. This food from heaven to our souls will also help propel the mission of the Church is to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give voice to the unheard. This food is none other than the presence of God through which we can truly receive the peace, which surpasses all understanding in any trials and dangers in life. In the vision of Jacob, God promises his ever-abiding presence and favor overcoming any fear, danger, toils and snares in the bitterness of life. God promises his presence to all generations of the faithful of All Hallows. In Jesus Christ, God promises his presence to you and me right here today.

Sisters and brothers, are you ready for God's presence?

With the angels bearing us, let us now ascend the spiritual ladder to approach God's Throne of Grace.

Amen.

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