



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

The Rev. Matthew J. Moretz, *Associate Rector*

Angels and Ladders

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, July 20, 2014

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Genesis 28:10-19a and Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Abraham had twin grandchildren. The younger one, Jacob, swindled his older brother out of his inheritance. As Jacob fled the wrath of his brother, he stopped near the Canaanite city of Luz for some fitful rest, making a rock his pillow. And in his slumber, he dreamt of a great ladder (or was it a staircase?) groaning with the weight of God's angels, in a great double stream commuting from heaven to earth with their visions and missions, and from earth to heaven with our pleas and our hopes. And atop the stairs, God stood, full of promises. Promises for Jacob to be safe. Promises for him to have descendants that would spread over the planet. A promise that this land would be his and theirs. And a promise that every family in the world would be blessed by his family. When Jacob awoke from his dream, he was terrified. He knew that he had stumbled upon the entrance to heaven. With solemnity and awe he anointed the rock that was his pillow, made it an altar, and gave the place a new name, Beth-El, House of God. But Jacob wasn't fully committed to God just yet. He prayed that if he would be kept safe in his dangerous journey, then he would follow the Lord as his God. And so the ladder is not only one of angels, but also promises in transit, some descending and some ascending.

What is so striking to me about this vision is not the portrayal of these fantastical creatures, these angels. For me, the image of an angel is a way for us to get a handle on the living and vivid character of God's interactions with us. Historically, we have given these encounters names and attributes like Gabriel and Raphael. It has helped us to grasp dynamics that are larger than us, with story and continuity. And some methods of portraying angels are better than others. Some are a distraction. Like trying to figure out how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. Unhelpful. But this famous image of Jacob's ladder, this image is very helpful.

It is a vision that insists that heaven and earth are connected. That the boundary that we thought was so distinct, between our home and God's home, that this is actually a zone that is full of commerce and discourse. The borders are open. The waters are brackish.

Centuries later, two children of Jacob, two children of these promises would meet. Jesus and Bartholomew. They were both very impressed with each other. Jesus said to Bartholomew, "Look at you. Such an honest Israelite." And Bartholomew in return gushes over Jesus, "Rabbi, you are the king of Israel, the Son of God!" And Jesus tells him, "Well, Bartholomew, you are going to see great things. You are going to see heaven opened up, and God's angels going up to heaven and down to earth, not on a ladder, but on the Son of Man." Jesus likes this title better. Another way to translate this title is that the angels are going up and down the Human One. And in the limestone panel next to me, you can see the scene brought to life. It is part of a sequence portraying the life of St. Bartholomew. This panel shows Bartholomew, kneeling under a tree, later in life, actually having the vision that was promised to him by his friend.

St. Bart's vision will take the vision of Jacob one step further. The ladder that the angels climb is not gilded crystal or something; it is a human life. It is a human way of life that becomes the doorway to heaven. A way of life that can be taught and practiced and passed down to people no matter what country they come from or what language they speak. A Way of Human Life becomes the stairway from heaven to earth, so that that hope from the Lord's Prayer is now a real possibility. God and humanity can work together so that it may be on earth as it is in heaven. It is in this good work where the lines between us and God are smudged, and as God's way of life is acted out on earth, it is honestly very difficult to tell where God begins and we end.

Another thing that is very difficult is trying to find something to say in the face of the visions our screens have shown us this week. All kinds of horrors are ascending and descending from heaven to earth. Rockets rising and falling in Israel and Gaza. Missiles rising and planes falling in the Ukraine. Children and adults, the intended and unintended, so many of God's children consumed in these contests for power and land and security. It is as if we've created demons, fueled by our fear and hate and territorial conviction, weaponized demons that climb up and down the heavens, ushering in a kingdom on earth as it is in hell. So often our ownership of land doesn't become a blessing for others, as God proclaimed to Jacob. It becomes a curse.

There are many who believe that the solution for the tragedies of our time is so obvious that it is a self-evident truth. Kill the bad guys. Sometimes this is stated diplomatically as "bringing those responsible to justice." The solution seems to be to respond with that same discourse of violence, yet in a judicious, surgical way. But if you listen to the parable that we read today, we see that Jesus is trying to expand our imagination into a different kind of response. He imagines a person's field that has been sabotaged. A rival farmer has scattered the field with weeds. These weeds are taking up resources from the crops. And the field hands want to pull up the weeds. But the landowner knows that if the weeds are pulled up, the crops will be pulled up, too, and the whole field will be dead, defeating the whole purpose. Instead the farmer asks the field hands to be patient. To wait until the harvest, and then they will be able to separate the weeds from the crops.

This is the problem with thinking that we can just "kill the bad guys." We don't just kill the bad in them. We kill the good in them, too. There is a light in every person that the darkness never overcomes. And in "pulling weeds," we hurt good people as well. The family and friends of the "bad guy" suffer pain that didn't have to happen, adding to the pile of human suffering in this world. And the temptations of vengeance become more likely to spin off into a multiplying firestorm. And since conversion and repentance is an ever-present possibility for us, some "weeds" might actually end up becoming a crop one day and bearing sweeter fruit. Jesus had other parables for this reality, comparing it to how hard it is to tell the sheep from the goats or to pick out the yeast that has been mixed in with the flour. The line between the good guys and the bad guys is just as blurry as the line between heaven and earth.

In the midst of all this confusion, we do not hear a call for confident action in a world of affliction. Instead Jesus begs us to wait. To hold back on weeding out evil, as if there were no such thing as collateral damage. He asks us to wait until the harvest, until all is fulfilled. To let God's angels sort it out in the end when all things are revealed. We are to give this task of judgment back to God.

Some would say that this patience is nothing but impotence. And worse, the abandonment of our responsibilities. But this patience, this forestalling of judgment and reactive violence, our mercy is a sort of miraculous act. The pardoning of an injury has the ability to contain the sting and outrage of that injury. The goal, the prize of our patience, is to maintain our bond with others, at great cost, so that the evil that is done might become an occasion for greater good.

Yet, what about the things that we have no direct control over? I would suggest to you that this is where the mystery of the world serves in our favor. Because it is also difficult to tell where the prayers and hopes and dreams of human hearts end and the physical activities of inspired people begin. The stakes are high for every one of us. Our blessings ripple out invisibly beyond us in time and space, yet, sadly, so do our curses. And so in places and times like this, we ask for the strength and patience to endure and live out mercy in our spheres, and we pray for mercy in spheres that seem beyond us, but really aren't. For it is really just one great networked sphere, if we have eyes to see it, a sphere of ladders connecting every human heart, billions each to the other, and each to God, ladders coursing with angels.

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For information about St. Bart's and its life of faith and mission
write us at central@stbarts.org, call 212-378-0222, or visit stbarts.org
325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022