



**A Sermon for The Eighth Sunday After Pentecost
July 23, 2023**



Jacob's Ladder, by James Jacques Joseph Tissot

**Rev. Barbara Bond
New Life Episcopal Church, Uniontown, OH**

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The Rev Barbara Bond

Genesis 28:10-19a, Psalm 139

Glimpses of heaven

One of my favorite prayers is the one for church musicians and artists.
Listen:

O God, whom saints and angels delight to worship in heaven: Be ever present with your servants who seek through art and music to perfect the praises offered by your people on earth; and grant to them even now glimpses of your beauty, and make them worthy at length to behold it unveiled for evermore; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Ah. Glimpses of God's beauty. How often have I encountered sacred moments as I gazed on a beautiful work of art, or listened to a heavenly piece of music. Faure's Requiem comes to mind – the last movement is called *In Paradisium*. In Paradise. I can hear paradise. I can imagine it. I can glimpse it.

I think Jacob is having a similar moment in our first reading today. He is guilt-ridden, running away from his brother Esau whom he cheated out of his birthright. Jacob is on the run, trying to escape his own guilt.

And he comes upon a special place, lies down, and goes to sleep. In his dream, he sees God's messengers, angels, going up and down on a ladder, or on a staircase. The angels move in both directions, wedding heaven and earth. In this fantastic vision, Jacob dreams on, feeling God right next to him, and he hears God's promise, which is now handed down to the third generation of this chosen family. God names the patriarchal generations of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and promises Jacob the same patrimony, the land on which Jacob is sleeping, to be given to his descendants forever. Jacob wakes up, awe-struck, still in a daze from the encounter with God and the vision of angels. He says, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." From this point on, he looks forward, not back. He knows that his people have been chosen by God and have been promised the land. He

anoints the sacred place and understands for the first time the sacred nature of his family and their connection to the land.

Just a few moments ago, we sang the famous spiritual, Jacob's Ladder. You probably remember it from campfire gatherings, when the repetition of the music was mesmerizing, and you could imagine yourself going slowly up a ladder –every rung goes higher, higher.

In Psalm 139 this morning, the Psalmist imagines God everywhere, leading us to the heights and to the depths of our life experience. The Psalmist seems amazed that God has been with him always, from the moment he was conceived, The Psalmist could be speaking for himself, he could be speaking for Jacob, he could be speaking for all of us when he writes: "Lord, you have searched me out and known me; you know my sitting down and my rising up; you discern my thoughts from afar."

How comforting to know that God is always with us, on the mountain tops, in the valleys, on every rung of the ladder of life. God awaits us on the other side of the great divide.

This past week I lost a good friend. Ron was in his late eighties, ready to move on to the next life. We will all miss him. I am honored to be delivering the homily at his funeral this week, when I will have a chance to recount the wonderful events of his life and his many gifts to the rest of us. Ron was one of those artists I mentioned in the opening prayer. His areas of expertise included food – he was a master chef – and theatre, both of those being artistic realms. When he grandly presented our Elizabethan romps down at St. Paul's, it was always with a grandiosity, full of charm and humor. What a guy!

As I think about Ron, and about all those who go before us, I imagine Jacob's dream. Here the angels lead the way, and God stands by, with God's promise. I think of that wonderful phrase from our funeral eucharist service: "to your faithful people, O Lord, life is changed, not ended." I love that. I believe that. God has promised us an eternal dwelling place.

Again I think of Jacob's vision of angels, how he was asleep when he was granted this beautiful vision. Our sleeping lives offer freedom of expression, not tied down by consciousness. We have certainly all had wild dreams and wondered, Where did that come from? But in those other

realms of consciousness, the subconscious is freed to wander about and give us glimpses of another life. Perhaps it is a bit like an Impressionistic painting – up close, we can't really tell what the subject matter is, but if we back off a certain distance, it comes together – perhaps we see, instead of a bunch of colorful dots, a scene of people in a park, or perhaps a pond full of waterlilies. Glimpses of eternity, through the works of artists and musicians, actors, chefs, all those around us with talents galore, opening up to us visions of God's kingdom.

Amen!