

“And so it begins, A Sermon in Five Parts,
Part One: “Of Jacob and His Ladder”
Preached at Knox United Church (Parksville, B.C.)
on January 15th 2012 (2nd Sunday after Epiphany)
by Foster Freed

John 1: 43-51

Beginnings are important...beginnings are of vital importance: especially to those of us formed by a tradition...formed by a *faith*-tradition...a faith tradition whose opening words speak of what God was doing *in the beginning*...a faith-tradition which later goes on to speak of a Word that was with God *from the beginning*. Beginnings are important...important, if for no other reason than that a beginning often defines the nature of that which will follow. Beginnings are important...beginnings matter.

In the case of our four New Testament Gospels, each of them pays close attention to the shape of *their* beginning: in other words, pays close attention to the way in which they present the beginning of Jesus' life and ministry. In the case of Matthew and Luke that happens through their telling of the Christmas story: the story of Jesus' birth told (by both Luke and by Matthew) in ways that provide some pretty ample hints as to the kind of life the adult Jesus will go on to lead. In the case of John and Mark—Gospels which lack a traditional Christmas story—in the case of John and Mark, their respective opening chapters try to do much the same thing....providing a glimpse of the beginning of Jesus' ministry in a way that manages to make clear all of the things to which we will need to pay special attention as we watch that ministry unfold over the remaining pages of their respective Gospels. And so this morning....this morning...as we open to the final section of the first chapter of John's Gospel, we need to be alert...alert to the way in which that very first chapter offers a snapshot...better still a frame-of-reference...one that will permit us to make sense of everything else that John will tell us about this Jesus as his Gospel unfolds.

And here, I hasten to note a feature of John's Gospel that is amply on display for us this morning: namely, that John's Gospel is dense with imagery, dense with allusion, and thick with meaning. Here, in less than ten verses, we see Jesus calling Philip; we see Philip, having himself received a call, in turn calling his friend Nathanael, inviting Nathanael also to follow Jesus; we then overhear some banter between Philip and Nathanael concerning Galilee and those—like Jesus—who hail from Galilee; finally, we experience Nathanael's awe-struck marvel as he realizes that Jesus has the ability to overhear that banter from an unseen distance. Each of those elements is worthy of its own sermon...the good news being that I'm not going to attempt to pack all of those themes into this one solitary sermon, partly because it might well lead a few of you to regret my returning from holidays (!), but also...also, because none of those preliminary elements ought to occupy centre stage on a morning such as this. And here's why!

Because...because all of these other elements are a mere prelude...a mere prelude... to the real insight with which John wishes to leave us at the end of his opening chapter: his painstakingly shaped portrait of the beginning of Jesus' ministry. As John depicts it, Jesus—having heard Nathanael's astonishment at his ability to see and hear him from a distance—as John depicts it, Jesus is almost dismissive in his response to Nathanael. In effect he says to him: "You think that's something, Nathanael? You think that sort of messianic magic trick is something to get all worked up about? That's nothing, my friend: that's nothing." And then Jesus adds the real kicker: the words with which John brings his opening chapter to a close:

"Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." And Jesus 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." Very truly! Very truly! You will see heaven opened. Heaven opened...and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.

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It is sometimes said...it is sometimes said that the church would be better off—in this modern/post-modern age we occupy...it is sometimes said that the church would be better off were it to jettison the first large portion of the Bible: the portion we designate as the Old Testament. The arguments that are generally marshalled in support of that proposition tend to be thoughtful, well-meaning and, quite frankly, not entirely unpersuasive even to someone like myself who, for rather obvious reasons, loves the Old Testament. But the real problem as I see it...the real problem is that a great deal of the New Testament would be incomprehensible were the church to distance itself from its Old Testament roots.

And this morning's passage from John is a textbook illustration as to why that is so. Jesus' promise to Nathanael is that Nathanael will be privileged to see the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. Read in splendid isolation, the only image that conjures for me is, quite frankly, sort of weird: that of Jesus the Christ, Son of Man, adorned with angels dancing on his skull as they ascend and descend—pixie-like—from heaven. What's that about? What in the world could that possibly signify?

Enter the Old Testament! Enter the story of Jacob as he flees from the wrath (the entirely understandable wrath) of his brother Esau! In short, enter stage-left, one of the Bible's central figures: a young man whose zeal for advancement has caused him to cheat and deceive his older brother at every possible turn. A figure who may well have our sympathy...but not a figure whose actions we can always approve. And here, at a critical juncture, one in which his very life is on the line, Jacob flees to the shelter of his mother's ancestral home. Fleeing from a mortal threat, exhausted from his journey, taking a stone for his pillow, Jacob pauses for the night in a place he comes to name Bethel: Bethel, meaning "House of God"! Why "House of God"? Because Bethel is the place where Jacob has a dream: dreaming that "there was a ladder set up on the earth,

the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God ascending and descending on it!" And as Jacob watches those angels ascend and descend, he hears God's own voice offering to him the privilege of becoming the bearer of the covenant first made with his grandfather Abraham: a covenant through which Abraham's descendants will not only *be* blessed, but will become an instrument through which "all of the families of the earth shall be blessed."

And it is quite impossible...entirely impossible...to make any sense whatsoever of Jesus' words to Nathanael...

...*"Very truly I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man..."*

...impossible to make any sense of that unless we have the background story—the Old Testament story of Jacob and his ladder—in mind. And the thing to remember is that the analogy here is not between Jacob and Jesus. Let's be clear on that. The New Testament may well regard Jesus as the New Adam. At other times he appears to be regarded as a new Abraham. At other times, still, as the new Moses, at other times as the true David. But nowhere is Jesus thought of as a New Jacob...which, given how questionable Jacob's character appears to have been, is probably for the good! And so no: when John's Gospel speaks of seeing heaven opened and angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man, what we're not being told is that Jesus is occupying the place of Jacob. Not Jacob's place...not the place of Jacob. Here Jesus has been cast in a far more basic role...a far more fundamental role. That of the ladder...That of Jacob's ladder.

Jacob 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.

And Jesus said to 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. A.k.a.: the ladder, the One through whom God has chosen to link earth and heaven...the One through whom God has chosen to bridge the gulf between heaven and earth. Jesus the Christ: God's ladder to the earth

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Beginnings *are* important...beginnings *do* matter. As the man said on the way in, beginnings—when they are well shaped--can provide us with a glimpse, with a hint. of that which is to follow! And if you do not think that John's Gospel is interested in leaving us—right at the outset—with the thought that Jesus Christ has come into our midst as a ladder—as Jacob's ladder, bridging earth and heaven—if you don't think that's John's intention from the get-go, then please think again.

And yes...if you are anything like me, right about now, you've got the words of the old black spiritual swirling around your brain.

*We are climbing Jacob's ladder,
we are climbing Jacob's ladder,
we are climbing Jacob's ladder,
soldiers of the cross.*

*Every round goes higher, higher,
every round goes higher, higher,
every round goes higher, higher,
soldiers of the cross.*

The problem being that Jacob didn't climb that ladder: what do we think we're doing climbing it. Jacob, in his dream, doesn't see the likes of you and me on that ladder...nor does Jesus, in his response to Nathanael, say anything about the likes of Nathanael climbing up that ladder. That ladder is for angels ascending and descending: bearing blessing on their wings...bearing gifts of goodness and love with their every step upon that most blessed of ladders.

And that too, you see, is what John wants us to grasp *in the beginning*, what he wants us to get straight right from the get-go. John's gospel, John's story, this story of the Christ, needs to be understood...needs to be understood from the outset as a story of sheer grace, unalloyed grace, undiluted grace. A story in which we are on the receiving end of a dream: not merely Jacob's dream but God's own dream for all of those privileged to be counted as God's children. Not merely Jacob's tribe, not merely the Christian tribe, but—as promised to Abraham—a blessing destined to touch and heal and transform the lives of all the families of earth.

And our first assignment—strange to say—our first job assignment as followers of Christ—as those who are cognizant of that blessing—our first job assignment is simply to learn how to receive that blessing with gratitude. Not imagining ourselves the authors of that blessing. Not pretending that we've done something meritorious to earn it! Not presuming that we are here because we are somehow the chosen few! Not kidding ourselves into believing that we've earned our place at this particular table. Simply acknowledging...acknowledging with gratitude...that we have been on the receiving end of grace. Opening our hands...our lips...our hearts to receive that grace. For today nothing more than that! But nothing less than that either. For a ladder has been sent our way: bridging heaven and earth. And God has used and still uses that ladder and its angelic travellers to bless...to bless...and then to bless again.

And so it begins! In Jesus' name! Amen!

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