

“Jacob’s Ladder”

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Genesis 28:10-19a

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

“And [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.”

Genesis 28:12

Let us pray... O God,

Show us the way to Heaven, show us the way to your Beloved Community,

And show us how they are the same.

Amen

For the last 2 years, the Florida Conference has been using the word, ‘Imagine’,
as part of its theme for the Annual Meeting.

This is in concert with the General Synod’s theme of

“Imagine What’s Possible”.

And I suppose if we dug a little deeper,

we would find a connection with Disney World’s ‘Imagineering’.

“Imagination” – that is something that can work for us or against us,
depending how we use it.

We can be lifted up into the heavens – or become bogged down in the mud
by our imaginations.

Even before there was a Disney World in Florida, there was – and is

Cape Canaveral, the original spaceport of NASA,

the National Astronautics & Space Administration.

And on Friday a week ago, the shuttle Atlantis lifted off from its launch pad

as the last manned American spacecraft for at least the immediate future.

It has been the occasion for me to reflect upon what “going up into outer space”
meant when I was growing up in the late 1950s and ‘60s.

In many ways, we take for granted how science fiction has become science fact,

but in the early years of space exploration, it was new and mysterious –

even affecting how we looked up at the sky then.

There’s a nostalgia associated with that time

that contemporary filmmakers such as Steven Spielberg have

recreated in films like “ET” and “Back to the Future”.

Not only was there an excitement about our capacity for space travel,

but also the prospect of encountering beings from another planet.

Willard, p.2

And this was the era of the “space race” with the Russians
who also had The Bomb which prompted another kind of competition.
The race to the Moon began
when the Soviets put up a satellite called Sputnik in 1957.
But it went into high gear when Russian cosmonaut, Yuri Gagarin,
became the first human being in space, orbiting the earth in Vostok I.
This flight took place in 1961 and from start to finish was less than two hours
when Gagarin ejected from the spacecraft
and parachuted safely back to Earth.

What happened next was literally a scenario right out of classic science fiction
like when the visitor from outer space meets earthlings and tells them,
‘I come in peace. Take me to your leader.’
Gagarin was still in his space suit and was dragging his parachute with him
as he walked through a field when he met a woman and her daughter.
They asked if he came from outer space, and he told them,
‘As a matter of fact I have.’

Later, it was alleged – though disputed that Gagarin said,
“I looked and looked, but I didn’t see God.”
But there is another story that puts it this way:

*When Yuri Gagarin... returned to Earth,
there was a huge reception in his honor.
As his close friend and [fellow]cosmonaut... Alexei Leonov tells it,
then-premier Nikita Khrushchev cornered Gagarin [and asked]
"So tell me, Yuri,...did you see God up there?"
After a moment's pause. Gagarin answered,
"Yes sir, I did."
Khrushchev frowned.
"Don't tell any one," he said.
A few minutes later the head of the Russian Orthodox Church
took Gagarin aside.
"So tell me, my child... did you see God up there?"
Gagarin hesitated and replied
"No sir, I did not."
[And the priest told him] "Don't tell anyone."*

Anecdote in *New Age Journal*, Vol. 7 (1990), p. 176 http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Yuri_Gagarin

Human beings have a need to prove whether or not God and heaven exist –
we want to know if God is tangible and is heaven a real place?

Willard, p.3

Our Jewish Testament reading today provides a vision of angels in motion,
ascending and descending from the earth to heaven.

Jacob is on his way to visit with his mother's relatives
in the hopes of finding a wife as well as escaping from his brother Esau's
anger at being tricked out of his inheritance.

Jacob passes the night, sleeping in the wilderness, resting his head upon a stone.
And he dreams of angels ascending and descending
on what appears to him to be a ladder.

In the vision, he only sees the activity of interaction between Heaven and Earth,
but not Heaven itself.

He also dreams that God is standing beside him
and makes four promises to Jacob –
that the land would belong to him and his descendants,
that these descendants would be more than he could count,
that they would go forth from there in all directions
to become a blessing for all humankind,
and that God would always be with him.

Though he gets only a glimpse of this Heavenly gateway,
he is given a set of promises for what happens here on Earth
through cooperation with God.

And those promises have pretty much all come true
depending on how you look at it –
though there is a lot more work to be done by God's people
to become a 'blessing' for all of humanity.

When he awakes he is filled with awe saying how
God had been there all along and he didn't know it.
So, he called the place "Bethel" – which means, "House of God"
and he set up a pillar on the stone he used to rest his head upon.
But he also recognizes that he has been shown the way to Heaven
through God's promises – so, he calls this place the "Gate to Heaven".

Jesus often used parables to talk about
the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven.
Though Matthew's version of the Parable of the Sower
does not specifically describe 'the Kingdom'
it nevertheless is about how we get there
and receive the benefits of God's promises.

Earlier in Matthew, Jesus taught us not to worry about hiding
our treasures on Earth where moths and rust and thieves can get at them,
but for us to store our valuables in heaven.
"For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

Willard, p.4

Jesus is basically equating heaven with our hearts
and the heart is the symbol for loving-kindness.
We are to cultivate our hearts.

In sharp contrast with the idealism of
the race into space with the Russians to the Moon and beyond
was the frontier wasteland between races
that our urban neighborhoods had become by the late 1960s.
Gil Scott-Heron is an African-American “spoken word” poet – or rapper,
who recently died and his style of rap was a form of social commentary
akin to the folk movement of the white community in the 1960s
and – I am inclined to believe, with Jesus himself
whose spoken word style was parables.

Gil Scott-Heron wrote a poem about how not everyone sees space exploration
as the advancement of humankind.

It is harsh in its language and would be too distracting for me
to use in this time of worship.

Let it be enough for me to say that this poem points out the cost
of getting a person on the moon – specifically a white man,
while impoverished minorities were faced with
having to live in rat-infested apartments with no hot water or lights,
having to pay higher rent, higher taxes, higher cost of food,
no money for a doctor, and neighborhoods dangerous with drug dealing.

It is specific about race and the space race,
but it could apply in our time to a wider group of people who are poor
and to political contests like gridlock and war.

In Jesus’ Parable of the Sower – which is more of a parable about the heart,
‘the word of the kingdom’ can only take root and grow
in ground that has been prepared, hearts that have been cultivated,
where the rocks of injustice have been dug up
and the weeds of materialism have been pulled out.

America’s space program did evolve to include astronauts who are
black as well as white, women as well as men.

It has served to inspire us as the human race,
bringing Americans & Russians to work together.

And just as the angels ascend and descend,
so the astronauts of the Shuttle Atlantis who went up into space last Friday
will return this week, ending this mission
while work begins for the next goal – Mars.

Willard, p.5

God told Jacob that his descendants would be beyond numbering
and they would 'spread abroad' in all directions to be a blessing to all –
just as Jesus said that the good soil would produce a harvest
up to a hundred times as much.

And this means that the Kingdom is about bounty and generosity,
the result of the loving preparation of hearts and communities.

So, the gateway to Heaven is available to us now,
but first we must imagine – and work for, a better Earth
to become a Beloved Community that is possible.

Amen

Genesis 28:10-19a

10 Jacob left Beer-sheba and went towards Haran.

11 He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night,
because the sun had set.

Taking one of the stones of the place,
he put it under his head and lay down in that place.

12 And he 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.

13 And the Lord stood beside him and said,

‘I am the Lord,

the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac;
the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring;

14 and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth,

and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east
and to the north and to the south;

and all the families of the earth shall be blessed

in you and in your offspring.

15 Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go,

and will bring you back to this land;

for I will not leave you until I have done

what I have promised you.’

16 Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said,

‘Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!’

17 And he was afraid, and said,

‘How awesome is this place!

This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.’

18 So Jacob rose early in the morning,

and he took the stone that he had put under his head

and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it.

19 He called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first.

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

13 That same day Jesus went out of the house
and sat beside the lake.

2 Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there,
while the whole crowd stood on the beach.

3 And he told them many things in parables, saying:

‘Listen! A sower went out to sow.

4 And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path,
and the birds came and ate them up.

5 Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil,
and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil.

6 But when the sun rose, they were scorched;
and since they had no root, they withered away.

7 Other seeds fell among thorns,
and the thorns grew up and choked them.

8 Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain,
some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

9 Let anyone with ears listen!’

[Later, Jesus explained this parable to his disciples...]

18 ‘Hear then the parable of the sower.

19 When anyone hears the word of the kingdom
and does not understand it,
the evil one comes and snatches away
what is sown in the heart;
this is what was sown on the path.

20 As for what was sown on rocky ground,
this is the one who hears the word
and immediately receives it with joy;

21 yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while,
and when trouble or persecution arises
on account of the word,
that person immediately falls away.

22 As for what was sown among thorns,
this is the one who hears the word,
but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth
choke the word, and it yields nothing.

23 But as for what was sown on good soil,
this is the one who hears the word and understands it,
who indeed bears fruit and yields,
in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.’