

Sermon for October 11th, 2026
NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

READINGS

Genesis 28:10-22

10 Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran. **11** And he came to a certain place and stayed there that 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 to sleep. **12** And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! **13** And behold, the LORD stood above it 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** 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 in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. **15** Behold, 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 awoke 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 early in the morning Jacob 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 the name of that place Bethel, but the name of the city was Luz at the first. **20** Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, **21** so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, **22** and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house. And of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you."

Psalm 84

- 1** How lovely is your dwelling place,
O LORD of hosts!
- 2** My soul longs, yes, faints
for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and flesh sing for joy
to the living God.
- 3** Even the sparrow finds a home,
and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may lay her young,
at your altars, O LORD of hosts,
my King and my God.
- 4** Blessed are those who dwell in your house,
ever singing your praise! *Selah*
- 5** Blessed are those whose strength is in you,
in whose heart are the highways to Zion.
- 6** As they go through the Valley of Baca
they make it a place of springs;
the early rain also covers it with pools.
- 7** They go from strength to strength;
each one appears before God in Zion.

8 O LORD God of hosts, hear my prayer;
give ear, O God of Jacob! *Selah*

9 Behold our shield, O God;
look on the face of your anointed!

10 For a day in your courts is better
than a thousand elsewhere.

I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
than dwell in the tents of wickedness.

11 For the LORD God is a sun and shield;
the LORD bestows favor and honor.
No good thing does he withhold
from those who walk uprightly.

12 O LORD of hosts,
blessed is the one who trusts in you!

Ephesians 4:17-28

17 Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. **18** They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. **19** They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. **20** But that is not the way you learned Christ!— **21** assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, **22** to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, **23** and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, **24** and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

25 Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. **26** Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, **27** and give no opportunity to the devil. **28** Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. **29** Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. **30** And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. **31** Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. **32** Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Matthew 9:1-8

1 And getting into a boat he crossed over and came to his own city. **2** And behold, some people brought to him a paralytic, lying on a bed. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven.” **3** And behold, some of the scribes said to themselves, “This man is blaspheming.” **4** But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, “Why do you think evil in your hearts? **5** For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk’? **6** But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he then said to the paralytic—“Rise, pick up your bed and go home.” **7** And he rose and went home. **8** When the crowds saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to men.

Our text for meditation this Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity is on our Old Testament reading.

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Introduction

Martin Luther wrote voluminously, publishing a great deal of books, commentaries, and translations. The total collection, called *Luther's Works*, spans approximately 79 large volumes and it is prohibitively expensive. But that said, there is a book of Luther's that he *didn't* write: the *Table Talk*. The *Table Talk* is a collection of things he said in conversation with his friends; after he went to be with the Lord, his colleagues and associates got together and wrote what they remembered him saying. Occasionally, you might hear some anti-Lutheran polemicist claim that there are heinous things written in it, as though the Reformer was secretly evil or something. But the reality is, the *Table Talk* is a great treasure for Christians everywhere, with right doctrine casually explained. Pertinent to our Old Testament reading for today, let us hear about a personal visionary experience Luther had:

I shall relate the following circumstance:—I being on Good Friday last in my inner chamber, in fervent prayer, contemplating with myself how Christ my Saviour hung on the Cross, how he suffered and died for our sins, there suddenly appeared upon the wall a bright shining vision, and a glorious form of our Saviour Christ, with the five wounds, steadfastly looking upon me, as if it had been Christ himself corporeally. Now, at the first sight, I thought it had been some good Revelation: yet I recollected that surely it must needs be the juggling of the devil, for Christ appeareth unto us in his word, and in a meaner and more humble form; therefore I spake to the vision in this manner: “Avoid, thou confounded devil; I know no other Christ than he who was crucified, and who in his Word is pictured unto me.” Whereupon the image vanished.¹

Now, there are many who might encounter Luther saying this who would be offended. Who in their right mind would see a vision of our Savior and hand-wave it away like that? But as our reading for today shows us, the Reformer was absolutely correct to do and say what he did. As the “Jacob's Ladder” passage shows us, it is not spiritual experiences which enlighten us, but the Word of God – for faith comes by hearing, and hearing by that very Word.²

Jacob's Ladder

Jacob, the third Patriarch of Israel, had fled to Haran to escape the wrath of his brother Esau.³ You see, he defrauded Esau of both his birthright and the family blessing, and so Esau planned to murder him. His mother Rebekah hears of her son's homicidal plans, and so she has Jacob flee to her brother Laban's estate. When we begin our passage, Jacob is in the middle of that journey. He is tired enough to sleep with his head on a rock for a pillow, completely exposed to the elements. It is remarkable that he fell asleep so quickly, as his mind must have been reeling being so full of thoughts about his sin and Esau's hateful reaction.

Yet sleep he did, and as soon as he was deep in slumber he had this dream of the ladder,⁴ the angels and the Lord. The vision shows him a ladder with angels going up and down, almost as though they were taking shifts on earth to do the Lord's will. This is a marvelous way to get the future Patriarch's attention, I am sure. He looks upward into Heaven and sees the Lord standing there – most likely a pre-Incarnation appearance of our Lord Jesus who gives him the message from on high. Now my friends, I am sure that you are wondering: what is the meaning of the ladder? Why are angels going

1 From the condensed version of the *Table Talk*, found here: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/9841/9841-h/9841-h.htm>

2 Romans 10:17

3 Genesis 27:41-28:5

4 It is more likely to be a large staircase, but we will not question the translators here.

up and down it? Are we supposed to learn something from this imagery?

My answer to those questions is that the ladder means *nothing* to us. Yes, angels exist and they do things here on earth. That is taught all over Scripture, and this dream of Jacob's does not contribute meaningfully to our understanding of how that works. Do angels need to walk down stairs to get to earth? I doubt it – they're angels, marvelously powerful beings who are not constricted by space and material the way we are. Do we Christians need to ascend such a ladder to get to Heaven? God forbid! Yet tragically, such an interpretation of this vision was offered by many of the Church Fathers, who decided that the vision formed a basis for their monastic obsession.⁵ You see, according to their madness, each step on the stair supposedly represents some work of inner self-perfection a monk must obtain in his journey to Heaven. Perish the thought!

You see my friends, the experience matters little. Moses dedicated only one (one!) verse to what it is Jacob saw. This means that no matter how much we wish we knew, we shall not know the explanation for the ladder or why it was there. Of course, that will not stop foolish Christians from trying. Throughout history there have been endless cases of believers trying to use the Bible like it is a grimoire of black magic. They see Jacob's Ladder and decide they can mystically monk themselves into climbing to Heaven instead of trusting in Jesus for their salvation. They see the vision of the chariot in Ezekiel⁶ and decide it's time to summon angels. They hear about the witch of Endor calling up Samuel's ghost and figure it would be a good idea to do some necromancy themselves.⁷ For crying out loud, in the Renaissance there were theologians trying to invent “Christian Kabbalah” to chase after spiritual things made up by Jewish rabbis.⁸ All of this because they choose to chase emotional and mystical experiences over simply believing the Word of God. That there were angels on a ladder in a dream means nothing more than angels being on a ladder in a dream: it tells Jacob that he ought to pay careful attention to what he hears, and nothing more. But the fools of history, beset with a need to feel *special* or give heed to human pride, desire earnestly to pry into these things.

Jacob's Message

That there is only one verse dedicated to what the Patriarch saw in this dream tells us that it is of little consequence compared to the *message* that Jacob received. God speaks to him with great promises. Jacob will not be a wanderer and a fugitive his entire life; to the contrary, our Lord is *with him* and promises to bring him back to the Promised Land. Our Lord says to Jacob that he will have innumerable descendants on the earth, and one day one of his offspring will bless everyone – this offspring, as the word is singular, is Christ. In other words, God Himself gives Jacob the Gospel message in a prophetic form.

Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of Christ.⁹ Jacob responds to this Gospel message, not to seeing some angels going up and down. Hearing that God will bless him and bring a Savior to the world through his line is what inspires his offering of oil, which was a precious scarce resource for a man on the run. Hearing that God will *do* something for him is more valuable than peering into heavenly realities. Oh sure, Jacob could have decided to be some professional soothsayer and misused the Divine revelations the way the prophet Balaam did. He *could* have started some ancient equivalent to what greedy televangelists or “I went to Heaven” book-sales grifters do. For that matter, he could have started a cult – plenty of cults start with a man claiming he had a vision after all. But Jacob does none of these things because he now has faith in the one true God who proclaimed grace over him.

5 Gregory Nazianzus John Chrysostom, John Climacus, Guigo II and many others held this view.

6 Ezekiel 1, 10

7 1 Samuel 28

8 For a brief summary: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_Kabbalah

9 Again, Romans 10:17

Jacob was not just fleeing because his brother wanted to kill him. Jacob was fleeing because his brother wanting to kill him was a consequence of his sins. He defrauded Esau *twice*, of both his birthright and blessing! But when God appears in this vision, our Lord has no condemnation to give him. Jacob was forgiven and considered *spotless* before our Lord, being justified by his faith in the promises he was hearing. So strong was this conversion, that he adds to his offering of oil by saying “since this is what God has offered me freely, then I am his and will tithe all that I receive.” It was not the ladder which inspired this faith, he does not even mention the ladder when he makes his promise! But the *message* our Lord gave him that offered pardon and blessing. Just like his grandfather Abraham, he believed and was justified.¹⁰ We must do likewise!

Conclusion

Luther held on to the promise that Jesus is to appear in the clouds on the Last Day.¹¹ Unlike the mystics, visionaries, cultists and hucksters, he held strongly to the Word's pronouncement that one only sees Christ in the Eucharist and when He returns in the clouds with the trumpet blast.¹² He stubbornly refused to hear any tall tales about visions, visits from dead saints, or even stories of Christ Himself appearing in someone's washroom. Luther had the Word and he held to it, meaning he had the same justifying faith that Jacob had. Even though Jacob *did* have such a vision, he held more closely to the message he received – to the Gospel! Let God take care of mysterious spiritual realities, we can learn about them after the Resurrection. In the meantime, may we share the faith of both the Patriarch and the Reformer, and rejoice that we belong to our Lord in accordance with the promises given in His Word.

Now the Peace of our Lord, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

10 Genesis 15:6

11 <https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1951/12/martin-luther-and-the-end-of-the-world>

12 1 Thessalonians 4:16