

Stairway to Heaven

A sermon preached at Bridge Street United Church

Nov. 16, 2008

Texts: Genesis 28:10-19; Psalm 84; John 1:43-51

I bring you greetings from Queen's Theological College. There is a rich history of relationships between this church and our Theological College, and it is a privilege to share in Bridge Street United Church's anniversary service this morning.

I am well aware that the title of this sermon is identical to one of the most popular rock songs of all time. Originally released in 1971 by the British band, Led Zeppelin, "Stairway to Heaven" continues to be one of the most requested and most played songs on popular radio. Just what it has to do with the 193rd anniversary of Bridge Street United Church is a topic I will come back to in a few minutes. But first, I want to invite you to take a journey back in time.

I invite you to imagine that you are a displaced person, a stranger in a strange land. Twenty-five years ago you lived in a little country called Judah. Your home was in Jerusalem. You thought it was safe there because in the centre of the city stood the magnificent temple of YHWH, the God of Israel. You thought that God would always look after his people.

But you no longer live in Judah. Twenty-five years ago, a powerful army from Babylon, an empire whose capital was in modern-day Iraq, marched into your country and destroyed practically everything. Thousands of people died in war and famine, Jerusalem was demolished, and—worst of all—the beautiful temple of YHWH was razed to the ground. You survived, only to be forcibly deported from Judah to Babylon, where you and other survivors now have to work in their fields and factories, building their economy, making the Babylonian empire rich at your expense.

And the cities of Babylon are amazing! There are tremendous fortresses and palaces, and in the city-centres breath-taking temples. These are the skyscrapers of the ancient world: huge man-made mountains of mudbrick, beautifully decorated. They dominate the skyline, and stand in spacious plazas surrounded by storehouses and chapels where an army of priests and other religious specialists work. They have a special name in Babylonian. They are called "ziggurats." Each ziggurat has a massive staircase that goes all the way up from the plaza to a little palace at the top where the god's statue resides. These ramps are literally "stairways to heaven," which the priests climb as gateways to the realm of the gods.

Of course, you still maintain your own traditions. You still worship YHWH, the god of your ancestors. But how can it be credible to hold on to belief in the one sole god of heaven and earth, how is it possible to hold on to the faith in Israel as the people of God through whom all the world will be blessed, in the face of Babylon's success? One answer to those questions was to tell the story of Jacob's dream.

Well, we could spend a lot of time thinking about the sophisticated theology of this text. But I will identify only one theme this morning and then try and connect it to the present context. Despite the King James Version and the well-known spiritual, Jacob did

not see a “ladder.” He saw a staircase,¹ a ramp with its foot on earth and its head in heaven. In other words, what he saw was a kind of stylized ziggurat. What is YHWH, the God of Israel, doing on top of a ziggurat, the temple plan of Judah’s arch-rivals and conquerors, the Babylonians?

Our dreams often reveal conflicts that beset us in our every day lives and sometimes they even offer us solutions. If we want to analyze Jacob’s dream, we might want to understand how Jacob and the exiled captive people of Jerusalem resembled each other in many ways. Both found themselves going into Mesopotamia, wondering if they would ever come home again. Both were aware that they carried with them an ancient promise, a promise that God was going to bless all the earth through the children of Abraham. Both wondered how it could ever be true, as they fled their ancestral homes and wandered into foreign country. The story of Jacob’s dream told the captives of Babylon that they would come back home, that God had a plan for Israel, and that God would make it come to pass no matter how bleak the future looked to them, that God was more powerful than the empire of Babylon.

One of things that fascinates me about Led Zeppelin’s famous song, is that its lyrics are a commentary on the search for success, a theme that is signaled in its opening lines; “There’s a lady who’s sure all that glitters is gold, and she’s buying a stairway to heaven.”² As if the stairway to Heaven is something that can be bought, acquired by human effort.

But the truth is, when it comes to biblical religion, there are really two kinds of stairways. The first is the stairway that leads from earth to heaven: that’s the one that human beings normally try to construct and realize. And it’s a very important kind of stairway to build. We all need to cultivate a spiritual life. But human experience would suggest that left to our own devices, on our own steam, there always seems to be one more rung to climb, one more step to master. It’s hard work building the stairway to heaven.

That’s why biblical religion is good news. For, as the great Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel reminds us, it is precisely on that point that biblical religion diverges from the presuppositions and preoccupations of its cultural context. The biblical story, says Heschel, is not about humanity’s search for God. On the contrary, from start to finish it is the story of God’s search for human beings.³ And we see an illustration of that in our Old Testament lesson this morning. YHWH was not waiting for Jacob to decide to try and find God, YHWH was already seeking Jacob before Jacob even knew he was being sought. Jacob’s dream was not about human beings who were building a ladder from earth to Heaven, it was about a God who has built a stairway from Heaven to earth.

At its most basic level, and yet at its most profound depths, biblical religion is a religion of response, not of quest. We do not discover in the pages of Holy Writ a deity

¹ Hebrew *sullam*. The root to which this word related means “to lay down a road, pile something up.” For a discussion of ziggurat imagery in Genesis 28, see Nahum Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), 193.

² Led Zeppelin, “Stairway to Heaven,” *Lyrics Freak*. http://www.lyricsfreak.com/1/led+zeppelin/stairway+to+heaven_20082076.html (accessed Nov. 19, 2008).

³ Abraham Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1956).

waiting in some kind of aloof and supernal isolation for us to make the supreme search. The good news is that the grace of God has sought us out and found us before we even knew it—most fundamentally through the crucified and resurrected Christ who has done for us what we could not do for ourselves and opened the way to eternal life: a stairway to Heaven which starts in the heart of God and reaches down to the depths of the human condition.

I know that I am speaking these words in a congregation of the United Church of Canada. It's a privilege to be here in this particular United Church, as it celebrates 193 years of service. As this service unfolds, we will have many opportunities to reflect on that heritage, to celebrate the faith of forefathers and foremothers who built and sustained this congregation, and to commit ourselves to its future. I have been reading some of the history of Bridge Street United Church in the book, *Bridging the Years*— and what an interesting and impressive story it is.⁴ There is here, in this congregation, a rich record of vision and achievement that is not to be gainsaid. The physical beauty of this church itself is a sign of a history of giving and of responding to grace, which is by no means only confined to the tangible. There is here a story of civic, national, and denominational leadership worth celebrating.

But as I speak, I am aware, as I am sure many of you are, that the United Church of Canada, like other expressions of Christianity, is slowly but surely declining in numbers and social influence. Now it's relatively easy to blame ourselves for these developments, as if we just haven't been diligent enough about building the stairway to Heaven from our end. But it would be a mistake to take the present situation too personally, as if the trouble was simply that the Church isn't friendly enough, or media-savvy enough, as if the only problem was that we simply haven't tried hard enough. Because, whatever the truth in such analyses, that's not all that's going on. In fact, to no small extent, the current decline in the church's fortunes has to do with the fact that modern society has found different means for maintaining its social structures. As a result, the church has lost favour, prestige, and importance in society.

At one time, the powers and principalities that rule this present age (see Ephesians 6:12) thought the Church was useful because it helped them to organize the body politic. But times change and so do techniques for managing culture. The powers-that-be don't need the church anymore; there are other ways of organizing society for their own advantage now. To put it bluntly: the Western Church is living through a time of cultural captivity and exile in an empire dominated by other gods: the gods of technology, efficiency, consumerism, and individual success.

This is not to say that we should look back at the Church's past, as if it were some kind of golden age. Jacob was no angel when he was still living with his family in Canaan, and neither was the Church when it was more socially dominant than it is today. The residential school debacle is indication enough of that. Nevertheless, mainline Protestantism was once an obvious cultural success story, and it dreamed and talked about Canada as if it were a "Christian nation." But those days are over. And if it now starts to feel that the Canadian Christian enterprise is in captivity to a culture with another set of values, does that mean that our faith story has been all in vain?

⁴ J. W. Lamb, *Bridging the Years: A History of Bridge Street United/Methodist Church, Belleville, 1815-1990* (Winfield, BC: Wood Lake Books, 1990).

We are not the first to ask such questions; they were asked long ago by the people who told themselves the story of Jacob's dream. What shall we say, as we find ourselves facing captivity in Babylon, exiled from the corridors of cultural success and social power? Where can we find the ladder to Heaven? How will we discover the means to bring ourselves back to shore as the ebb tide of history, so well described in Matthew Arnold's poem "On Dover Beach," keeps washing the Church out to sea?

I do not know what the future of the Church is in the Western world; I do not know what the future of this Church is. I only know that we will make a mistake if we forget the promise of Jacob's dream. God has a plan for the Church and that plan will not be frustrated by its captivity in Babylon. As we shape our worship and our plans, we do so in response to the God who is already here before we come, and already seeking us before we seek her. As we strive and strain to remain faithful to the promises that have been given to us and our ancestors, we have a confidence that joins us with Jacob and with the exiles of Babylon of long ago. God is seeking us, even before we may be aware of the divine presence. God will be with us, even in the Church's captivity and exile. There is a staircase built from Heaven to earth that all the powers of Babylon cannot overcome or master. As the United Church's creed says it so well, "We are not alone, we live in God's world."⁵ Thanks be to God.

⁵ "A New Creed," *The United Church of Canada*. <http://www.united-church.ca/beliefs/creed> (accessed Nov. 19, 2008).