

# The Second Sunday After the Epiphany

## John 1:43-51

January 17, 2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father  
and from the Lord Jesus Christ.



### Heaven is Open During the Lockdown

On this Second Sunday After the Epiphany we look to our Gospel reading from St. John, especially the final words of our Lord here in the first chapter: “And he said to him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.’”<sup>1</sup> Jesus is of course speaking to Nathanael, who now realizes that he is standing in the presence of the Messiah, and therefore exclaimed, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”<sup>2</sup> The sense of Jesus response is “you ain’t seen nothin’ yet,” and refers to the story of Jacob’s ladder to teach Nathanael – and us – about the Son of Man and heaven.

In Genesis chapter 28 we read that as Jacob was wandering from his parental home toward Mesopotamia, with Esau hot on his heels, he arrived at a spot. Luther reflects the traditional teaching about this when says this spot where Jacob lay his head on a rock would be the site of Jerusalem and especially of the temple of Solomon, in which Christ was to preach later on.

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<sup>1</sup> Jn 1:51.

<sup>2</sup> Jn 1:49.

In any event, we know that Jacob was a schemer and a twister. His name means something like “he cheats” in Hebrew. All his life he has had his eye on the chance to get one up on his older twin brother, Esau. In fact, even the story of how they were born includes this telling little detail, that that he was born holding on to his brother’s heel. He was trying to trick him up even in the womb. And the habit stuck. He tricked Esau out of his birthright for a bowl of lentils, and tricked him out of their father Issac’s blessing. Eventually the tables turned and Jacob had to leave in a hurry to escape the wrath of his brother. The entire story occupies Genesis chapters 25 – 28, fresh and vivid even across the millennia.

In this running away of Jacob we hear about his dream, where he lays his head on a stone because he had no pillow, and slept filled with sadness and fear. Then God comforted him with a vision, in which He assured him of His divine protective mercy and of the presence of protecting angels. He beheld “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! And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, ‘I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac.’”<sup>3</sup> The Lord promised Jacob that he would be restored to peace and prosperity in the land of his fathers. Why does Jesus use this story in His reply to Nathanael? Because the story of Jacob’s ladder points us to Christ. In effect He is saying, “Just as Jacob beheld this vision, so you too, will see the heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of man.” Nathanael will see “greater things.”

So we might ask then, when did this happen? When did Nathanael see the heaven opened,

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<sup>3</sup> Ge 28:12–13.

and when did he see angels? The Gospels record two instances when heaven opened. The first was when Christ was baptized in the Jordan by John, there we read that, “the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him.”<sup>4</sup> The second time we read about at the Transfiguration, the heaven opened when Moses and Elijah appeared with Christ to three of His disciples on the mount (see Matt. 17). Only the three apostles saw the heaven opened there, Nathanael was not there, nor was anyone else. So what is Jesus trying to tell us about heaven being opened? The point about Jacob’s ladder was that it showed that God was there with him, in that place where he was sleeping and dreaming. Jacob called the place “Bethel,” which means “God’s house,” and as we have already seen the Church traditionally taught that this was site of the temple in Jerusalem. The idea is God is worshipped where He is present, in His house, and He is really present, with his angels coming and going to link heaven and earth.

Jesus uses story about Jacob as a way of saying, “don’t think that all there is to my ministry is a few remarkable acts of insight. What you will see for now on is the reality toward which Jacob’s ladder, and the temple, was pointing.” For when Christ became man and entered into His ministry then heaven was opened. Beginning with that time, it is open, and it has remained open, and it will never again be closed, even though it is hidden from our physical eye. We behold heaven instead with eyes of faith. When heaven is open and God the Father addresses us through the Son we see and hear this with spiritual senses. I once saw a Google Maps entry for a church that said “open Sundays 10 – 11am.” I don’t think that church had the doors locked the rest of the week but perhaps that is possible. Nothing could be further

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<sup>4</sup> Mt 3:16.

from how heaven is now open in and through Christ. The Father still addresses these words to us: “This is My beloved Son!” He will continue to do so until the day when Christ returns in glory to judge both the living and the dead.

The coming of our Saviour means heaven will never be closed again, and when we behold Him we know what it looks like when heaven and earth are open to each other. When you are Baptized, partake of Holy Communion, hear the Words of Absolution, or listen to the preaching of the Gospel, heaven is open. All these things descend on us from the open heaven through Christ our Lord. God converses with us, governs us, provides for us, and Christ is with us. Today we might be tempted to think that somehow heaven is closed along with the rest of the province because we are once again removed, temporarily, from our gathering in the Divine Service. But I can assure you that heaven is open during the lockdown. We are still able to call upon our Lord in prayer, we are still able to hear the Word preached, and to read the Holy Scriptures, to call upon Him in prayer, trusting that our Baptismal grace has not departed merely because we are not at this moment physically in our church building. We call and cry to Him, and He answers us, just as He has promised. Heaven is open, as St. Stephen saw it open (Acts 7:55), and we hear God when He addresses us in His Word as it proceeds from the mouth of the men who proclaim His message to the people.

Heaven is open now, it is always open, and the angels are ascending and descending to serve the believers in the kingdom of Christ and acting as faithful servants, guardians, and messengers of God. In these times we are subject to much anxiety and worry, the devil still

torments and oppresses when and where he can. So our Lord Jesus Christ bids us to cast our eyes toward heaven so that we remember that we are not dependent on these earthly things, but we are here temporarily. Heaven is where we hold our citizenship. We are not forsaken, even if we suffer trial and tribulation. Luther writes:

“Thus we still see the heaven open; indeed, we ourselves live in heaven. Although in a sense all still dwell on this earth, in a spiritual sense our names are recorded among those of the celestial citizens in heaven. There we have our being before God in prayer, in faith, and in the divine Word, likewise in the Sacraments. There we walk in love toward our neighbor; there we grow in the Word and in the knowledge of Christ, and we also increase in all things necessary for eternal life. This is our heavenly life, begun here by faith. Yes, heaven is open for us. We live and have our being in heaven; we dwell there as citizens even though we are still on earth according to our physical body, which must be chastened by the cross and by temporal death.”<sup>5</sup>

So when Jesus addresses Nathanael he means to tell him that something much greater even than the Messiah is here, for when you are with Jesus it's as though you are in the house of God. It's as though you are in heaven already, for that's where heaven is: the place where God is, the place where we shall be in His presence forever. God has opened heaven through His Son, the Word made flesh for us, and we are joined with the company of angels, fellow citizens of that glorious home. In our faith, in our love, and in our prayers, we already have one foot there, where someday our eternal praise of God and our hallelujahs will join with the countless multitudes before the throne. In the meantime, let us join together with all the company of heaven in the angelic chorus: “Glory to God in the highest.”

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

✠ Soli Deo Gloria

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<sup>5</sup> AE 22, 204.