

## **Ascending and Descending**

The Second Sunday after the Epiphany. Year B, RCL. John 1:43-51. January 14, 2018. The Episcopal Shared Ministry of Our Saviour, Salem and Trinity, Alliance. The Rev'd Jerome H. Colegrove.

I'm a really insecure climber. Always have been. Other kids would swarm up and down trees and rock piles and other climbable obstacles and I would struggle just to get halfway up (or down, if I ever got to the top in the first place). I wasn't afraid of heights; I was fine once I got to the top, and looking down didn't bother me. It was insecurity about footholds and handholds. I never did get over this fear, though a few well-supervised hours in a safety harness on a climbing wall (which we didn't have in those days) would probably have overcome it. You have to learn how to move, and the skills involved are teachable.

It's the same way for me with ladders, to this day, though I've learned how to handle myself on them somewhat. So whenever I come across Jesus' reference to Jacob's ladder in the first chapter of Gospel of John, the first thing I think of is that I'm glad it's the angels—and not me—that have to climb up and down between Earth and Heaven!

But, in spiritual matters as in other situations, you have to learn how to move, and the skills involved are teachable.

Heaven and earth are connected by the presence of God, but we human beings are inconstant, uneven, hit-and-miss in our awareness of God. The moves we need to learn are prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Prayer: techniques for talking to God and listening to him; fasting: techniques for avoiding excess in our appetites; and almsgiving: techniques for being generous with our time, our abilities, and our possessions.

Prayer, fasting and almsgiving mirror, in human moves, the moves God makes in his own nature. He is communicative, self-controlled, and generous. He is not like us, exactly, but in some ways we are like him; the theological phrase for this is "being made in God's image." The biggest difference between us and God is that God doesn't make mistakes. We do make mistakes, which is why learning to move like God—learning to make good choices and follow through on them—is a problem for us.

But that image of all those angels going up and down on the ladder conveys to us the message that God is active in the world. Angels represent God's vigorous and uncorrupted agency, which fills the world and is available to us. The disciplines of prayer, fasting and almsgiving are teachable, learnable, doable. We can learn to climb like angels, moving up towards God, being drenched in his joy and wholeness, and bringing this as his gift down into the world. God gathers us into himself, transforms us, and we bear this new life into a world thirsty for God's refreshment, hungry for God's grace.

“Up” and “down” are traditional images for moving into and out of God’s perfect holiness, but as a person challenged in going up and down against mere gravity I get it about the difficulty of going up and down against the deep, pervasive habit of bad moral choice, which we call sin. Carrying God’s holiness down into the world is as hard as climbing up into God’s love and joy, as Jesus proved on the cross.

Are you an insecure climber in the spiritual disciplines? Are you having trouble getting solid handholds and footholds in prayer, fasting and almsgiving? God is calling us into the fullness of his love, peace and righteousness, and calling us just as strongly to carry these qualities into the world for its healing, its relief from suffering, its conversion into a new reality. We can learn the moves that go with this. As this new Church year moves into Lent I’ll have more to say about God’s climbing wall, where his angels provide the safety harness and all sincere attempts are accepted.