I’ve been shopping for ladders. Who knew there were so many kinds? Step ladders, extension ladders, telescoping ladders. Oh, and articulating ladders. What does that even mean? A ladder you can understand when it talks to you?

Anyway, it’s time for me to clean the gutters on my roof or hire someone to do it. I’ve put it off until all the leaves have fallen, and now they have clogged my gutters and drainpipes. It’s a messy job, and I’m just the man NOT to do it. At least not without the right equipment. Which may take me some time to figure out, giving me more time not to do it, don’t you know?!

A ladder connects things vertically. You can go up and down on it—one part grounded, the other elevated. Simple enough. But today I want to talk about two other kinds of ladders, both spiritual metaphors: one, a ladder that connects heaven and earth; and two, a ladder that connects the mind to what is to be known. The first describes the identity of Jesus as the Christ; the second, how we come to know that.

At the end of our Gospel text today, Jesus says something about himself that seems opaque: Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. What does that mean?

More than the other three Gospels, John wants us to see Jesus from the outset as the one who has always been the key to God’s relationship to the world. Whereas the other Gospels lead us along, allowing us to discern his true identity gradually based on his words and deeds, John jumps right in and declares him to be the Word of God through whom the worlds were made.

Here in the first chapter, we get another image of him that combines two passages from the Hebrew Bible. The first is an allusion to the story of Jacob’s ladder. You may recall the story of the patriarch Jacob sleeping on the ground with a stone for a pillow when he began to dream. He saw a great staircase or ladder connecting heaven and
earth with angels going up and down on it. When he awoke, he declared the place where he lay holy. He named it Bethel, the house of God, because surely the Lord was in that place. Jesus says that his disciples will see the angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. That is, he—Jesus himself—is the Place. He is the connector of heaven and earth, wherever he is.

Then he uses the term Son of Man to describe himself. Son of Man comes from the book of Daniel and is associated with the one who comes at the End of Days to judge the world. So, if we would know Jesus for who he really is, we would understand him as the one who stands at the beginning and the end, as the agent of creation and judgment both. He is God’s presence among us—the ladder between heaven and earth.

This is important in light of where we have been as a country in the past two weeks. The assault on the Capitol on January 6 was mainly by Christian nationalists who used the name of Jesus to support insurrection against our democratic government. They carried crosses and Bibles, held up signs that read Jesus Saves and blared Christian music as they marched on our seat of government. One man carried a Christian flag into a legislative office and others carried the Confederate Battle flag through the rotunda.

Conservative Christian columnist, David French, has been warning the church about this defection from truth and the danger of coopting Christ to support political ends. In the wake of the deadly riot in DC, he wrote this: Are you still not convinced that it’s fair to call this a Christian insurrection? I would bet that most of my readers would instantly label the exact same event Islamic terrorism if Islamic symbols filled the crowd, if Islamic music played in the loudspeakers, and if members of the crowd shouted “Allahu Akbar” as they charged the Capitol.

If that happened, conservative Christians would erupt in volcanic anger. We’d turn to the Muslim community and cry out, “Do something about this!”

1 https://frenchpress.thedispatch.com/p/only-the-church-can-truly-defeat
Non-Christians have a right to demand that the church say and do something about this. So, let’s start with this and hope it spreads: We condemn Christian nationalism in the strongest possible terms. We repudiate the use of the name of Christ in defending violence to undermine the will of the people and to claim that somehow America is the rightful property of Christians. No more silence in the face of lies. When the heavens are opened, we will see the angels of God ascending and descending on the person of Jesus, not on the United States of America. Christ stands in judgment of every nation, including ours.

When Jacob saw that ladder in the Genesis story, he received the promise that through him all the nations of the earth would be blessed. To see Jesus as the ladder is not to see him replacing Israel but instead fulfilling the promise of Israel that every tribe and people on this good earth would be blessed through him.

Which is why we cannot weaponize Jesus against others. We cannot think he is on our side against others. We can only claim him rightly if we claim him as a blessing even for our enemies.

So, there’s that. Now, how do we get to the place where, with Nathaniel, we can see and confess Jesus as the Son of God, the ladder that connects heaven and earth? That’s the point of the second ladder.

The second ladder is the ladder of understanding. For the philosophically minded among us, ontology leads to epistemology. That is, the identity of Jesus as the Son of God leads us to the matter of how we come to know that.

The ladder of knowing is a process of climbing from earth to heaven, after heaven has climbed to earth first. Let’s see how that works out in this story of Nathaniel’s confession of Jesus as the Son of God.

Philip finds Nathaniel to tell him they have found the one they have waited for, the one Moses and the prophets attested to. He is Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth. Nathaniel wonders whether any good thing can come out of Nazareth. He is seeing Jesus purely as a human being from a town no one would logically look to for a special
agent of God.

My grandson, River, is almost three-years old. He was furious with his mother, Jillian, last week. His anger stemmed from hurt feelings. See, he was going through the trash can in their apartment and found his artwork. He pulled it out and cleaned it off, announcing to his mother that it was his favorite. Then, as if to show her what she should have done with such a marvel of coloring genius, he marched over to the refrigerator and posted it with a magnet while posing for the camera with an impish grin. The thing about being a grandparent is that you get to see karma in action.

Anyway, the point is, when we only look at Jesus through eyes of flesh, we will only see him as the son of Joseph from Nazareth. We have to look deeper, to look with spiritual eyes. We have to move from sight to insight. And to do that, we need an encounter with Jesus that will open us to his true identity. Here’s the principle: we have to be seen before we can see; we have to be known before we can know.

That’s what happened when Jesus tells Nathaniel that he saw him under the fig tree. Now, we don’t know the exact meaning of what took place in this, but the fig tree was a symbol for Israel and a common place of Torah study and prayer. Jesus calls Nathaniel a true Israelite without deceit, so this is likely the point. In other words, Nathaniel feels seen and known by Jesus even though he has otherwise not seen or known Jesus.

And this changes Nathaniel’s understanding of Jesus from sight to insight, from flesh to faith. He declares him to be the ladder, so to speak. Jesus is the Son of God, the King of Israel, Nathaniel says. That is, he is the link between heaven and earth.

Jesus then tells us that we too can see him this way. When he responds to Nathaniel’s confession of faith, he says you will see greater things even than this. You will see the heavens open and the angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man. He says you will, but the you is plural. You disciples is what he means. That is, you and me, too—any of us and all of us who answer the call to follow Jesus.

The Catholic writer on the spiritual life, Father Bruno
Barnhart, says this: As we accompany Jesus through the gospels, we are present at one dramatic meeting after another. One person after another experiences a mysterious power in Jesus that, from this moment, changes the course of his or her life. If we are fully present at the moment when we read such a narrative, we ourselves experience the liberating power of this awakening.²

I pray you settle under your fig tree this morning and that you will feel seen and known so that you may awaken to the truth that Jesus is the Son of God. And once awakened, that you will join him in being nothing else but a blessing to the world. Amen.

² https://cac.org/unveiling-christianity-2021-01-05/