

“Jacob’s Ladder”
A Sermon for St. Michael & All Angels 2013
St. Aidan Church, Moose Jaw

Have you ever seen an Angel?

- I thought I did once when I came into the nave for Morning Prayer last winter
- There was a flash of silver in the darkness sitting on the bench next to the door....It was a wonderful silver-haired man, David Warnock!

Angels are a popular subject in modern film; it is almost a Who’s Who of actors who have played Angels (good or bad) in recent years: John Travolta (*Michael*), Nicolas Cage (*City of Angels*), Alan Rickman, Matt Damon & Ben Affleck (*Dogma*), Denzel Washington (*The Preacher’s Wife*), Warren Beatty (*Heaven Can Wait*), Emma Thompson (*Angels in America*), Keanu Reeves & Tilda Swinton (*Constantine*), Al Pacino (*The Devil’s Advocate*)

For me, I’m almost embarrassed to say my first serious thoughts about Angels came from reading the pot-boiler book, *This Present Darkness* by Frank Perretti

It wasn’t until I moved to England in 2005 that I became aware of the Feast of St. Michael & All Angels – it marked the official start of term: Michaelmas

Now, as a NT Scholar, and someone who has spent a considerable time in Luke-Acts in recent years I’ve come to appreciate how significant they are in the biblical narrative

- Just looking at Luke’s 2-part narrative, Angels play key roles in the Story of Salvation:
 - Gabriel’s announcements to Zechariah & Mary (Luke 1)
 - To the Shepherds (Luke 2)
 - In the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:43)
 - At the Empty Tomb (Luke 24)
 - At the Ascension of Jesus (Acts 1)
 - Peter & John’s deliverance from Prison (Acts 5:19)
 - Philip is sent to the Ethiopian eunuch by an Angel (Acts 8:26)
 - Cornelius visited by an angel (Acts 10)
 - Peters’ deliverance from jail (Acts 12)
 - An angel strikes down Herod Agrippa (Acts 12)
 - Paul receives a vision from an angel while in the storm (Acts 27)

The point is that Angels are important players in the Story of Salvation

- In some way, it is a good counterpoint to last week’s focus on Stewardship and Service

- Angels, like us, are God’s servants, and like us they are called to worship God, to speak on his behalf, and to enact judgment and deliverance
- They are not even though many might want them to be at our beck & call
 - While there is a popular notion about “Guardian Angels” they do not protect us from all harm
 - Sometimes they deliver and rescue, sometimes they are present (I’m assuming) in the midst of our suffering
 - Sometimes they are named: Michael (“Who is Like God”); Gabriel (“God is my Strength”); Raphael (“It is God Who Heals”); Uriel (“God is my Light”)
- Whatever else, Angels rarely manifest themselves visibly; they are part of God’s creation things “visible & invisible” but usually the veil is closed
- On this day, as we celebrate a baptism that invites us to connect the invisible reality of salvation with water, we are reminded that we are not alone, that there is a connection between what is visible and what is invisible, between heaven and earth
- Angels, along with the continued Presence of God’s Holy Spirit, are a reminder that we are not alone

It is tempting to think that we are all alone, that no one does or possibly could understand our problems

- It seems to me to be one of the habits of struggling Christians, including struggling priests, to isolate ourselves when we are ashamed, depressed, or just plain scared

Jacob thought he was all alone that night in Bethel described in our reading from Gen 28 this morning

- He was running scared from his twin brother, Esau, who hated him not only for swindling him out of his birthright but for stealing his blessing
- But Jacob was also hopeful, for he was on his way to Paddan Aram to find a wife
- Those two things filled his life two *big* things, and there wasn’t much room for anything else

Then Jacob’s dream showed him that there was more to his life than fleeing from his brother and finding a wife

He dreamed about a ladder connecting earth to heaven; he saw angels of God going up and down on it; he heard God speak

- The message was this: “Jacob, you are blessed and you will be a blessing. I have a purpose for your life, and I’m going to complete it. I am with you and will not give up on you.”

Suddenly the world of Jacob expanded

- When he lay down that night and put his head on the stone pillow, his life was two-dimensional
- His world was defined by what was behind him – his brother – and what was ahead of him – his wife
- He was all past and future, but there was no present to him
- His identity consisted of what he had been and what he hoped he would be
- The dream gave him the *present*
- It plunged him into what was going on right then – God fulfilling a divine plan in him that was so much grander than the plan he had for his own life
- It also opened his eyes and ears to a world that was more than what he had before imagined – this is a world that includes all that is, not only what is seen, but what is unseen

I have not had a dream of a ladder to Heaven like Jacob did, but I have read Annie Dillard’s, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

- Annie Dillard alerted me to the world around me, the things that are there but not always visible – like the chloroplasts in water and crystal in rocks – she is an exegete of creation, in all its profligacy and fecundity, in the same way John Calvin was an exegete of Holy Scripture
- She reminds me of the angelic qualities in the book of creation

I need this reminder in the same way I need the reminder from Moses in the Pentateuch and John on the island of Patmos that there are great and wonderful realities around us – things visible and invisible

Without this reminder, without the connection between what we see and what is occurring behind the veil of heaven, then all our words this morning are merely puffs of air, the glory streaming through the Ascension window is merely refracted sunlight, and the water at the font is merely a mixture of hydrogen and oxygen molecules

- But Jacob’s Ladder, with its Angels ascending and descending upon it, reminds us that we are connected to a world grander and more wonderful than we could ask or imagine – Heaven & Earth are indeed joined together