



The Feast of St Michael and All Angels 2014
St. Michael's, Vancouver and Evensong at Christ Church Cathedral
The Rt. Rev. Melissa M. Skelton

Genesis 28:10-17

Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the LORD stood beside him and said, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place-- and I did not know it!" And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

John 1:47-51

When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

It is about six months after the completion of the renovation of the worship space at St. Paul's, Seattle, my former parish. Two of the three icons commissioned for the new space are now in place. The icon of Mary is appropriately on the credence table near the new tabernacle where the reserved sacrament is kept. The icon of the parish's patron, St. Paul, the most attractive icon of Paul I have ever seen, is on the back east wall of the space. Written by a young Russian woman both are elegant, stately and prayer evoking.

It is late morning and I am unlocking my office door when I see an unopened flat package, leaning against the wall. Upon inspection, I see that the package is from St. Petersburg, Russia.

"It's the third icon!" I say out loud, though no one is there to hear me.

I unwrap the package slowly. And this is what I see: An image of Michael, the Archangel, resplendent in his battle armor floating on a field of gold. Behind him are two enormous green-gold wings. He is not just beautiful or handsome. Instead, his direct gaze communicates bracing holiness and what can only be called ferocious love. In one hand he holds a delicate staff and in the other he holds what looks like an orb with an image in it.

Later that week I get a letter from the icon writer. She describes the icon and explains that the staff Michael holds has to do with his rank as an Archangel. The orb, she says, is a mirror and the image in profile in the mirror is Christ the tiger. Christ the tiger.

Angels in the church's tradition are, of course, not the fat-cheeked cherubs that appear on note cards or on lapel pins. They are also not the leggy, pouting models strutting and preening with ridiculously large wings in a lingerie ad. They are not even the unruly, haloed, adorable children of the Christmas pageants of our youth.

Rather, in the church's tradition, angels are creatures who terrify, who inspire awe rather than "oh, aren't they cute." Angels are messengers, usually on errands for the Most High, sometimes visible to human beings and sometimes not. When they are visible—usually on extraordinary occasions—their incarnate presence is fierce and powerful. Not surprisingly, then, "Fear not" is nearly always the first sentence an angel speaks to a human being. This is just what novelist Charles Williams was getting at in his novel The Place of the Lion when one of his characters asserts that angels are not sweetness and light but instead "are the principles of the tiger and the volcano and the flaming suns of space."

And so today on this celebration of the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels, we get to explore what it means to have an Archangel who carries a staff and a mirror with the image of Christ the tiger in it. We get to explore what it means to look upon the face of Michael with his unstoppable, wild holiness and his fierce love and to imagine that in many ways his face comes as messenger to us from the Most High. We get to imagine a world where Christ the tiger is moving among us: not, I would say, as an emblem of one who devours or destroys, but as an emblem of the unstoppable, wild and fierce love of God, a love that is willing to go to whatever lengths it takes to reach us, to protect us, to walk with us—Christ the one who shows us what this unstoppable, wild, fierce love looks like.

Our story from the Hebrew Scriptures and its twin story from the Gospel of John help us understand more about the fierce, wild love of God. In our story from the Hebrew Scriptures, Jacob, a man who has cheated and stolen all his life in order to get what he wanted, comes to a deserted place, and, after the sun goes down, falls asleep and has a miraculous dream. In that dream a ladder stretches from heaven to earth and on that ladder are angels ascending and descending. And as the story goes, God comes and stands beside Jacob, reassuring him that he intends to give Jacob and his offspring both the status and the land that Jacob has been seeking. And so, in this story the presence of angels signals the breakthrough of the unstoppable, wild, fierce love of God into the life of an imperfect man who thought he needed to steal and cheat his way to the good things of life. Such a message, that God had all along intended to give him the blessings that he thought he had to steal could only be heralded by angels.

But wait, there's more! In John's gospel we get a similar story but with some important differences. In this story Jesus, himself, comes to Nathaniel not at night but in the full light of day with a message more startling than the one delivered to Jacob. The unstoppable, wild fierce love of God, the one whose power is that of tiger and volcano and the flaming suns of space, is standing right in front of Nathaniel in the person of Jesus, himself. The unstoppable, wild, fierce love of God has come, arriving in the humble flesh of a carpenter from Nazareth. And the ladder, if you will, the connecting point by which the fierce, wild love of God will come to all is the cross, the event that will open heaven itself and cause the angels of God to ascend and descend upon the face of the earth and into each of our lives.

And this, of course, changes everything.

For it means that through Christ the incarnate one, through Christ the crucified one, through Christ the tiger, our own imperfect flesh and the imperfect flesh of our communities have become the ladders, the places where earth and heaven meet and where the wild, fierce unstoppable love of God can, and in some cases, will be poured out upon the world.

And so, my friends, where in your life is the wild, fierce love of God yearning to be expressed and known? Is it in the fierce love and devotion that will stop at nothing that you express in your love for your parents? Your children? Your spouse? Your friend? Where in this parish and in all parishes is the wild, fierce, unstoppable love of God alive? Is it in the boldness of our multi-cultural identities, an identity that in itself expresses the love of God for all people? Or is it contained in the careful, clear, powerful commitment that we all have made to growth?

No matter where it is—in your personal life or in the life of our parishes—what allows us to become the wild, fierce, unstoppable love of God is some moment of yes, some moment of yes that leads to our taking the hand of the person or the community or the cause that is right before us: a moment of yes that even though we may feel overwhelmed, though we may doubt our strength, allows us to be the wild, fierce, unstoppable love of God in our corner of the world.

The poet David Whyte is world renowned for poetry that inspires. Though this poem is about romantic love, listen to it with an ear that is more than about romantic love. Listen to it as you think about the opportunity that is right before you now to say yes, to take the hand of the person or the community or the cause that needs the wild, fierce, unstoppable love of God through you.

“The True Love” by David Whyte

There’s a faith in loving fiercely the one who is rightfully yours
especially if you have waited years and especially if part of you never
believed you could deserve this loved and beckoning hand held
out to you this way.

I am thinking of faith now and the testaments of loneliness
and what we feel we are worthy of in this world.
Years ago in the Hebrides I remember an old man
who would walk every morning on the gray stones
to the shore of baying seals, who would press his
hat to his chest in the blustering salt wind and say his
prayer to the turbulent Jesus hidden in the waters.

And I think of the story of the storm and the people
waking and seeing the distant, yet familiar figure,
far across the water calling to them.
And how we are all preparing for that abrupt waking
and that calling and that moment when we have to say yes!
Except it will not come so grandly, so biblically,
but more subtly, and intimately in the face
of the one you know you have to love.
So that when we finally step out of the boat
toward them we find, everything holds us,
and everything confirms our courage.

And if you wanted to drown, you could,
But you don’t, because finally, after all
this struggle and all these years,
you don’t want to anymore.
You’ve simply had enough of drowning
and you want to live, and you want to love.
And you’ll walk across any territory,
and any darkness, however fluid,
and however dangerous to take the one
hand and the one life, you know belongs in yours.