



The Feast of St. Michael and All Angels, St. Michael's Surrey September 24, 2017

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."

People say there are no atheists in foxholes meaning there are no atheists on the frontlines of a war. I would add to this that in tight personal situations, there are few skeptics about the idea of guardian angels.

Many years ago, right before a doctor's appointment in which I was to receive uncertain medical news, a friend of mine pressed a little medallion with a very sweet image of an angel—kind of like Tinker Bell--on it into my hand. "Put it in your pocket," she said. "And anytime you begin to feel afraid or queasy, touch it to remind you that your guardian angel is near."

As you might imagine, I am a deeply religious person and at the same time I am from a long line of skeptics. And so while part of me winced at the suggestion of a cute little guardian angel in my pocket or hovering behind during my doctor's appointment, I put the little medallion in my pocket anyway, just in case. After all, I thought, I needed all the help I could get.

The day of the doctor's appointment I woke earlier than normal, got dressed and, of course, put my little angel in my pocket, ready to be touched whenever I felt fear, ready to remind me of my guardian angel, the one that I was not sure existed.

And so the appointment happened. The news ended up being good. And as the doctor left the examining room, I had not only not touched my little angel medallion, I had not even thought about doing it!

This more personalized, domesticated image of a guardian angel we can call upon in difficult times is very much around us and perhaps is in us whether we want it to be for not. For the most part, however, it is not how the Bible depicts angels.

Angels are referenced over 600 times in the Bible. Most often they are depicted as larger than life creatures who bear important messages from God to human beings, move important God-inspired actions along or signal times or places when God's heavenly realm "above" becomes connected to the human realm which was considered here "below."

And so in our first lesson when poor, beleaguered Jacob, on the run from his angry brother, lays his head upon his stone pillow, it is angels that his astonished eyes see in a dream ascending and descending on a ladder, on a kind of staircase, in the place where he lays his head. And it is God's own voice that Jacob hears, God's own voice that Jacob hears reassuring him that God is with him and will be with him in this deserted place whether Jacob deserves it or not.

This event in the story of Jacob is the same event that Jesus refers to in his conversation with Nathaniel in our Gospel for today. Nathaniel is awed by the fact that Jesus recognizes him before they meet and, out of this, makes a bold statement about who Jesus is. "You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Nathaniel declares.

To this Jesus replies: "'Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.....Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

The point that Jesus is making in talking about Nathaniel seeing a ladder of angels ascending and descending on him is that the new ladder between heaven and earth, the new staircase between the human and the divine is Jesus himself. What this means is that the presence of God is neither tucked away in our pockets like my little talisman, nor is it going to come to us like an angel waiting to swoop down from the clouds. The presence of God is closer still—here, now, in us and among us through Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit.

For in Christ, God becomes flesh, and therefore, our flesh becomes the place where God meets us. In Christ, God inhabits all broken and fearful situations and all circumstances needing reconciliation and forgiveness. And so in Christ, God lives forever with us in the middle of our fear, our anguish and our alienation, no matter where those experiences occur—in our personal lives, in our work lives, in our political life or in the broader society in which we live.

And so while we are celebrating Saint Michael and all the Angels this day, it is finally and forever Jesus, whose body is the connection between the heaven and earth, and whose Church as the Body of Christ is the place where the divine energy of kinship, peace, justice, and reconciliation lives.

What this means is that it wasn't so much the little talisman in my pocket during my medical appointment that was the presence of God with me that day, it was the caring initiative of the person who gave it to me and her phone call to me after my appointment. What this means is that in Christ you and I are in a manner of speaking each other's angels and that in Christ you and I are angels sent into the world as God's people who bring a sense of kinship where there was alienation, peace where there was anxiety and conflict, justice where there was injustice and reconciliation where there was brokenness.

Today, of course, is the Walk for Reconciliation in Vancouver. For this reason I will be leaving right after our liturgy today and will not even be able to greet you at the door. This walk and the Expo afterwards is an example of one of the ways we can be angels, so to speak, in and for the world. We can be the presence of Christ in an event that focuses on reconciliation, one of the central ministries of Christ and of the Church. Please know that as your bishop, I will carry your presence with me.

And so today don't look in your pocket for your little angel or for help in times of distress. Instead, look around. Look to those who surround, support you and challenge you, for those people are the presence and action of God in your life.

And don't expect that when a sense of kinship, peace, justice or reconciliation are needed that God will arrive from on high like some winged creature from above to set things right. Instead, look in the mirror. Look at what you can say and what you can do, for you are the presence and action of God in and for the world.