

Angel Escort

The Art and Architecture of Faith, Part 8

from the pulpit of
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by
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Psalm 116:5-15

⁵Gracious is the LORD, and righteous; our God is merciful. The LORD protects the simple; when I was brought low, he saved me. ⁷Return, O my soul, to your rest, for the LORD has dealt bountifully with you. ⁸For you have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling. ⁹I walk before the LORD in the land of the living. ¹⁰I kept my faith, even when I said, "I am greatly afflicted"; ¹¹I said in my consternation, "Everyone is a liar." ¹²What shall I return to the LORD for all his bounty to me? ¹³I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD, ¹⁴I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people. ¹⁵Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his faithful ones.

Revelation 22:1-7

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ²through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. ³Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; ⁴they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever. ⁶And he said to me, “These words are trustworthy and true, for the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place.” ⁷“See, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.”

Early this past week someone sent me this from a religious journal: If you are still looking for a really scary Halloween costume, there's no better place to look for inspiration than the Bible. The article's title was: *Sea monsters, giants and angels, oh my!* It quoted Professor of the Hebrew Bible at Union Seminary in New York, Esther Hamori, saying: there are monsters throughout the Bible that we have tamed or domesticated in our imaginations. Take cherubim, for example. Today we think of them as "happy, fat angel babies," but in the Bible they are winged guardians who sometimes have the body of a lion." They are ferocious! Timothy Beal from the Religion Department at Case Western Reserve University added that Angels can be particularly threatening when they show up as a part of God's entourage to avenge some injustice.¹ The point is angels have God-given power.

We can presume these powerful messengers of God must have been terrifying, since the first words out of the mouths of many angels is, "Do not be afraid." For typically, Biblical angels bring good news; they bear warning of danger, and they sing praises around the throne of God. Generally – they are spiritual beings, who serve at God's command to deliver important messages.

They praise God – as the angel chorus over Bethlehem at Jesus' birth. They warn of impending danger, appearing to Joseph in a dream to take his family to Egypt and out of harm's way. They attend to Jesus in the Wilderness with care and compassion. They proclaim God's gift of new life – like the Easter morning angels who greet the grieving disciples at the tomb. And they watch over God's people in death, ushering them to their ultimate destination of eternal life, like the one we meet in the Revelation to John this morning.

This scripture reading from the very last chapter of the Bible presents the culminating glorious vision of God's eternal realm, and the angel we meet here is gathering the beloved community of God's people to the throne of God. Madeleine L' Engle wrote about death, "Here we are on the border of Christian mystery. We are not meant to be separated from those who have

¹ Kelsey Dallas, "Sea Monsters, Giants and Angels, Oh My!" Desert News online, 10/25/2018

gone before us.”² It is this angel escort – at the end of scripture – who helps us face the mystery of death – our death, the death of those we love, the death of innocents gunned down in worship or swept away by the storms of life, whatever they may be.

This angel escorts us to the border of mystery, with a promise so glorious we cannot hear it without hope. Revelation’s angel points to the River of Life flowing through the City of God, and to the Tree of Life – which will produce twelve kinds of fruit, one for each month of the year. The leaves of the Tree of Life will heal the nations. In death, the angel promises we will see God face to face. We will enjoy the close presence of the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ. All the light we need will emanate from God, and the angel of the Lord will lead the whole great Cloud of Witnesses in endless praise and peace.

The Book of Revelation may be one of the most misunderstood books of the Bible so let me put this glorious vision in context. Decades after the death of Jesus, a man named John was exiled, in a prison cell, which was probably a cave on the Island of Patmos. The book is a letter he wrote to several small Christian communities in Asia Minor – Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Philadelphia, Sardis, and so on. All of these small Christian enclaves were suffering great persecution at the hands of the Romans. Because of their belief in the supremacy of God over the Roman emperor, these early Christians were considered political subversives who threatened the security of the state. They were jailed, tortured, fed to wild animals for the entertainment of the emperor, and burned like torches along the side of the road.

It was to these persecuted communities that old John was writing to, addressing their real fears and their horrible season of weeping. If intercepted by the Romans, these letters could have added to their troubles, so John used bizarre and creative symbols to disguise his true intent. Earlier in the book, John describes the Great Beast, and his readers would have known he was

² Madeleine L’Engle, *Walking on Water*.

talking about Rome. John's New Jerusalem, a vision of beauty, security and peace descending from heaven, addressed the reality of Jerusalem having been left a smoking rubble of ruins in the year 70.

John tells these persecuted people of faith: God's light will come to vanquish their tortured darkness; the real power over the earth is lodged in Christ, the Lamb upon the throne, and not the state; history is headed not to Rome but to God; not through military might and cruelty, but through mercy, compassion and love. Ever since John wrote down this amazing vision, his words have comforted and inspired people in trouble, people oppressed by political power, people denied their full humanity because of their race or national identity. It has comforted all people pondering the mystery of death.

John did not receive this vision in a vacuum. He was echoing the long held hope of the Psalmist: *Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful ones*. John wrote for people suffering loss because it is suffering people who most often find themselves searching for the meaning of life. Facing the reality of death forces us to ask questions about what gives life meaning; what gives us hope; what is our ultimate destination?

Sometimes this search for meaning happens in the midst of persecution, where our Jewish neighbors and friends are finding themselves rethinking life anew following the shooting in Pittsburgh. It also happens when the natural passing away of loved ones comes: parents, siblings, spouses, friends. This searching comes especially when we have to grapple with unexpected deaths: the loss of a child, the senseless loss of victims to violence, and those moments when facing our own death. John assures us that somehow in the mystery of God's eternal love we are safe in God, our death meets the fullness of God's presence, our pain is healed, our tears are wiped away, even the warring nations will be healed by the leaves of the Tree of Life. It is a Revelation so wonderfully mysterious it is better sung than explained.

In Malcolm Gladwell's book *Outliers*, he explores the lives of ordinary people who become extraordinarily successful. He discovers we are invariably

the beneficiaries of hidden advantages and legacies that allow for opportunities to learn and work and to live into our gifts. Like many of us, Gladwell was raised in the Christian faith, wandered away from it, and then came back to faith as his writing was trying to make sense of the world. He says these legacies of who we are and how we find our being in the world cannot be separated from those who have gone before. What comes to us passed down from our forebears shapes the patterns of our lives in ways we cannot begin to imagine.³ We are connected to them, or as the Bible puts it elsewhere, we are surrounded by that Great Cloud of Witnesses who cheer us on.

So today, on All Saints Sunday, we thank God for the angel escort who has taken our deceased loved ones to the throne of God. We thank God for their legacy: how they have molded and shaped us, and how they so often handed down their faith. We affirm what Catholic Theologian, Joan Chittister, once said: “We do not do it alone, of course. We are companioned through life. Underneath it all, holding us up are people who have loved us. They stand by... They provide the unchanging foundation of love.”

Thanks be to God for the angel escort who takes us to that truth and faith and hope.

Amen.

³ Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers*, p. 19.