

## THE ANGEL ENCAMPMENT

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

November 2, 2008

Scripture: Psalm 34:1-10, 22; Revelation 7:9-17

On this All Saints Sunday, we remember those who have gone before us in the faith. Those who have been a shining example of what it is to live in Christ, and those who have been less so, and those, shining and otherwise, who are still among us.

To borrow the language of faith, we are a great cloud of witnesses in heaven and on earth, the now and future company of that heavenly city, "... a multitude that no one can count, from every nation, from all tribes, and peoples and languages..."

And the words of the song that are sung before the heavenly throne are, "Blessing and glory and wisdom, and thanksgiving and honor and power... be to our God, forever and ever. Amen."

For a moment in the scriptures in the Book of Revelation the veil of heaven is parted if only for a moment, and the reporter tells us of a sighting that is yet to be and already is, where God reigns and all humanity is gathered and all the sufferings and pain of this world are left behind.

And I am struck in that description by John's ease with the idea of angels, heavenly messengers of God, who sing and stand about the throne like an honor guard with swords drawn, protecting the One who is on the throne.

Angels are a matter of some ambiguity in the minds of most of us, let's be honest. What do we make of them? Has any of us ever seen one? Have any two of us seen one at the same time? Never mind that claptrap about ghosts. We can make sport of them on Sixth Avenue on Halloween night. But angels? Angels are a less dismissible lot.

Of all the creatures in scripture, the angels get a pass, as if we must take them for granted. Our sources speak of them so casually.

And *even we* talk about an angel sitting on our shoulder. And we hang gold and silver angels on the Christmas tree and place a large one on the top; for what would Christmas be without Gabriel and his startling message to Mary?

Angels appear as almost *expected* in the stories of the Bible. They minister to Jesus, for instance, after his temptations in the wilderness, they come like paramedics to salve his wounds and cool his brow.

There's an angel dancing in the fiery furnace where Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are cast. An angel appears to Joseph in a dream in Egypt and warns him to return to Galilee by another way. Angels are there at the tomb on Easter morning bearing the good tidings that the Lord is not there in the tomb, but risen.

Angels in the scriptures are messengers of the presence of God, bringing good tidings, bearing warnings of danger, and singing praises before God's throne.

Most of the angels *we* see are not visual sightings, close up and personal, but the kind that we find in card shops, and cherub calendars, and little brass pins that we put on our lapel; the domesticated versions of a more fierce and intentional tribe who are

anything but cute, scripturally speaking. They are what there is of God's nearness sometimes, the very presence of the Almighty, if you will, on certain occasions; and we do wrongly to domesticate them, to claim them as our own.

Now you can say what you want about the angels, that they are expendable, that they are not particularly effective, that an infinite number of them can dance on the head of a pin, or even that you have never seen one. But there is something about the persistent appearance of them in the Bible that insists on the point that sometimes God draws close to us in ways that exceed our ability to describe.

In the psalm read this morning, there is a particularly interesting reference to the angels.

The psalm is a psalm of praise and blessing. "I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth," sings the psalmist.

She invites the listener to join in the song of praise as well. "Oh taste and see that the Lord is good," she sings. And she speaks of dark times of the soul when God has answered prayer and comforted fear. "I sought the Lord and he answered me," the psalmist writes, "this poor soul cried, and was heard by the Lord, and was saved from every trouble."

And then, almost as if calling 911, or summoning a squadron of protectors, the psalmist declares, "the angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear God, and delivers them." The term is military in its implication. An angel stands sentry watch, the psalmist asserts, over those who fear God. And isn't that an interesting way to put it?

It is an affirmation that causes me to pause and ponder. Because life never feels quite that protected by heaven to me. Maybe it's just the economy these days that has so shaken everything, or maybe it's the uncertainty of life that has been driven home to me so clearly in recent months that makes me think it, but I suspect most of us don't exactly feel as if an angel is standing sentry watch over us all the time.

Life has been pretty rough in these past weeks. I've been talking with people recently who in a night have lost half or more of their retirement nestegg. When you're in your late fifties and not planning to work that much longer, it sort of turns your world upside down. It makes you ask existential questions about what life's meaning may be. And it reminds you how fragile is our hold on life.

Losing my brother three weeks ago has reminded me of what it is to walk through the valley of the shadow of death with someone upon whom the darkest of those shadows has fallen. Cancer is a cruel illness. And from the beginning of Don's diagnosis, it was an insurmountable mountain that he had to climb, it's just that no one told him when he started that there was no way he could make it past tree line.

We all know what a serious illness like cancer means, to a greater or lesser degree. First, there's the determination to overcome all odds that eventually gets mixed in with the haunting weariness of having to live one more day of misery. There's the chemotherapy and radiation, the biopsies and surgery, or worse yet, the determination that no surgery can help. There's the diarrhea and the constipation, and then the colostomy bag, the loss of appetite, the strange feeling that everything tastes like silver or sawdust, so bland as to be tasteless. There's your hair coming out in clumps and the

looking like a conehead, the vomiting, and the staying up all night, and the worry about the toll you are taking on everyone you love, and being exhausted all day long. And from time to time, maybe, there's the wondering where the angel is that is supposed to be keeping sentry watch over you.

I would like to have that sense of confidence about God standing near, protecting, encamping around me, delivering me like the psalmist says God will. But after watching the worst of all this too many times in your families and mine, I am left wondering sometimes about the angels and where they are when we most need them.

A friend of mine, Catholic by background, but more of a generalist as far as religion is concerned once confided in me that he, on two occasions, had felt the undeniable presence of an angel. He went on to say that he believed that there was a particular angel who was keeping an eye on him. And he asked me if I would like to see a picture of his angel.

Well, I wasn't going to pass up an opportunity like that. So he produced out of a box of photographs a picture of a kind of cloudy night sky scene with an illuminated configuration of clouds that might well be construed to be an angel of enormous proportions with outstretched arms filling the sky and illuminated with a kind of lavender, yellow, white brilliance. Now if you have a Rorschach kind of mind and can assign meaning to indeterminate shapes, you could certainly say that this might be what would generally be thought of as an angel.

But as usual, I was skeptical, though I continued to listen.

Greg went on to mention two occasions where he felt his angel had warned him away from a place where something bad was going to happen and this had proven to be the case. On one evening he avoided being caught in a fire by changing his dinner plans on an instinct, and in the other he avoided being mugged when he said his angel literally turned him around on his heels and kept him from going down the street where he was headed. The next day in the news there was a police warning issued that several people had been mugged in that neighborhood that night. I listened politely to Greg's insistence that something or someone was looking out for him and tried not to make more of it in my own mind than it being his very personal testimony about the providence he felt in his life. If he felt it, fine. But that is not my experience.

I lost contact with Greg for a few years, until a mutual friend called me one evening to say that Greg had been murdered by a man who jumped into his car, stabbed him repeatedly, threw him out of the car, and left him to die in the street.

And I wonder to this day, what happened to Greg's angel that night, that angel that the psalmist says encamps around those who fear God, and delivers them?

The whole problem with the psalm of course, is that life is not as easy as the psalmist portrays it. Is there really an angel putting a pillow underneath us to cushion our falls? Or if there are angels encamping around the faithful, how do we explain the occasions when it appears the angels have fallen asleep at the switch? That's what I want to know.

I think about this list of saints that we will remember in a few moments. It is a great cloud of witnesses. And among them, the ones I knew best are very much in my

heart and thought today as we gather at the table and break bread together in their presence.

Cara Kyles who fought so hard to live, a young wife and mother, in pain one moment, then making some comment in the next that just cracked you up, she was so ironic in her humor. Nobody fought harder than she did to live, for her sake and her husband and her daughter.

I think about Dick Webber, and a lovely afternoon this past summer visiting with him and Mary in Connecticut along with Charlotte Wallace. He was half the weight he once was, but doing well that day sporting a beard and telling us about how they found their house there in Lyme and how fortunate they were to have a view of the water out the window.

Marie Sibilla, that incredibly vivacious and talented and energetic Pearl Mesta in our midst. She loved this church, she loved her Joe, she loved her pastors, she was having the time of her life when death came.

Gloria Mellin, having led a full and good life, living in her house on the Cape, enjoying friends, cutting flowers from her garden for the dining table. She loved to return here to Old First to revel in the goodness of years past and the church continuing strong and vibrant as one would hope it would having invested so much of yourself, as she did, that it might do exactly that in the future.

And my brother Don, having just started a new life, marrying a second time, moving to Las Vegas where he was working. Happy for the first time in a long time. His life cut short when a cough started getting a grip on him about this time of year last year, and he ignored it. In February he finally went to see what the doctor had to say. From that point on, I am not sure where his angel was.

I got to spend a week with him in August, and he was sick, but we made the best of it, his hairless head and fearful eyes haunting me all the way home.

On the day before he died, when I arrived at his home again, I was the last family member to get there. And I remember telling him that I had come and that I would be there for him. Though for him, I think it was important that I be there for his wife even more than for him. His battle was against pain that night and it kept breaking through, fighting against him in every restless turn and moan and crying out. Finally, he seemed to settle down when the morphine dosage was increased, and we all felt that that was a blessing.

I went to bed that night knowing that the end was near, but knowing also that soon he would be all right.

It was about five in the morning, and I was sleeping until a quiet fell upon the house, a stillness and a calm that I shall never forget. "The strife was o'er, the battle won," as the Easter hymn puts it so well.

I heard my sister getting ice from the icemaker in the kitchen, and I went out because I sensed not only that something was gone but also that something was present that had not been present before in quite the same way.

The labored breathing, the sighs and moaning were over. My sister said that about a half hour before, a stillness had awakened her too, and she had gone to check on Don. “Go see for yourself,” she said, and so I did.

I have heard a friend, Fred Craddock, describe what I saw in much the same way once,<sup>1</sup> but not until Don died have I really understood what he was talking about.

As I entered Don’s room I didn’t see an angel, but I saw the after effect of what happens when an angel has defended you. My brother was lying in the bed, his eyes no longer seeing, his breathing stopped, his earthly body no longer imprisoning him.

I looked around the room. And to my surprise, there was Old Death crouching over in the corner wanting to claim a victory, but vanquished and defeated.

To tell you the truth, I felt sorry for him. The pills and bottles on the night stand no longer useful, death’s aches and sufferings overcome by life that knows no suffering, the wracking tortures that he’d brought in his bag of tricks lay broken in pieces on the floor in front of him. And around Don’s bed was the evidence of an angel who had done battle through the night, encamping around him as we all slept, keeping him from danger, and preparing the way for him to go.

I didn’t need to see any more, and while I didn’t see any angels, I did see death sneak out the back door foiled once again by one of heaven’s messengers.

Maybe I am more sure of angels now, than I once was. Even though I have not seen one.

I do not know what heaven is like. But recently someone suggested to me that “It’s like whatever it was like before we were born, warm, and quiet, and safe, and as close as life itself to the ones you love and the Source of Love.”

I’d like to think that that is what those ones whom we will name in a moment or two now know. The arms of Love enfolding them and the nearer company of the saints about them.

When we gather at the table today, perhaps we can count on the promise of the psalmist that the angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them. Our faith is that there at the table is gathered a great cloud of witnesses, a squadron of angels protecting, and Christ the host of the table, for there and in our midst is the presence of God, and all who are with him.

Here we anticipate a heavenly banquet, in a time beyond time, and in place beyond place, where we shall see each other face to face, and know each other as God knows us for the very first time. There, “the angels will stand around the throne of God and fall on their faces and worship singing,

‘Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.’”

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<sup>1</sup> Fred B. Craddock: **Craddock Stories**. (St. Louis, Chalice Press, 2001) 38-39.