

“Angels”
Matthew 4:1-11
April 7, 2019

So today we have reached the final Sunday in Lent. Technically, Lent will continue until the dawn of Easter (Lent never includes Sundays, by the way), at which point the forty days will be over, at least for this year. But quite some time before that fortieth day later this month, our minds will be turning to Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday. So this is our last chance to consider what Lent can mean for us, before we are swept along by the dramatic events of the final days of Jesus' earthly ministry.

In our scripture lesson this morning, Lent's forty days of prayer and fasting end with something of a footnote, almost an afterthought, saying that once the trials and temptations in the wilderness were over, the devil departs, and angels come to wait upon Jesus. It all sounds pretty, and rather pious - it's almost as if there's this sigh of relief: Satan has been dealt with, and Jesus can finally get on with healing and preaching and teaching: all's well that ends well. Except, of course, that Jesus will have to face Calvary. The devil, we must remember, was not defeated at the end of Lent; he simply retreated, in order to regroup, and then to come roaring back.

Now let's put ourselves in Jesus' place - after all, we are reminded that in the present world, we are the hands, the feet, the body of Christ. So let's really put ourselves in his place - if we had been alone in the desert, weary, isolated, starving, assailed by Satanic forces, when would WE have wanted the angels to appear? After all, we are all tempted, like Christ. In our temptations and our trials - where are the angels?

I normally don't think about angels much. Of course, they're central to the Christmas story, but beyond that, well, maybe I just haven't met any angels - at least that I've known of. However, angels were recently brought to mind because of a funeral I just assisted in conducting. Nancy Heacox was a long-time member at Barkhamsted Center Church, and we shared something unusual in common: we not only liked

anchovies, we LOVED anchovies on our pizza. All I had to do was phone her up at Ovation Guitar in New Hartford, where she had worked for years, and as soon as she recognized my voice, she'd say, "See you in five minutes" ... and off we were to New Hartford Center for an anchovy pizza.

Well, Nancy not only loved anchovies, she was also big on angels. So while at her funeral I had a 15 second story to share about pizza, I had to think of 15 minutes' worth of things to say about angels. I was hard pressed. But at least it got me thinking about the subject, which is maybe why the final verse in our scripture lesson this morning about the angels ministering to Jesus jumped out at me.

Remember, the angels came to Jesus, NOT during the forty days of praying and fasting, NOT when Satan was doing his best to confuse the carpenter from Nazareth, NOT when we might think that Jesus would have needed them most. But only after he had passed through one of the most trying times in his life would help come.

Are any of you familiar with the art of Thomas Cole? He worked in mid 19th century America during the time of the Second Great Awakening, and is famous for his collection of four paintings entitled "The Voyage of Life" which follow an individual as he sails down a river. As an infant, all is bright and cheerful, with a guardian angel watching over the wee lad. If anything, life gets even fairer in the second picture as our infant is now a strapping young man, dreaming of castles in the sky - but his angel begins to take leave of him. In the third picture, our youth has now grown to middle age; his boat is battered, his clothes are in tatters, and the storms of daily existence beleaguer him - but his guardian angel has retreated so far into the distance that it is barely visible, if not forgotten. It was only at the end of life as shown in the fourth painting, with our hero now decrepit with age, at his wits' end with only prayers to ward off his despair, that his angel returns to usher him to the gates of paradise.

Sounds a little like those old movies, where the cavalry charge doesn't quite get there until the final reel. Or like finally sighting the lighthouse - after you've straggled

ashore from the shipwreck. It reminds me of a story about a famous politician from not too long ago (and yes, I voted for him). He was the kind of guy, it was said, who would see you drowning 200 yards offshore, would throw you a lifeline 150 yards long, and then claim that he had met you more than halfway. Some “angel” he turned out to be!

So why did the angels arrive so late for Jesus in the wilderness? Why weren't they there when they would have been most needed, when they could have done the most good? And if we think about our own lives, the same might be said about our case - help sometimes comes not in the nick of time, but after it's basically all over and done with and the crisis has passed. Maybe that's why it seems so much easier to get into a jam than to get out of it, and we more than suspect that if there had only been a little something extra to help us through, life would have been so much more easily faced.

Unfortunately for some of us, there are those times when help never seems to arrive. For too many of us, problems dog us at almost every turn, and there seems little or nothing that can be done about it. Where are the angels? Aren't we told that Christ's yoke is easy, his burden is light? Didn't he say, “Come unto me all you who are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”? Aren't we promised love divine, all loves excelling? Well, then, where are the angels? After all, when Jesus prayed in Gethsemane, his tears like drops of blood - what help arrived for him? At least Peter tried, pulling out a sword and striking off the ear of a Roman soldier. Not that it did a lot of good. Not very angelic, either. In the end, it was not much help at all.

We need help, in our schools, in our homes, at work, in our town, in our church. There is so much that could be improved, there is so much that needs our attention, there is so much that we are in danger of failing at. If only the angels were here. Now. If only we could be sure that temptation could always be resisted. If only we could know that our rear-guard actions against the waywardness of human nature - rear-guard actions that consume so much of our energies - rear-guard actions that often become the center of our

lives as we struggle almost constantly against despair, doubt, and turning away from a higher calling, given and made by God himself - if only success were assured. If only!

That is where the body of Christ comes in. As another well-known politician once told us (and this one I did NOT vote for): “Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the change that we seek.” Indeed, perhaps we are the angels that we are searching for. Perhaps our calling is to become angels - for others. To do that job, we don’t need wings or supernatural powers or wisdom beyond our years or a saintliness that would rival that of Mother Theresa. Because any one of us can be the person who is there to hold a hand, to create order out of chaos, to talk a friend through their confusion.

That is where our artist, Thomas Cole, hasn’t gotten it entirely right: in his vision, he saw the individual as an isolated Child, a solitary Youth, a friendless Man, and an almost godforsaken Oldster. But in the church, in the community of faith, we are never alone. That is why scripture places so much importance on us loving one another. As it says in the epistles of John, life as a Christian is not just about loving God, whom we have not seen. It is also about loving our brothers and sisters, whom we have seen. And if we cannot or will not love our next-door neighbor, who is so readily visible (warts and all), how can we say that we truly love a God who is invisible?

So let us resolve to become the answer to one another’s prayers, to one another’s cries for companionship, to each other’s need for solace. For it is always possible for us to reply, when the need arises, as we sang two weeks ago: “Here am I, send me.”

Let us pray: