

Michael & All Angels
September 29, 2019
Daniel 10, Rev. 12:7-12, Luke 10:17-20

MESSENGERS OF GOD

It all started with a hankering for chocolate.

Chris and I were in the Bay Area for a summer seminary course when we decided to go to Fisherman's Wharf for dinner. And after dinner, being within walking distance of Ghirardelli Square, it seemed fitting to follow up the meal with some sort of chocolate confection.

So it was that while walking along The Embarcadero through the Gallery District an exhibit featuring etchings by Marc Chagall caught our eyes.

Chris had been a student of art history in college. But what I knew about Chagall could fit in a thimble:

- that he'd been born in Russia to a Jewish family,
- that he'd studied art in Paris in the early 20th century,
- and that had become one of the celebrated artists of his generation.

His series of etchings on scenes from the Bible—the subject of this exhibit—I knew nothing about. Yet, as we crossed the threshold into the gallery, there they were: a score or more of his etchings—not for viewing purposes only but for sale.

There were etchings by other artists, too. Two or three tiny ones by Rembrandt, and several by Picasso. But it was the Chagall series based on stories from the Hebrew Scriptures, that we found ourselves most interested in.

And when our obvious interest reached a tipping point we were escorted by the gallery staff out of the main gallery and into a private viewing room. And it was there, as we listened to the young female curator describe Chagall's work on this series of 100 etchings over two and a half decades, that we found ourselves completely smitten.

Using a variety of techniques and styluses, Chagall had etched lines into copper plates to create a kind of “negative,” and those plates, then inked, had been pressed into fine paper. The results were portraits that captured the artist's intentions in an astoundingly intimate and animated way.

Viewing the art directly, up close, rather than in a catalog of photographs, made all the difference.

And we found ourselves going through the paces—internally—to figure how we could make one of those etchings our own.

DO YOU HAVE ANY WITH ANGELS? I asked.

You see the stories of Scripture that have most intrigued me through the years are the ones that capture the DIVINE – HUMAN ENCOUNTER.

- Abraham entertaining three divine strangers outside this tent in the heat of the day...
- Jacob wrestling through the night with an unknown assailant at the ford of the River Jabbok...
- Isaiah coming face to face with seraphim in the Temple of the LORD...
- Mary being visited by Gabriel—and so on.

The curator called upon the gallery manager, shared my request, and soon he returned with an etching entitled The Call of Jeremiah.

It captures that moment when a winged angel, its face steeled in concentration, hurtles toward the prophet; its right hand reaching and covering a startled Jeremiah's mouth, bestows on the young prophet a message of woe he will struggle mightily to proclaim.

For a preacher—for this preacher—Chagall's work was irresistible.

WHEN THEY TELL US THE PRICE, I thought to myself, WE'LL GET UP AND WALK AWAY.

But much to our surprise, we learned that by stretching payments out over a series of months, this piece of art—this etching—could be within our reach.

Minutes later, as we left the gallery, we were giddy! Our search for chocolate resumed—and thanks to Chagall, it would be the most expensive chocolate we ever consumed.

In the days that remained before our return home there was no buyer's remorse. Quite the contrary, we found we had an insatiable appetite to learn more about Chagall and his work. So we scoured the used book stores of Berkeley, finding several titles we could take back with us.

Today is the feast day for Michael and All Angels.

And when you hear the texts before us, or take out a concordance and look up some of the 296 references to angels in the Bible, you may wonder why you never noticed all those angels before.

And you may wonder what, really, angels are about.

- Are they spiritual beings who exist at some level of reality we mortals have no access to?
- Are they some sort of outward manifestation of Divine intention?
- Are they an imaginative invention of the ancient mind?

The possibilities are many, which has spawned a lot of poor theology in popular culture through the centuries, like how many angels can dance on the head of a pin; or like the statement I heard recently from a funeral home staff member, that when we die we become angels.

Or that angels, like Clarence in IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE, have to accomplish certain tasks in order to "earn their wings." The realm of mystery can open the door to all sorts of invention.

Two things I've learned about angels from the Bible.

(1) First, they are messengers, messengers of God; and their whole identity and purpose is wrapped up in that vocation.

In the First Testament those encounters can take on an ambiguous and even visceral quality—like when the angel ambushes Jacob at the Jabbok. In encounters like these we're not sure what the divine intention is—is God trying to destroy Jacob? Teach him a lesson? Put the fear of God into him?

In the end Jacob survives the encounter, but he bears the scars of the encounter in the form of a permanent limp and a new name: ISRAEL – WRESTLER WITH GOD.

Angels, encounters like these teach us, are not to be trifled with.

The archangel Michael, in two of our readings, is depicted as a WARRIOR who triumphs over the forces of evil. The image of Michael trampling on the dragon—i.e. Satan—in the vision from Revelation has reverberated powerfully through the centuries, especially among people of faith in the midst of persecution.

GOD IS NOT HELPLESS, the image assures us. IN THE END IT IS GOD'S VISION FOR THIS WORLD THAT WILL FINALLY TRIUMPH—NOT THE DRAGON'S.

The New Testament word for angel is angelos...messenger. It's the root from which we derive the word EVANGELICAL, which means Good Angel—good message, good news; as in EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH.

Whatever else angels may be, they are messengers which bring us tidings of great joy; news from the GREAT HEART which pulsates at the center of the universe, the heart of God, the God of love.

While quite a body of angel lore—angelology, it's called—has developed through the centuries, there are but two clusters of occasions in the gospels in which angels make their appearance and have something to say.

The first cluster is prior to Jesus' birth—the visitation of Zachariah first and then Mary, in Luke; and the visitation of Joseph, in Matthew's version of the story.

The second cluster occurs at the empty tomb.

And in both cases the words of these divine messengers can be distilled down to these three: BE NOT AFRAID.

What is God trying to tell us through this heavenly messengers?

- That we need not live in fear...
- That we need not organize and insulate and barricade our lives around what we're afraid of...
- That the Power at the center of the universe is a Power which wills our good—and more than that—which desires us to take hold of life and life abundant...
- That the perfect love which our Creator offers us, the complete companionship, the peace which passes all understanding, will cast out all fear.

(2) The second thing about angels is that we are, perhaps, not aware of their existence as much as we could be because of one simple fact:

Their purpose is not to draw attention to themselves, but to point to God and God alone.

“AND THE WORD WAS, AND THE WORD IS, AND THE WORD SHALL BE.”

William Blake claimed “it is not because angels are holier than men, women or devils that makes them angels, but because they do not expect holiness from one another, but from God alone.”

In his book, PEREALANDRA, CS Lewis has this description of the angels:

On their faces one single changeless expression was stamped, which the observer could only identify as charity: but it was more terrifyingly different from the expression of human charity, which we always see either blossoming out of, or descending into, natural affection. Pure, spiritual, intellectual love, shot from their faces like barbed lightning. It was so unlike the love we experience that its expression could easily be mistaken for ferocity."

Ferocious love. Not to consume us, not to ingest us, as Satan would do the souls of men and women in his hatred. But to bring us liberation, to open our eyes to the reality of God's presence in us and around us and between us.

Who is Michael, that great prince and archangel of which Daniel and John both speak, but a manifestation of God's intention to finally complete one day the liberation that God began in Christ.

- To roll away the stones of our tombs,
- to cast out all within us and within this world that is not of God,
- to unbind us and let us go.

The angel of God is a ferocious lover of the human race, more intent to assist us than we are ready to be assisted. But the assistance, if it is to be for our liberation, must be secret, unseen.

Sometimes, however, when the need is there, that angelic ferocity takes a shape that our eyes can behold, or at least our minds can perceive.

When, in 2 Kings, the King of Aram sends his horses and chariots and armies to capture the prophet Elisha, and surrounds the city where the prophet resides, Elisha's assistant wakes in the morning and sees that they are indeed surrounded with no hope for escape.

ALAS! he cries to his master, WHAT SHALL WE DO?

And Elisha replies "Do not be afraid, for there are more with us than there are with them."
And Elisha prays, "O Lord, I pray thee open his eyes that he may see."

So the Lord opens the eyes of the young man and he sees.

"And behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha."

The assurance of the Scriptures is that the love of God is at work in the world in more ways than we can possibly imagine; sometimes openly but sometimes secretly, beyond our vision and ken; accomplished in the ministry of angels.

They whisper to us in our blessed nights, in dreams and insights; they come to us in the gift of reason and intelligence; they take up armor for the sake of God's children; they bear good news to us by pointing not to themselves but to God alone.

If they come—when they come—to you, receive them with joy and be not afraid!
There is good news on the wing.

Amen.