

"CLAIMING OUR ANGELS"
MATTHEW 4:1-11
April 7, 2019
Fifth Sunday in Lent

Typically, I prefer Luke's storytelling to Matthew's. Matthew can be dry and legalistic at times. Gus is going to read you in a few minutes Matthew's version of Jesus' time in the wilderness, a story we have been exploring all through this season of Lent.

You will hear the familiar temptations laid before Jesus by his demons. He will be tempted with food when he is starving. He will be tempted with power when he is alone and afraid. And he will be tempted by the devil with a promise of eternity when he is sensing his time on earth is drawing short. This is all the same as in Luke's version.

But notice when you hear it, a critical addition in Matthew's story: the presence of the angels. They appear in the devil's understanding of the unique person of Jesus. The devil is quite aware that Jesus does not stand alone against death. He has help. He has help from God. He has angels.

The angels appear to worry the devil, but they also show up to celebrate Jesus' emergence from his wilderness time. They show up when Jesus needs them most. They show up and so remind us that God is never far away from us, especially when our energy, our hope, and our strength is in the dumps, when our need is greatest.

Several of us here at church have been studying for Lent John Dominic and Sarah Crossan's new study, *Resurrecting Easter*. This book reminds me of the theological texts of my seminary days; it is dense and a struggle to understand at times, the subject matter unfamiliar and rather esoteric. But we press on! through it in our Wednesday classes, making our Easter experience richer for the journey.

Whittled down to its basics, *Resurrecting Easter* celebrates the Western world Christian resurrection tradition that pictures Jesus individually rising from the dead after his crucifixion and ascending to heaven in triumph over death. At the same time, the book honors the Eastern world Christian view that Jesus resurrects all of humanity with him, that as he is freed, he too frees everyone from the depths of Hades, the place and personage where all expired souls go after they die. This is called the *Anastasis*, or the Up-Rising of Christ. Over the first two millennia of Christianity these competing resurrection traditions struggled with each other and here in the West, eventually we lost entirely the theology of universal resurrection. I'll talk more about this in weeks to come after Easter. There's too much to cover here this Sunday.

The book itself is beautiful. I'll pass it around. It has some 140 color faceprints of artwork dating all the way back to the year 400 and

forward to the 14th century, images that demonstrate the ancient Christians' theology of resurrection.

What struck me this week in browsing through our early Christian visual experience was the presence of angels in the paintings, carvings, mosaics, and statues. In many of the images the angels attend to Christ. The angels also appear with the souls trapped in and with Hades, threatened by demons or Satan, and to the post-resurrection witnesses. Across the centuries, from East to West, from Greek language and art to Latin and back again, the angels are there for faithful Christians.

Why have we in our Western Protestant context dropped them from our personal and corporate theology?

Chris and I lost this past week our little wonder dog, Jake, to the heartless evil that is cancer. Metastatic melanoma wasted him away and Jakey could not keep up his brave front any longer. We had him put to sleep on Thursday. We were, of course, a total emotional mess for much of the week's end. But as I said goodbye to him, I whispered to him, "Be Free, Jakey. Fly with the angels now." I felt peace come to him, and I was so grateful for how he had graced our lives. You know how it is. We have all been there. We all recognize that broken heart. But right there before me, sporting his green shamrock

bandana for the last time, Jake took on his new job of being our guardian angel, our unseen but surely-felt protector.

Our angels. We have them. I know we do. Some of you might be skilled at calling on them, attuned to their everyday presence in your lives. Some of us, me included, tend to forget about them until there's a major shake-up in our life story. I asked you in an email this week to think about your angels and to claim them.

Angels take many forms. They can be living angels. Some people just literally save our lives with their caring presence.

Angels can also be departed ones—parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, siblings, children, dear friends, or people we may not have personally known but who nevertheless inspire us. The categories are endless. Then there are also our dear departed pets, angels no doubt.

We are so easily able to name our demons. It might be that you label demons those persons you dislike. A name or two may be popping into your head right now! Your failings and shortcomings are all jumbled up in there, too, I'll wager, those demons of your own making that deny you a good story, those demons that haunt you and terrorize you without mercy.

Those demons are easy to access. But like Jesus in the wilderness, we have help against the forces of evil. We all have our demons, but we have our angels, too. Let's claim them. Let's call upon

them when our days are dark, when our hope is waning, when there seems to be no way out, when we hate ourselves for everything that is imperfect about us. For I know this to be true; our angels love us. They never *stop* loving us. And by God, we need them.

Listen to Gus read this passage. He is prepared to tell you thereafter about an angel of his that he claims, and then it will be your turn to share, if you want. Come up to the mic and briefly tell us who is an angel you claim, and why.

Let's paint our own resurrection story today with our images and our words of hope and inspiration.

May It Be So.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to our church in Matthew's Gospel, the 4th verse, beginning with the 1st verse:

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written,

'One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶ saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

'He will command his angels concerning you,'
and 'On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

'Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.'"

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Here ends the reading. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.