

**Sermon Preached by The Reverend Geoffrey Royce, Deacon
at Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
on the Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year B, at 9 a.m.
April 28, 2024**

Voices, Voices. Listen, my heart,
The way only saints have listened till now,
As that vast call lifted them from the ground;
While they kept on kneeling
And noticed nothing,
Those impossible ones,
Listeners fully absorbed.
Not that you could bear God's voice—not at all.
But listen to the wind's breathing,
The unbroken news that takes shape out of silence.

From the Duino Elegies 1923
Ranier Maria Rilke

There seems to be an abundance of deafening silence. I know I don't have to be specific. Each of us hears these silences from a different place and with different degrees of clarity.

I am thinking primarily of the ways we are called and drawn into transformative love in an encounter with God. Are we listening? Are we listening as Abraham Lincoln said, "to the better angels of our nature"ⁱ.

Are we as human beings any different from the disciples, from the saints? Do we think they just happened to be in the right place at the right time? Some of them probably would disagree with that assessment. They may not have seen their lives as having been so blessed. Do we perhaps think that angels only speak to certain people who are special? Or is it that we think angels don't actually exist? Maybe we simply don't recognize them.

Receiving a message or guidance from an angel may not happen in an expectable way. Its mystery might unfold more like assembling a piece of Ikea furniture or deciphering one of my sermons.

In the apocryphal Book of Tobit, ordered by his dying father to go from Nineveh to Media to retrieve a sum of money from another man, Tobias looks for someone who knows the way and encounters a youth his own age who is actually the Archangel Raphael in disguise. The angel agrees to accompany him and so the two went forth and the young man's dog went with them.ⁱⁱ

In the motion picture "Love Actually", the great British comedic actor, Rowan Atkinson (known widely as Mr. Bean) appears in two scenes. In both scenes he is surreptitiously altering the outcomes of other lives. In one, as a department store clerk, he is delaying the purchase of a piece of jewelry by stretching out the time of the purchase with an indulgent and embarrassingly funny and exaggerated level of gift wrapping. The gift is being bought secretly by a married man for an extramarital interest. During the delay caused by the extravagant gift wrapping, his wife reappears and the transaction is successfully quashed.

Here comes an angel of the Lord, saying to Philip “Get up and go take the wilderness road. The names of Jerusalem, Gaza and Ethiopia are all mentioned as bearings, all places in dire straits right now in history. So, he got up and went. Did he have a choice, whether or not to go on God’s errand. He is supposed to join himself to the travel plans of an Ethiopian eunuch already returning home from worshipping perhaps in Jerusalem. Everyone in this narrative is going to great lengths. The eunuch has travelled just shy of 2000 miles from Ethiopia to Jerusalem.

Stuff like this happens to all of us, doesn’t it? Maybe not via a visit from an angel but it could be. Philip is to catch up with the Ethiopian wherever he is on this long journey and then to travel with him. Doesn’t successful evangelism require us to travel with someone for a while on their journey, to journey with them. Culturally and socially these two could not be more different from each other. I get the feeling that these differences were not of much consequence. God has intervened.

The eunuch is the perfect vessel for receiving the good news of Jesus Christ. Philip, responds to the eunuch’s request for guidance and teaches him how Jesus is prefigured in the whole of scripture and whole history of Israel. The suffering, the passion, and resurrection of Christ is the message the eunuch is ready to hear. He has been listening and moving in this direction for a while.

They pass by a body of water and two men go down into the water at the eunuch’s suggestion and he is baptized. The supernatural merges with the natural. Then the Spirit takes Philip away. This resembles the way Jesus suddenly disappears when he breaks bread in the home of those he meets on the road to Emmaus. Again God intervenes.

I believe the angels are always with us, standing in our path to prevent us from venturing further towards our own destruction or harming others. They are also standing by the door, holding it open, perhaps even smiling or beckoning to us, or in a moment when you are waiting in a long line that adjusts the schedule of your day so you move through another moment safely or with greater benefit. As long as we continue to say yes to the ways God has intervened in our lives, inviting us to new life, guiding us towards growth and healing, the angels will always be there.

ⁱ Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address

ⁱⁱ Snow, Edward. *The Poetry of Rilke*. p 291