

THE ANGEL ANGLE

Sermon, July 19, 2020

Texts: Genesis 28:10-22, John 1:43-51

As mentioned during the Time with the Children, the spiritual we just sang (*"We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder"*) originates from (pre-Civil War) era of slavery in our nation (and was often heard in the soundtrack of Shelby Foote's renowned *Civil War miniseries*). As is true of many spirituals, there is no known author or composer; it was first written down around 1825. It was inspired by the Old Testament text we read this morning, telling of Jacob's dream of a ladder, or staircase; a point of contact between this physical, visible world and the transcendent, invisible world (for *Led Zeppelin fans*, this was the original *Stairway to Heaven*). In his dream Jacob saw angels continually coming down and going back up this staircase; at the top of the stairway was the presence of God. As we now know from the perspective of history, this dream was both a promise to Jacob and a prophecy for the people of God. There is no other mention of this dream in all the Old Testament; it is not mentioned in the Bible again until centuries later, in the Gospel of John, where Jesus says to Nathanael, *"I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."* Slightly paraphrased, Jesus is saying (*intimating words and themes found later in John's gospel*), *"Nathanael, you are a true Israelite, you know Jacob's dream. In Me, you see the incarnation of Jacob's dream. I AM the link between heaven and earth. No one comes to the Father but by Me. In Me, God has lowered the 'ladder.'" Jesus Christ is the ladder, the stairway, the bridge, the "point of connection" between heaven and earth. All interaction between earth and heaven is by and through Him. So, in this short little verse at the end of our Gospel reading, Jesus claims to be the fulfillment of Jacob's dream; He is the bridge, the "connecting point," between heaven and earth.*

Of interest to note, though, is just *who* is seen ascending and descending this stairway to heaven. Angels. So why does the spiritual say *"We are climbing Jacob's ladder"*? We aren't angels ... or, are we? Augustine wrote, *"Angels are spirits, but it is not because they are spirits that they are angels. They become angels when they are sent [by God], for the name 'angel' refers to their office, not their nature."* Strictly speaking, the word "Angel" describes a position of office, rather than a state of being. In short, "Angel" is a job title. The root word for 'angel' in the Hebrew can be translated to mean *"to dispatch as a deputy;"* and the root word for angel in the Greek means *"to send."* In the Greek language of the New Testament an "aggelos" was a messenger (*Latin "angelus"*), one who is sent. Angels, biblically speaking, are God's messengers, emissaries, deputies, and, at times, His soldiers. The Bible uses the term 'angel' for God's spiritual, heavenly messengers as well as His earthbound, human ones. In fact, something often missed in our English translations is that in the Old Testament Hebrew, the words "prophet" and "angel" are often used interchangeably. Biblically speaking, an angel is simply one who fulfills the angelic job description. There are heavenly spiritual angels, and there are earthbound human angels. God uses both. Whoever acts as God's emissary, God's messenger, God's deputy, God's soldier is fulfilling the job description of Angel.

So, *"We are climbing Jacob's ladder,"* these faith-filled slaves appropriately sang, *"... soldiers of the Cross."* Think of the angels ascending and descending Jacob's ladder as good soldiers, disciplined soldiers, who are going up to receive orders from the Top, then coming down and going out into this world to faithfully execute the orders received. In fact, that is something of what worship is designed to replicate ... an ascent into the presence of God through Jesus Christ, then a descent back out into the world to carry out His orders. As Fanny Crosby wrote in her famous hymn **Blessed Assurance**: *"Angels descending, bring from above, echoes of mercy, whispers of love."*

Those slaves who sang these words found some comfort and purpose in their difficulties by remembering who they were, who they were called to be, and what they were called to do both in, and in spite of, their earthly circumstances. No matter what the circumstances, no matter where we are or what we are doing, we, too, have the angelic calling to be soldiers of the cross ... dutifully carrying out the orders of the Lord of Hosts as best we can. We are called to be God's messengers, God's emissaries, deputies and representatives in all we do ... when fulfilling our calling as angels, we are in the company of angels! The "Angel Angle" sermon title is a bit of a poor pun takeoff on the news program "The Ingraham Angle", where current events are presented from the "angle" of the woman who hosts the show, Laura Ingraham. "Angle" refers to a certain fashion of approaching a problem or considering an issue; the direction or perspective from which someone or something is approached. (*An Angle is also a geometric term; it is also a member of a Germanic people who, along with the Saxons, invaded "Angle" land, England, in the 5th century AD and merged to form the Anglo-Saxon people; "angle" also means to go fishing ... but those three definitions don't fit right now!*) Well, our "Angle" for approaching everything in life is to be an **Angel**; for we are called to be angels. As sung earlier by our "choir", Olivia Black: *"Master, Thou callest, I gladly obey; only direct me, and I'll find Thy way. Teach me the mission appointed for me, what is my labor, and where it shall be. Master, Thou callest, and this I reply, "Ready and willing, Lord, here am I." Willing, my Savior, to take up the cross; willing to suffer reproaches and loss. Willing to follow, if Thou wilt but lead; only support me with grace in my need."*

That's the song of an angel with a consistent divine "angle" toward life. I'd like to quote myself from May 17, the sermon "Skyfall Living":

*What happens if the economic damage and the educational damage is so bad we can't recover, with all the related human pathologies that entails? The goal was to flatten the curve, not flatten the nation! What happens if the economic damage is so severe that we're killing the patient in order to cure the disease? All of the really smart people in Washington, on Wall Street and in state capitals throughout the country seem to be arguing with each other about what is to be done to keep us safe. But you don't have to be all that smart to realize no one really knows for certain what to do. That uncertainty is a huge part of what worries us. It makes us anxious. Well, we are not the Church of Chicken Little; we are the Church of Jesus Christ! Our central message is not "The sky is falling." Our central message is "There Is Hope." Part of that message, that work, that mission, is no matter how bad it gets we are to do good (ed. note: in short, we are to be **angels**), we are to do what we can do in the here and now in the midst of how it is to save our culture from moral collapse, to be faithful and law abiding and to raise up faithful and law abiding progeny, to work with our Lord making this world a bit more like heaven (as we pray each week, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven") and not to fritter away our time and energy whining wistfully about the good ol' days. We still have work to do, people to take care of, responsibilities to perform. The mission of the church is to proclaim HOPE through the gracious and living ministry of Jesus Christ. Until the sky really does fall, as it will in that day when the Lord comes again, that's the work God has given the church to do. Let's keep doing it."*

In short, our "angle" from which we approach everything in life is that we are called to be Angels where we are, when we are, how we are, in the midst of how it is, to do the work of the One who placed us here.

In the second century AD, persecution of Christians was widespread throughout the Roman Empire. The early Christians lived under very difficult circumstances; they were being arrested and even martyred for their faith and spurious charges such as cannibalism, treason, ritual incest were being made against them (*which apparently were intentional "misunderstandings" related to the Christian "love feasts," their consuming "body and blood" in their sacramental rituals as well as their refusal to call anyone but Jesus Lord*). However, many Christians kept climbing Jacob's ladder, steadfastly and faithfully fulfilling their angelic calling to a higher way of life, both in and in spite of their circumstances. It was during this time (197 AD) that Christian scholar Tertullian wrote from Carthage his most famous work entitled Apologeticus, which is one of the earliest and most articulate defenses of the Christian faith. Addressed to the provincial governors of the Roman Empire, Tertullian's Apologeticus was written to a largely hostile readership challenging their misunderstandings and prejudices, demanding legal toleration for Christians, and showing that Christianity was reasonable and respectable, not some shameful secret society. Tertullian appealed "... for toleration of Christianity, rebutting charges against Christian morality, and claiming that Christians are no danger to the State but useful citizens." Some excerpts, which contain some well known lines: (*These were placed on a bulletin insert, emphases added*)

"Let me now show what we really are. We are a body knit together by one faith, one discipline and one hope. We meet together as a congregation, uniting together to offer prayer to God. We pray for the emperor and all in authority, for the welfare of the world, for peace and for the delay of the final end. *We read our holy scriptures to nourish our faith, hope, steadfastness and good habits.* Our elders preside over us, obtaining that honor not by money, *but by their established character.* There is no buying and selling in the things of God. We have a fund, but not because people can buy religion. Once a month, anyone who wants to makes a small donation – but only he who is able and willing; there is no compulsion. It is not spent on [elaborate] feasts, but to support and bury poor people, to care and provide for orphans, the elderly, victims of shipwreck and those in prison for their faith."

"Christians are persecuted in ignorance, because they are not allowed to defend themselves - as long as they can be called 'Christians', they can be executed. Real criminals are allowed to deny their offences, defend themselves, and are *often tortured to get them to confess.* By contrast, the Christians are not allowed to demand evidence of any crimes they are condemned for, and *are tortured to make them stop confessing.* Christians are denied any chance to vindicate themselves, nor do the magistrates try to find any evidence of crime - the name of 'Christian' is enough. *Yet you know very well that particular Christians are moral and upright people.*"

"We are not a new philosophy but a divine revelation. That's why you can't just exterminate us; the more you kill the more we are. **The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.** Your cruelties merely prove our innocence of the crimes you charge against us. When you chose recently to hand a Christian girl over to a brothel-keeper rather than to the lions, *you showed you knew that we counted chastity dearer than life.*

"The meetings of the Christians are described, and how the Christians love one another. Yet the unbelievers sneer at the way Christians call each other 'Brothers' - because among pagans such usage always means fraud. We share everything except our wives - you share nothing except your wives.

When Christianity was born, Christians were the radical counter-culture in the face of very difficult and extreme circumstances. Christians set themselves apart by embracing and faithfully living out a higher standard, an angelic standard. As underscored by Tertullian, the early Christians were known for their chastity, but not *just* for their chastity ... they were also known for their integrity, their compassion, their industriousness, their honesty, their trustworthiness, their dependability, and their generosity toward the poor. They developed a truly angelic reputation as honorable people who were faithful representatives, emissaries, deputies of the God they worshipped, and they demonstrated they could be trusted precisely because they were Christians.

And they eventually won over and saved an Empire, by taking seriously their angelic calling in the midst of difficulty; they consistently and faithfully approached and viewed everything in their lives from the angle of angels.