

It Makes Me Wonder

A homily written and preached by Jennifer A. Hudson at the Celtic Eucharist service, September 29, 2015, St. Paul's on the Green Episcopal Church.

In the name of God: Creator, Companion, and Communicator. Amen.

Each time I hear the classic rock song “Stairway to Heaven” on the airwaves, I immediately turn the channel, complaining, “Again? It’s so overplayed!” What accounts for the song’s ubiquity on classic rock stations? I’m sure musicologists could explain very well. But I’ll venture that part of the appeal of “Stairway to Heaven” is that, musically and lyrically, it can feel like a journey into another world. Stylistically, there’s the ethereal, folksy, Renaissance quality of the flute and acoustic guitar in the first movement, followed by a gradual progression into a slow electric middle before climaxing into primal, frenzied hard rock elements.

Besides its bridging of different sounds, “Stairway to Heaven” also delivers poetic lyrics, weaving a narrative about the search for meaning in a world of ambiguity. Listeners are cautioned that “there are two paths you can go by, but in the long run/There’s still time to change the road you’re on.” Lyrically, “Stairway to Heaven” is a statement on the human condition: how do we make sense of the stuff of our reality that’s grey and muddled? How do we make sense of words, emotions, or experiences that have, to quote the song, “two meanings”? Will we ever find an answer to the things which make us wonder or will the answers remain in a “whispering wind” that we can’t grasp? ¹

Fortunately, we have helpers in our quest whom we honor on the feast of St. Michael and All Angels. These beings of light move freely and fluidly between the ethereal

and primal, as if gliding along a slow electric middle of their own, like motorists on a bridge.

Traditionally, angels and archangels have been viewed as intermediaries between God and God's people. Think of them as "Godline negotiators." Closer to God than we are, their purpose is often to guard or guide. They help those of us on Earth connect with Heaven. Archangels, angels of higher rank, tend to hold more specific purposes and qualities, and there's four we honor within the Anglican tradition: Michael, the protector; Gabriel, the messenger; Raphael, the healer; and, perhaps the most mysterious, Uriel, the light or flame. In Scripture we see angels and archangels interfacing with human beings either by way of communicating a message, such as when Gabriel announces to Mary that God has chosen her to give birth to Christ, or by intervening, as when Michael defeats Satan in the Book of Revelation.

Tonight's angels are interesting because they don't actually do much except ascend and descend. There's no specific message they deliver. There's no intervention. But God uses them—not as messengers, but as *the message*—to communicate to us a truth about Heaven and Earth.

In the reading from Genesis, it's not the angels but God who speaks to Jacob—beside him, as his companion—in the dream about the ladder. That's amazing in itself because it suggests God is willing to meet humans where they are. God isn't limited to Heaven. Nor are humans limited to Earth. The sight of the angels ascending and descending the ladder must have been equally astounding—and comforting—to Jacob, given that he had just left home because of some pretty primal stuff. He'd stolen a blessing from his brother Esau, who now was bent on killing him.

Jacob needed a fresh start and in his dream he glimpses a new reality: the presence of I AM, the house of God, the gate of heaven, and all who are one with it. There's a promise of redemption in the land given by God and upon awakening, Jacob realizes: "the LORD is *in* [emphasis mine] this place." God isn't just in Heaven. God is also present in Earth. The two realms are not so disparate.

Nathanael is about to learn the same lesson in our gospel from John. When Jesus says "you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man," he doesn't mean Nathanael will see this literally. Rather, because "you know sometimes words have two meanings,"² Jesus is saying two things. First, as the Son of Man, he is the fulfillment of God's promises to Jacob. Beyond that, Jesus is the very ladder which Jacob saw. Jesus *is* the stairway to heaven. Just as the angels ascend and descend *upon* Jacob's ladder, they also ascend and descend *upon* the Son of Man. Jesus, the Creator having become the Created brings together Heaven and Earth, the ethereal and the primal, by his very nature. It's no coincidence that Nathanael is the one to whom Jesus reveals this truth. Nathanael is a descendent of Jacob, after all, and that he'd been sitting under a fig tree suggests a philosophical nature. In fact, before the start of tonight's gospel, Nathanael had asked "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

How many of us are like Nathanael—doubtful that God, or even God's intermediaries, are concerned with us?

It's little wonder we might feel this way. The news bombards us each day with rampant reports of hell on earth: sexual and racial violence, teen suicides, a troubled economy, a refugee crisis. And then there's our own personal hells: unemployment,

separation or divorce, depression, life in the closet. In these instances, Heaven can seem like a world so radically distant from ours. We might be inclined to ask “Can anything good come out of this?”

Such a thought is misgiven.³ It’s when we’re at our worst, when the primal seems like it is about to overcome us, that the ethereal manifests and reaches out—be it in the form of a spirit friend or God directly.

Overall, angels give us a glimpse at what we can become. More than that, they’re a reminder of something much deeper, “a tune,” so to speak, that Jesus, perhaps as “piper,” is trying to teach: “that all are one and one is all.”⁴

God isn’t just in Heaven. God isn’t just in the stairway. God is in Earth too. Look at all of the people in our earthly lives who touch us and whom we call “angels.” We can ascend and descend like the angels. We *can* move along that stairway. We’re closer to heaven than we think. Despite all of the hells that persist in our reality, there’s still an awful lot of goodness to be seen. Will we choose to recognize and spread it? Will we choose to build heaven on earth? “Ooh, it makes me wonder”⁵...

¹ Led Zeppelin. “Stairway to Heaven” *Led Zeppelin IV*. Atlantic, 1971. CD.

² Led Zeppelin. “Stairway to Heaven” *Led Zeppelin IV*. Atlantic, 1971. CD.

³ Led Zeppelin. “Stairway to Heaven” *Led Zeppelin IV*. Atlantic, 1971. CD.

⁴ Led Zeppelin. “Stairway to Heaven” *Led Zeppelin IV*. Atlantic, 1971. CD.

⁵ Led Zeppelin. “Stairway to Heaven” *Led Zeppelin IV*. Atlantic, 1971. CD.