

2-Part Sermon at Leaside United Church, Toronto ON
“The Light that Guides You Home” December 9 and 23, 2007
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Part One: Isaiah 11 and Psalm 27

I like to walk, and a year ago, when I had suffered a devastating burnout,
I would spend two or three hours a day walking.
I liked to go to a place along the Bruce trail, not only because it was familiar,
but also because, I knew the exact spot, the exact line on the trail,
where I left this world, and entered the world of the forest glen.

The threshold was marked for me when at last I could no longer hear the rush of the
trucks along the country road, or the tractors in a field far off.
There was a line that marked the place where the birds and squirrels, and the hidden deer
accepted my being there, and I could hear them singing and breathing,
just as I was singing and breathing.

It was as if everything there was waiting for me to arrive.
I didn't have to go there, I could have walked anywhere.
But there, in the quiet of the forest, with the ever-changing light of the day,
was the place I came home to myself.

David Whyte:

Sometimes,
you come to a place
whose only task
is to trouble you
with tiny
but frightening requests
conceived out of nowhere
but in this place
beginning to lead to possibility.

Requests to stop what
you are doing right now
and
to stop what you are becoming
while you do it,
questions that can make
or unmake a life,
questions that have patiently waited for you.

I crossed this frontier place, not of my own accord,
but because I know and believe that God led me there.
For it was a healing place,
and when my heart was broken wide open,
it was a healing place I needed.

Crossing that line was like crossing from NO place to SOME place.
I had found my boundary with the world.

AND, I had found that I could carry the healing energy from the SOME place easily back to the NO place, the possibility of being healed in the present, not just in the future.

And so I was guided, there was a path that appeared,
from death to life.
From no hope to much hope.
From no inner peace to calm inner peace.
Even now, as I picture myself crossing that invisible threshold in the forest,
I find I can feel that inner peace.
I can paint the picture in my mind of a healing light, of the energy of the Bruce trail
wrapping itself around me like a warm blanket,
carrying me from dis-ease to a new ease of living again in the world God gave me to live
in.
But I also know that I was never alone there in the glen.
I know that God was the healing presence, the energy of life, the divine possibility, that
hovered in and around me.

Richard Kearney (book reference is The God Who May Be) suggests that a contemporary
way for us to understand God,
is as a being who MAY BE or who MAY BECOME, a deity yet to come.
It is this kind of God which our season of ADVENT celebrates.
God did not finish God's work at creation.
God did not finish God's work in Jesus.
God refused to impose a kingdom, or to declare it finally accomplished from the
beginning, because the kingdom will not fully arrive
until each of us has been given the possibility of realizing the kingdom.
We do this by opening ourselves to the power of God's presence in our lives TODAY.
Kearney says: each human person carries within him/herself the capacity to be changed,
and only when we do this, do we initiate the possibility for God to be even more
incarnate and even more fully alive in our world.

Another writer, Etty Hillesum wrote, just before she was executed in a Nazi
concentration camp: "You God cannot help us, but we must help You and defend your
dwelling place inside us to the last."

It's this kind of thinking, clearly contemporary, post-metaphysical, post-scientific, that Isaiah used in his writing.

Even though he wrote 3000 years ago, yet his words still maintain a fresh possibility to them.

He imagines the future healing place where God lives.

He imagines what it would be like when all people in the world are led to this new Eden, to this new home.

He imagines what it will look like when all of creation crossing the healing threshold and lives "at home with itself".

Even the natural world is included: the wolf will lie down beside the lamb, the leopard will sleep beside the goat. The cow will feed beside the bear, the infant will play near the hole of the cobra.

Isaiah imagines forward.

He imagines the future.

God will of course be there, in the future.

But precisely because this is just a promise and not a fait accompli, there is a free space,

a gap,

a threshold,

that opens inside the very CORE of divinity.

This is the space of the possible.

It is this divine gap which renders all things possible which would otherwise be ***impossible*** to us, including the kingdom of justice and love.

But the gap also means that the promise remains a promise ONLY, unless and until we respond to it.

Making the impossible possible,
making the kingdom of God a present reality,
is not just something God does for us,
but something we can do for GOD.

IN short: if we say NO to the kingdom ourselves, the kingdom will not come.

In the Advent season, our main question seems to be: what do you want for Christmas? We ask people to make lists, to let us know what they want, so that we can fulfill their wishes, and feel good about the giving and the receiving.

It's nice, but it may not be the real reason for Advent and Christmas.

In Advent, we go about preparing our hearts and our minds to BE the dwelling place for God.

We enter the season of hope and expectation, not hoping and expecting that we will be given everything we want,
but rather, hoping and expecting that we can give everything we can TO GOD.

We look for the gaps.
We look for the crevasse, the abyss, the place where someone or something is just about ready to collapse or fall apart,
and when we find the gap, we fill it as best we can
with whatever we can,
because it is in the gap between the possible and the impossible, that we find the coming kingdom of God.
We find, in the gap, that *we can be the light* for others.
We become what we seek.
We shine the light we are hoping to find for ourselves.
I think this is the true vocation of every human being.

When I was 18, I lived for a year in Brazil.
I was homesick for the first month or so, wondering why I had travelled so far, culture-shocked, tongue-tied with a language I was struggling to learn.
Looking back now, I can honestly say that I think I was depressed.

If you know anything about depression, you know that there is a numbness not unlike that which you experience when a loved one dies.
Your world becomes narrow, you lose your appetite, and sleeplessness leaves you desperate and forlorn.
It's like living inside the shadow of you.
Like crossing that threshold in the forest, but finding it not a healing place, but a scary place, from which you can't escape alone. You lose track of the way back.

To use Kearney's rubric, it is as if a huge gap widens before you, the life you have and the life you thought you had. It feels impossible to bridge the gap.

When you are in that place, you need someone to lead you out of it.
Jesus did this, for us, we Christians like to say.
God saw the gap, and filled it with Jesus, the light that guides us home.
But we do it for each other.

One day in Brazil, I opened a letter from my Mom, who though she didn't know all the details of what I was going through, yet must have somehow known. For in the letter was a page that she had ripped out of a very precious Bible. It was psalm 27.

The Lord is my light and my salvation: whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life, of whom shall I be afraid?

Those two lines of scripture filled the gap for me.
It was as if a beacon of hope and light and love came shining through into my own heart.
It was if God used my mother in order to save me from my own inner demons.
It was such a clear message of hope to me, that I have never forgotten it.
I remember it like it was yesterday.

And in re-remembering it, I can imagine the future,
a future with God in it,
shining light for you and for me,
to guide us home.

That the Christ was born into the gap between humanity and God is a matter of faith.
We are pretty good at celebrating the birth of Christ, what with all the trappings we have
wrapped around ourselves in,
but if you think about it,
we are for the most part celebrating Christmas *as a past event*.
History.

But Advent opens up the gap again for us.
It opens our minds and hearts to the possibility that the kingdom is not just a past event.
It is a present reality, made possible by our remembering it.
And it is coming again, if we continue to tell the story.
There is still hope and possibility that we will dwell in the kind of kingdom that Isaiah
imagined, that God's love will continue to transform and change our world.
Our Advent lights draw us forward to the promise that is possible.

How would it change the way we think of Christmas, if we were to see it as light for
tomorrow,
rather than a celebration of a one-time deal?

Part Two: Calling all Angels

Based on Joseph's dream in Matthew 1: 18 - 25

Recently I shared with you some of my story of burnout and depression.
This is part two.

Last year I had a burnout/depressive episode.
It took me months to climb out of the pit of despair into which I had fallen.
It took many angels to help me make the climb.
My wife, my kids, and my doctor, my therapist: all were angels to me.
It took some courage to climb out of the pit, and more yet to stop being afraid that I might
fall back in. Of course as soon as I was up out of the pit, I wanted to go back right back
to work. My doctor said no: she said I needed to take time to get used to being out of the
darkness and into the light, before I could resume normal activities.

And the journey of healing and health progressed.

About a month ago I had a dream. Now, here's the thing. I NEVER dream. I am not conscious of dreaming, and when I wake, I can never tell whether I have had one or not. But for some reason, I had a dream. A message, like the one Joseph received.

In the dream I was walking toward a calm ocean. The waves were gently coming in; it was peaceful and serene. Not even any seagulls. The sun was starting to set and it was one of those spectacular Lake Huron sunsets.

But in my peripheral vision, I saw the pit.

I saw the darkness again. I saw the edge. And, because of the journey through it all before, I was very afraid. If there's one thing I have steeled myself to believe in my daily life now, it's this: I am never going to fall back into that pit!!!

I tried not to put too much stock in that dream, went on with my work, and didn't tell anyone about it. As I'm sure it was with Joseph, some dreams are best kept quiet.

So a week or so later, I was sitting in my office, hunched over the computer, when a knock came on the door. It was one of your former ministers. She told me she was passing by on McRae, and thought she should come in. She sat down in a chair and proceeded to tell me about a book she was reading on *dream interpretation*. The hair on the back of my neck stood straight up!

She went on: she said that she was reading about "pits", and how so many people who have suffered depression dream about pits, about falling in them, and being lost in them. By this time, I was almost shaking with disbelief.

Then she said the most beautiful thing: She said: I am here to tell you not to be afraid of the pit. She and I had read the same book by Thomas Moore, ([The Re-Enchantment of Everyday Life](#)) in which he talks about sacred wells, sacred caves, sacred holes in the ground. I immediately thought of the Hopi Kivas in northern Arizona, where spiritual energy flows freely, like water from an underground spring.

I had been to the Kivas in the Hopi reserves, I had felt the raw spiritual energy, and I recognized my pit as having the same shape and form as the kiva I had seen.

In a flash of insight: I learned that the despair I had known was transformed into a well of spiritual energy. I could draw from this dark place. I could be refreshed and renewed, and all it took was, to not be afraid of it.

I think angels have the belief that God has the power to change things.

Walter Wink asks bluntly: who are the angels?
Who are the ones stepping on the stage of our human history
and speaking these words of God?,
Who are the ones who are willing to speak directly to powers of domination, guilt, fear
and anxiety?

Angels are ones who speak from the darkness, and point us to the light.

They are messengers, direction-givers, holy crossing guards if you will.
They help us navigate our hopes and fears, and help us to transform our despair into joy,
our sadness into acceptance, our pain into a reality that helps us face truth we would not
often wish to face.

William Blake, as a young boy, wandered in the hills and dales of the land surrounding
his home.

He was a perceptive boy, a receptive spirit, and he came upon a tree that was shimmering
in the new light of the dawn, the leaves glistening with dew, the rays of sunlight shining
through the tree, through the leaves, through his heart, as though they were beams of
love. The sight filled his senses with beauty and love.

He ran to tell his parents that he had seen a ***“tree filled with angels”***.

His father was about to punish him for telling lies, for making up stories.

His mother rescued him, for she was able to see the artist within her son.

Perhaps she was the real angel in his life.

Angels teach us to look with love upon those whom we love.

I have told some of you about a woman that I met from Rwanda a few years ago.

Antoinette was a nun, a sister of charity, part of a group that ran a home for orphans in
her native country.

Antoinette’s whole village was ransacked and burned during the time of the slaughter of
the Tutsi people in 1994.

The women were first raped, then killed.

The men had their heads cut off, sometimes they were tortured first.

Antoinette thought she was safe behind the walls of her convent.

On the day she learned this was a false hope, a convoy of three military jeeps pulled up to
their door.

In the jeep was General Romeo Dallaire.

He convinced the sisters they must leave the convent or be killed.

Those who left were saved; those who stayed, died.

In this grim time, many people were angels to Antoinette and her small group of sisters,
not the least of whom was Dallaire.

They arranged for them to be transported to Montreal, where they lived for three years. They were taken in by other Catholic orders, and many have carried on their work in this country.

Antoinette bears the pain of her suffering, the suffering of her whole people.

Like Mary in the gospels, she represents the burdensome pain and sorrow of the hurt, abused, oppressed of her time.

It is evident in her body, the way she carries herself.

She is slow to speak, and slow to smile.

She holds back most of what she wants to say, because she is afraid sometimes to vocalize her feelings.

The genocide of 1994 terrorized a whole people, but took from them not only their pride, but also their whole sense of being, of feelings, of safety, and security. It took from them their voice.

If an angel like Gabriel had appeared to Antoinette when she first came to Canada, and gave her the message to not be afraid

Antoinette would not have understood him. The words would have been unintelligible to her.

When I look at ***Joseph and Mary*** in our gospel story, I realize that none of the rest of the story would have happened, if Joseph had not heard in a dream that he should stop being afraid.

Normally, we would not associate fear with Joseph.

In the patriarchal system of the day, he would have the right to defend his honour as a man, and the fact that Mary came to him and told him she was pregnant, was more than enough reason for him to have her put away. She brought shame upon the family, and in that context, deep shame upon Joseph.

Not unlike the young girl in the news recently, Aqsa Parves, who reportedly brought shame upon the men in her family because of her refusal to wear the hijab.

It's not something I agree with, but it helps us understand the fear that Joseph had.

He could have had Mary killed, literally stoned to death.

He could have divorced her on the spot, and she would then lead a life with absolutely no privileges or any expectations. If you have read [A Thousand Splendid Suns](#) this year, you'll know what that life might have been like for Mary.

And, thinking about Joseph again, there would be the fear of going forward *WITH* Mary, standing up for her, explaining her actions to his own family, bearing the shame and bitterness, and perhaps the shunning, which very much could have been expected.

So, even if we knew only this much of the story, we can truly understand what is at stake for this young couple.

Who on God's good earth would want to wish this kind of darkness and shame on two young folk with such a bright future?

In my younger days, I did not put much stock in the stories about dreams and angels.

I didn't think they were authentic.

I thought they were probably fabrications.

I thought: how would Matthew, writing this gospel 50 or 60 years after the facts, even KNOW that Joseph had had a dream, let alone know the contents of it???

But now I'm a little older and I hope a little wiser.

I think I'm a bit more like William Blake's mother than like his father.

I want to protect the artistic dignity of the vision.

I want to think: what if angels really do appear, really do address us, really do believe in God, so that we will believe in God too?

I never would have thought of them as essential parts of the story.

Yet now I see that the story would make little sense without them.

***How would Joseph decide to opt for "the impossible possibility" before him?
if not for the voice of God which he heard spoken somewhere in his heart.***

I said earlier that angels help us to look with love upon those we love.

Perhaps Joseph looked with love upon the one he loved.

And then he knew what he had to do.

Do you think we are all called to be angels?

Do you think we're all given a message to convey?

Do you think that right here right now we are all angels in training????

Do you think that somehow, when we really hear God speaking to us, that we will be so transformed, so changed inside, that we will believe in God enough to go on with our lives?

Do you think that somehow, this is why we need Christmas? To light the fire of the angel's voice that lies dormant within each of us, so that we might bear hope and love, even in the midst of this world in which we live?

I mean, life is full of pain, suffering, and difficulty.

Cancer news.

Domestic violence.

Car accidents.

Random shootings.

War on the news every night, small victories.

It's dark, this world we live in.

It's hard to see clearly when the world is so dark.

However, the possibility exists that it's not a pit.

Maybe our world is instead a well of loving energy, emanating from some hole in the galaxy somewhere, energy born from the love of a creator who refused and refuses to give up on us.

Antoinette

For 11 years since the genocide, her pain and trauma had been repressed.
She could not trust.
She did not believe that there was goodness in people's hearts.
Consequently, she could not celebrate, she could not feel joy,
and in her culture, this meant she could not dance.

In our group, each person was to put together a project that represented their learning.
Each of us went in turn.
Something truly remarkable happened when it was Antoinette's turn.
The traditional drumbeat of the African music began and we waited expectantly for her to enter the room.
When she did, it was as if she had been transformed.
She danced.
You might say that she found some hidden strength within her.
You might say that she had simply unlocked her pain and let it out.
She danced and twirled and smiled.
She danced for her people, and for herself.
It was one of the most beautiful sights I have ever witnessed.
Joy and life radiated from her soul.
Joy and life shone forth from what was once dark, sad, and lost.
I must say that my own heart was transformed by the light and hope that Antoinette danced into being that day. I don't think I will ever be the same again.

What we always forget, is that we cannot re-birth ourselves.

We cannot make ourselves new.
We need others to show us the way.
Angels perhaps, whom we entertain, unaware.

Don't be afraid, the angel said to Joseph. Don't be afraid Antoinette.
Don't be afraid you, and you and you.....

God does not visit us in conventional ways.
God calls us and calls us and calls us and calls us.
And sometimes, when we open ourselves up just a little bit,
we hear the message.

May it be so for you this Christmas.
May you hear the voice of the angels calling specifically to you.
Don't be afraid.
God is waiting to show us the way forward.