

“AND THE ANGELS CAME TO MINISTER TO HIM”

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First Sunday of Lent (Year C)

Texts: Luke 4:1-13 (Matthew 4)

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“Suddenly I became aware of it. A flick, a brush. So swift and subtle, I catch my breath and bring the swing to a full stop, hoping to feel it again. Yes, there it is again, like the touch of an angel’s wing or feather passing in the breeze. For months now, I have known. All the tests came back positive. The predictable physiological symptoms followed suite; the cessation of bleeding, fatigue, nausea, tenderness, weight loss then gain. But, somehow, it still did not feel real. More like a lingering illness than an impending birth.

But here, on this wooden porch swing on a summer’s azure afternoon, I experienced it and I do know. The momentary quickening—an angel’s touch—from an aliveness at the root of my being speaks the volumes all the other assurances can not.” (Wendy Wright, *“Passing Angels: The Art of Spiritual Discernment,”* in *Weavings*, Dec/Jan of 1995, p. 7)

There is one detail that Luke leaves out of his account of the image of Jesus and his temptation in the wilderness: the ministering angels—the angel’s touch.

And it may be the most important of all; we return to that theme in a moment.

Wendy Wright, a profound spiritual writer, notes the connection between two stories which caught the imagination of the medieval tradition of Christianity: The Annunciation of Mary—and the Temptations of Jesus.

Both stories challenge and confront with the them of faith and trust; Mary

enacts the drama of the human soul welcoming God.

Jesus, in the wilderness, presents us with the drama of discernment.

Both are about centering ourselves in the crucible of life, to be “spiritual,” which in the ancient traditions means literally “under God’s spirit.”

The term spiritual today has a very different meaning—the distinction between formal institution observance and personal meaning.

Jesus taught, the scriptures affirm and the traditions of the church teach that such is an utterly false distinction.

Jesus did not go into that desert alone; he had “ministering angels” of both tradition and community.

Let us return to that point in a minute as well.

From earliest times, Christians have claimed that the spiritual life is about paying attention to the Spirit moving in and among us and distinguishing that Spirit from the vast array of other “spirits” vying for our attention.

These other spirits have been characterized as having a variety of origins: They may be spirits of “the world,” (the normative culture), spirits of the “flesh,” (addictive demands of the body and the self absorbed life), and the “evil one/devil” (active forces working to destroy and enslave rather than give life and freedom).

However the spirits are conceived, the Spirit of God is one touch, one inner brushing among many and much of the Christian life consists of discerning which is which.

The spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness for 40 days; the stories of scripture are not just about Jesus; they are about us; they are about the church.

If Mary teaches about the ways of welcoming Jesus, how does Jesus teach us about the ways of discernment?

We now return to that theme of “the angel’s touch.”

We can not fathom the power of Jesus in the Wilderness with the spirit of the evil one and what the allure of this spirit is—unless return to the event directly preceding.

Jesus is baptized; the Spirit descends, and the voice declares, “This is my beloved Son.”

Then the Spirit leads him out into the desert. For what?

It is significant sent him forth having heard he was a child, and he was beloved.

A child, in health, accepts dependence on love; knows he or she is loved.

It was this deep-rooted knowledge of this belovedness that made the desert discernment possible. It was his identity as cherished child that enabled the carpenter from Nazareth to define himself as one other than....

What?

Role playing? Cheap second? Not authentic? Not truthful?

Jesus was not just given the spirits of power, pride and possession. He was given something far more alluring---the traditional images of Messiah.

He was given the image of Moses—who feed thousands in the wilderness. So would Jesus.

He was given the image of Elijah—who performed spectacular miracles; So would Jesus.

He was given the image of David—who forged a new Kingdom. So would Jesus.

However, Moses would not endure utter catastrophic defeat in this life. Elijah would not be betrayed by his closest friends. David would not die almost alone, scorned, rejected.

These roles were not the way of Jesus. To live them would live a lie.

That is the great alternative spirit of Satan—the true destroying angel—to

shake us from our “foundational identity.”

To what extent do we know ourselves, not as beloved, but as playing the role?

To what extent do we “know” ourselves first as civic and church leaders, or as respectable citizens, or as job holders, and not as beloved daughters and sons of God?

Somehow, Jesus never ceased to know the “angel’s touch. He was, above all, beloved.

We might ask, “how?”

How do we know the “angels’ touch” as powerfully as a pregnant woman, perhaps like Mary, welcome’s the reality of pregnancy and new birth?

Let me suggest, beyond all the spiritual disciples we might enter into this Lent, that we become aware of two streams of soul-force.

The first is always turning a question around into what Wendy Wright terms the principal “plumb line:” Where does love lie? Where do I get real and truthful in my belovedness? How can I honestly say that something is “not me.” That something is of the voice that says, “Do this because you are worthless without it and need it as a prop?”

When Henri Nouwen first came to the L’Arche community in Toronto, having given up a prestigious academic career to minister among mentally handicapped people, he describes how he came to feel that Jesus’ first temptation, Bread, was all about “the temptation to be ‘relevant.’

He writes, “The first thing that struck me when I came to live in a house with mentally handicapped people was that their liking or disliking me had absolutely nothing to do with any of the many useful things I had done until then.”

“Since nobody could read my books, they could not impress anyone, and since most of them never went to school,

my twenty years of Notre Dame, Yale, and Harvard did not provide a significant introduction. My considerable ecumenical experience proved less valuable. When I offered some meat to one of the assistants during dinner, one of the handicapped men said to me, "Don't give him meat, he does not eat meat; he's Presbyterian."

"This experience was, and, in many ways is, the most important experience of my new life because it forced me to discover my true identity. These broken, wounded, and completely unpretentious people forced me to let go of my relevant self—the self that can DO things—and forced me to reclaim that unadorned self in which I am completely vulnerable, open to receive and give love regardless of accomplishment. Such is the only real way of life."

Do you want to be truly powerful in the lives of others? Offer you own, true, naked self." (Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus*, pp. 15-16)

Wendy Wright comments, "Where does love lie, and for whom and when and how? The hundreds of half answers to the questions emerge only in the groping, only in the process of feeling texture, assessing weight, listening for overtones, feeling the quickening, and surrendering to love."

In my own experience as Christian and as ordained Christian leads over many decades, the second stream of soul-force is relationship and community.

Yes, the touch of the angels can come in a personal way. But, in my experience, they happen most fully in the crucible of Christian community and among Christian friends.

Jesus was with the angels in the desert. What form did they take? How did they minister?

Angels are primarily messengers; they protect yes; but they grant us total free will. They enfold us with truth, with the message that, above all, we are loved by God.

We have to face the truth that the organized church often fails here. Of course it does because it is fallible and human and torn asunder by sin.

But, we often are inattentive to the transforming power of God to make it more of the spirit. We often accept the false dichotomy between personal and institution as the church accepted, too blindly, the reformation's turning the bible against the church when the bible was always the church's book.

There is only one reason we gather each week; to know the Angel's touch that we are beloved of God, which provides the only true power for life.

Every bit of experience and teaching we have as Christians will remind us that we can not discern the spirits apart from our life in community and relationship. We need each other.

In this vein, Henri Nouwen also writes, "I took a guy, Bill Van Buren with me, when I went to Washington DC a few weeks ago. After I finished my prepared text at the podium in a lovely Ballroom at a DC hotel, Bill said to me, "Can I say something now?" My first reaction was, "Oh how am I going to handle this? He might start rambling and create an embarrassing situation."

"But then I caught myself in my presumption and my own self-importance. I told the audience, "Will you please sit down. Bill has something he would like to say to you."

"Bill took the microphone and said simply, "Last time, Henri went to Boston, he took John Smeltzer with him. This time he wanted to take me to Washington and I always wanted to come to Washington first anyway because it is our Capital and the best

city in the world. I am glad I am here. Thank you very much."

"I did not worry about mingling with Bill among the crowd—he was getting to know everyone just as much as I."

"As we flew back to Toronto, Bill looked up from the word-puzzle book that he takes with him wherever he goes and said, "Henri, did you like our trip?" "Oh yes, " I answered, "it was a wonderful trip and I am so glad you came with me"

"Bill looked at me attentively and then said, "We did it together didn't we."

"Then I realized the full truth of Jesus' words, "Where two or three meet in my name, I am among them."

"I prayed right there that Jesus who had send us out together would be with us all and really become present to those who had gathered at the Clarendon Hotel in Crystal City, Virginia." (Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus*, pp. 80-81)

"The touch of the Angels."

Jesus knew the Angels; heard their message that he was loved.

So can we; and so can we live in that truth.

Amen.