

Lent 3, Matins
Genesis 28:10-19a, John 1: 35-end
Mother Emma

“This is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”

In our Old Testament reading today, we were reminded of the story of Jacob, fleeing from the anger of the brother whose birthright he has stolen, and forced to sleep in the open air on his journey to safety. He dreams of a ladder reaching right up to Heaven on which he sees angels ascending and descending, and he himself is given a message – a promise that he will inherit the land of Israel and that all the families of the earth will be blessed through his offspring.

God also tells him, “Know that I am with you wherever you go.”

Jacob may only have been reminded of God’s presence and his promises by his vision of the angelic messengers who pass constantly and unseen between earth and heaven, but the strong message he received was that God was always with him.

The word, “angel” of course means simply “messenger” in the original Greek of the Bible, and the appearance of angels generally illustrates the prayers and messages of humankind being conveyed to God, and his messages, guidance and assurances returning to us, if only we are open to them.

Jacob awakes from his dream, still presumably in the lonely and inhospitable landscape in which he made camp, but declares, “This is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”

Today we are commissioning, praying for, and offering training for those who serve in this church as welcomers or sidespeople at the doors to the church. A modern theologian and pastoral liturgist, Richard Giles, has written about this particular ministry, amongst others, in a book called, “At Heaven’s Gate”.

“The house of God” in the sense that Jacob intends it, can of course represent any place in which one has a strong awareness of God’s presence, but as a community we hope and pray that this sacred space will indeed be experienced by those who enter it as a “House of God.” This would make the entrances, the welcome received at the door and the first impressions made into a foreshadowing of the gate of heaven, and we are grateful to all those who contribute to this ministry. But even as we consider that the message we offer as a parish could be the message of God’s presence in the church, we should also be aware of angel messengers who come with a message or revelation for us.

Reflecting on this image reminded me of the instruction in the Letter to the Hebrews: “Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.”

Every person entering the church will bring, through their own character, experiences and faith journey, a new revelation to us of the love of Christ, reflected in the faces of others. Just the angels on Jacob’s ladder move both upwards and downwards, so the gate of this house of God should be warmly welcoming and at the same open to all and to the gifts they bring.

The implication of both of our readings is that messengers from God are all around us, if we only open our eyes and ears to them.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus assures Nathanael, “Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. This is so close to the wording used in the story of Jacob’s ladder that we can only assume Jesus had it in his mind as he spoke.

If we understand the image of angels ascending and descending from Heaven to represent the movement of our prayers and supplications to Heaven, and of God's messages of encouragement and challenge back to us, it does not seem too far-fetched to suggest that for Jesus, God's own son, the open gateway of communication between earth and Heaven, was a constant feature.

For the rest of us, God is always sending his angel messengers to us, with messages of guidance, wisdom, love and hope, but we so often fail to see or hear them, and we also often forget to send our own messages and prayers heavenwards.

If you have already looked up the final hymn, you may think that we have made a mistake, as it appears to be a Christmas carol. Yet, although "It Came upon the Midnight Clear" is generally used at a time when we particularly remember the angels "bending near the earth" to bring the message of peace on earth, goodwill to men, it never actually mentions the birth of Christ, but is concerned with the thought that the angels are always with us and exhorting us with this message, but that we so often fail to hear them. "Yet with the woes of sin and strife, the world has suffered long. Beneath the angel-strain have rolled two thousand years of wrong. And man, at war with man, hears not, the love-song which they bring. O hush the noise, ye men of strife, and hear the angels sing!" Since these words were written by Edmund Sears in the nineteenth century, at a time when Europe was beset by war and revolution and as fears of the American Civil War approached, we have seen two World Wars, and the worldly noise level has risen beyond even his wildest imaginings.

We are caught up in fear, overwhelming compassion and a sense of impotence as we see war in Europe once again, as well as the somewhat eclipsed wars continuing across the globe in Yemen, Syria, Sudan and elsewhere.

The message to hush the noise and to listen for the message of the angels, sent by God, is perhaps more relevant now than ever. If we could, just for a moment, be still before God, and become aware of the silent but unending stream of communication and love moving between Earth and Heaven, we would remember that God does indeed hear our prayers and pours down upon us his love and protection, guiding us in the ways of peace.

Then like Jacob waking from his dream, we might exclaim, "Surely the Lord is in this place – and I knew it not!"

Amen