

Angels of Glory, Overshadowing the Mercy Seat

Hebrews 9:1-5; John 20:1-18

It sometimes happens to God's people that, even with the best of intentions and despite our best efforts, we wind up off the rails with God. Some sin or confusion arises in our hearts and, before we know it, we're in the wrong and turning in circles and the damage starts to pile up and often there is no way, humanly speaking, to pull it all back together and make it tidy enough so that it looks like anything but damage.

And if you lived in Old Testament Israel and you ever took a path that left you far from God and surrounded by damage, they actually had a holiday for you. It was called "Yom Kippur" or in English, "The Day of Atonement". Now Yom Kippur happened near the Jewish New Year, no coincidence there, and the holiday involved all God's people gathering in the candlelight in the temple as close as they could get to the Ark of the Covenant.

But only one man, the High Priest, and him only on that one day a year, was allowed to brush past that one last curtain and see with his own eyes the Ark, that beautiful golden box filled with all those wonders from the days of Moses, wonders that also looked forward toward to that day when Christ would come.

So inside the Ark was an urn filled with manna which pointed toward Jesus as the True Bread who would sustain us through the twists and turns of life. There was Aaron's walking stick which had blossomed to life and pointed toward Jesus as the True Vine, who would connect us to and teach us the love of his Father. And there were the Tablets of the Covenant, God's Word carved in stone, which would point toward Jesus as the "Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing". We just sang it and we sing it every Christmas.

So the High Priest, and him alone once a year, would get to draw near to all those wonders and the memories and promises they expressed. But the point of his mission that day, on Yom Kippur, was to pour the blood of a sacrifice into a small basin carved onto the top of the Ark that was called the "*mercy seat*" and as he poured the blood onto the mercy seat there flickered over him in the candlelight the shadow of two huge angels carved into gold. Each of them was molded onto the ends of the ark and they were bowed in toward each other so that they gazed down on the blood the priest poured into the basin.

And we are prone to miss the point of angels being there because we tend to think of angels as some sort of heavenly decoration, big, oversized, heavenly humming birds who flutter around singing sweetly while God does things and we mortals react to to God's plan. But give angels more than a moment's thought and it becomes plain that the angels are living, thinking, feeling, spiritual creatures who are as actively involved in the unfolding of God's kingdom as we are in our prayers and our worship and our struggles here on earth.

It was Meredith Kline who first taught me to see the angels as members of the heavenly royal court. So when God proposes in Genesis, *“Let us make man in our image, after our likeness!”*, this is not the Father, Son and Holy Spirit having a private conversation at a worksite. This is heaven’s King, the great Suzerain, standing in the center of the royal angelic council announcing to the angel’s amazement that man, who looked to be a modest little creature in a garden on an out-of-the-way planet, but men and women were about to be invested by God with the same powers of thought and affection and principle and sacrifice and purpose that had only belonged to God and to the angels till that moment.

So someone new was coming into the heavenly mix. Us! The point being that God wants to share the unfolding of his kingdom with creatures, angels and humans, who get to learn his character and participate in his goodness and wisdom and power by playing a part in the unfolding of his plan. So it follows that when angels like Gabriel and Michael appeared to people at critical points in human history, it was to express to us humans that God and heaven were in play right there and then in us.

So the point of having the statues of two angels mounted on either side of the Ark was to express to God’s people back in the day God’s intense interest and commitment to forgiving peoples’ sins and healing the confusion and upset and wreckage that sin causes. So the message the angel statues over the mercy seat expressed was that all heaven waited with baited breath for that day when a Sacrifice would be provided to put people like you and me, people God loves, back in his good graces again.

This is why in Luke 15, when Jesus tells the parables of the Lost Coin and the Lost Sheep and the Prodigal Son, each happy ending is celebrated by angels in heaven rejoicing that human sinners, people like you and me, were back in the fold, back in a place where God could teach and guide and care for us and in the process heal the mayhem and clear the wreckage that so often piles up when sin gets the better of us.

So, on Yom Kippur, the High Priest, like Jesus, really looking forward to Jesus, would burst out the curtain and emerge from the Holy of holies to announce to God’s people that all is well. “The sacrifice has been made, the blood is on the mercy seat, and we are right with God again! Whatever was wrong in our hearts and lives is forgiven for another year!” he would say. Which brings us to that first Easter in John’s gospel, the third day after Jesus had been wrapped in linen cloths by a man named Joseph, this Joseph from Arimathea, and laid in a sort of box, not a manger, but a tomb right in the middle of a garden sanctuary.

I know I’ve mentioned to you in years past that Moses’ tabernacle and Solomon’s temple both were laid out in a garden motif, as if to say to God’s people that the worship you offer here, the Sacrifice promised for you here will one day result in your return to the Garden, whole and forgiven and belonging to God as if sin were never a thing and as if the wreckage and damage that so breaks our hearts here and now had never happened.

So at the resurrection, just as at Jesus' birth, a Joseph helped a Mary wrap Christ's body with linen and laid him in a box, and, just like at Jesus' birth, a Mary kept vigil, this Mary named Magdalene. And just like at Jesus' birth, the angels were in play! So Mary, in her frantic search to find where Jesus was, bent over and looked into the tomb and she ended up seeing a sight not unlike what all the old high priests saw on Yom Kippur. Two angels at either end of the burial slab looking down at the mercy seat where the Sacrifice had been laid.

But here, at Easter, Mary was too late! Heaven's new High Priest had already burst out the curtain, was already outside standing behind her. And the angels had already started to party, so the one question the angels and Jesus alike ask Mary is "*Why do you weep?*" What is there to be sad about? Because Mary, as is often the case with God's people, is not entirely in the loop here. She supposes Jesus is the Gardener, the man running the Garden.

And ironically, she's absolutely correct. Jesus is Lord in this Garden! So when Jesus calls her by name, then she knows that here is her Beloved, her Rabboni, the Teacher. Now I'm not trying to say that Jesus and Mary were in love. We know for a fact from Luke's gospel that Mary was only one in an entourage of women in the garden that day. But I believe John's gospel focuses in on Mary Magdalene alone because, for John, she is standing in for all God's people, who together as the Church will become what Eve was to the original gardener. God's people together are the Bride of Christ and the Mother of the Living.

So we in the Church are spiritually betrothed to Christ, spiritually beloved by him. And Jesus went on to announce to Mary a message not very different that what the old high priests used to say at Yom Kippur. "All is well! The sacrifice is made. Sin is forgiven. Wreckage is a thing of the past!" Or in the words of Jesus, "...*go to my brothers and say, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God!'*" In other words, here we are in the Garden and all at last is right with God!

Small wonder then that the angels gather and sing and party whenever they see Jesus, wrapped in cloths and laid in a box, anything that could pass for the mercy seat on the Ark of the Covenant. A manger in Luke's gospel, a tomb in John's gospel, it all says the same thing. Because the whole gesture of laying him in the box speaks of a Sacrifice on the mercy seat which in turn speaks of forgiveness and wholeness and healing and peace for every soul who might have drowned in wreckage and damage and sin. So the angels sang as Jesus was laid in the manger, "*Peace on earth and good will toward men with whom God is pleased!*"

And no one fits the bill better than Mary Magdalene. No one needed a Day of Atonement more than she. We read in chapter 8 of Luke's gospel that when Jesus found her, Mary Magdalene was oppressed, Luke tells us, by seven demons. Now we no longer describe peoples' sins and troubles in terms of demons and I don't want get into that except to say that, to the Jewish mind, one demon at work in your life meant you were in serious trouble. Seven demons at work in your life meant that you were a train wreck.

Mary might have been one of those bad, bad women, so desperate that she washed the feet of Jesus with her tears and her hair while everyone went “Tsk! Tsk!” The gospels don’t tell us who these women were and, really, it doesn’t matter. Because by the time we get to John’s resurrection account, wreckage and damage and trouble and sin is the farthest thing from anyone’s mind. At that moment, Mary Magdalene loves Christ and she is beloved of Christ which is the whole reason Jesus went to the cross in the first place.

What Mary saw that day, angels and linen and a new High Priest on our side of the curtain, was the fulfillment of what the day of Yom Kippur was all about . At last, in the resurrection of Christ, all is well. The sacrifice has been made. The sin and wreckage and damage that might have brought us down has all been done away with, if we will only believe the promises and live out the commands Jesus gave us. Christ’s Father is our Father, Christ’s God is our God and no one and nothing will ever separate us from his love. This is why angels sang over the Carpenter and the Virgin when they wrapped the Infant in cloths and laid him in the box. Because for fourteen centuries, since the days of Moses, they had hovered over the mercy seat, waiting for the Sacrifice, the Savior, who would finally and totally free us from all that nonsense that might have brought us down.

And now here he was in the box, on the mercy seat, ready, able and willing to make us right with God. If we understood it, we would sing more than we do, early and often, day in and day out. Don’t you think?