

A Letter to the Angel of Austin Heights
Revelation 1:4-11; Mark 1:21-28
The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, (Jan. 28) 2024
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This morning I'm asking you to use your imagination. Put your modern mind, that understands everything individualistically and materialistically, on hold and enter the realm of family systems theory and New Testament theology which thinks in terms of the spiritual and communal/relational. Here, I remind you, that the spiritual is less about the ethereal and otherworldly and more about learning to see this world multi-dimensionally. We can think in terms of three dimensions, but to think with the New Testament is to think about four or five dimensions, or even more.

This morning I invite you to think of this church, Austin Heights, multi-dimensionally. That this congregation is more than the aggregate of all of us as individuals. We modern American Protestants, tend to think as individuals and see the world around through individual eyes. But this morning thinking communally and even more, think spiritually.

Imagine with me that you make your first visit to some unfamiliar congregation. You walk in and find a seat, glance at the printed Order of Worship, watch some people come in, look around at the space, and take a deep breath. You don't know why, but for some intuitive reason this feels like home. It fits and it's good.

Now, go with me to another congregation. Likewise, it is unknown to you. Perhaps the people were pleasant enough and maybe the music was fine, and even

the sermon was okay, but for some indefinable reason you didn't feel engaged. It just didn't grab you and you know that this is not where you need to be.

And for the sake of our conversation and imagination let's say you attend a third previously unknown congregation. Maybe you're attending a funeral or even a wedding in another city, but it doesn't take you long to feel uncomfortable. There's an edge to the atmosphere, to the people. You notice or feel anger, fear, or even hostility. People are suspicious, maybe even suspicious of who you are. You know not only is this place not for me; you know you need to leave.

In each of these imagined congregations we felt a kind of invisible force, the personality of the congregation, the culture, or "spirit." This is what New Testament theologian Walter Wink calls the "angel" of a congregation. The angel represents the congregation in its totality, its wholeness. It is the spirit of a congregation, not something airy or ethereal that is separate or hovering over our heads, but the congregation is the spirit or angel incarnated.

You've heard me say over the years, that a biblical understanding of us as human beings is more than the sum total of our biological and chemical body parts. We are accustomed to calling it our soul. Well, think of the angel of the congregation as the soul of the congregation.

Our first reading this morning is from the first chapter to the Book of Revelation and is the introduction to John of Patmos' seven letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor in chapters 2 and 3: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

And what's interesting is that John writes his letters to the angel of each of those congregations. In contrast, the Apostle Paul writes his letters to the people of

each congregation. To the church in Rome he says, “To all God’s beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints” (1:7). Or “To the church of God that is in Corinth” (1:2). And “To the Saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus” (1:1).

John, on the other hand, writes: “To the angel of the church in Ephesus,” and “to the angel of the church in Smyrna,” and so on. These angels represent the spirituality of each congregation, the felt sense of the whole, the soul of the congregation. Some of the angels of these churches are mature and wise and faithful while others are immature and unfaithful. Like human beings, these angels are a mixture of fidelity and infidelity, of goodness and sin, of serving Christ and serving themselves. John is a minister of Christ writing them calling them back to whom God calls them to be, created them to be. John is telling them that the Living Christ walks among them congregations calling them back to the “better angels of their nature.”

In our lectionary reading from Mark 1, Jesus enters the congregation of the synagogue in Capernaum and is met by a man with an unclean spirit, or with the unclean angel of the congregation. Christ is immediately confronted by this unfaithful angel, the toxic spirit of a troubled man and a troubled congregation. Jesus rebukes the unfaithful or fallen angel and sets the man and the congregation free.

In the all-time classic movie, Frank Capra 1946 *It's a Wonderful Life*, starring Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed, among many others, early on there is the scene where the Jimmy Stewart character, George Bailey attempts to commit suicide on Christmas Eve by jumping from the bridge into the river. He is saved by another person who jumps in before him, forcing George to save him. Afterwards

they are both drying out and warming up by the big stove in the bridge's office building. The man George saved we discover is Clarence Oddbody AS-2. Though he is bumbling and forgetful we discover he is George's guardian angel. George is not impressed. He is depressed and angry that this Clarence Oddbody kept him from committing suicide and he is not impressed that this bumbling and scatterbrained old man is his so-called guardian angel. George says, "Well you look like the kind of angel I'd get; I'll give you that much. Sort of a... fallen angel. What happened to your wings?" And Clarence explains that he is AS-2, meaning "angel second-class" who does not yet have his wings.

So, here's my question: What kind of angel do you think Austin Heights would get? What does our angel look like? To use contemporary family systems language what does our system look like?

Every pastor with any sense has two tasks when they go to a congregation: (1) get to know the people of the congregation, and (2) get to know the system of the congregation, or what Wink would call getting to know the angel of the congregation.

And any pastor with any sense does a lot of listening toward these two tasks of getting to know the people and getting to know the system, the angel before bringing any big changes.

In fact, over the years and after watching lots of British detective television, I've learned that much of getting to know the angel is like being a detective looking for clues. Watching, listening, and paying attention: what's the architecture of the building like and why? Why is the sanctuary like it is and why is it arranged in such a way? What stories are told over and over? What are the past favorites and

highlights of victories and things we felt we did well? What crises do we talk about and why? Who are the heroes and who are the villains? What's our education, class, race, and predominant ethnicity? What's the power structure? How have we handled conflict? How does the congregation see itself? Does a congregation hang out and talk after a service or is everyone quick to head-out the door? These and many more are questions to ask and listen for the various answers, to listen and notice – all before the pastor seeks to change the system or call the angel back to who Christ wants it to be. And we pastors are listening to all this while also listening to you, the individual members of the congregation.

So, with all that in mind, I've decided to write a letter.

A letter to the Angel of Austin Heights:

After thirty-four years of being your pastor there are some observations I'd like to mention and some encouragements I'd like to make. And I'd like to make some challenges too.

What a terrific congregation! If I had to pick a color for the angel of Austin Heights, I'd pick blue. Blue keeps showing up as long as I've known you. You used to have blue turquoise Naugahyde chairs until naugas became extinct. The sign and logo of the church, the shepherd's staff, has always been blue.

Your primary blue color tells me you're calm and deeply thoughtful. But there is also some yellow coloring. The warm yellow of the sun rising giving us new ideas and imagination. When the yellow and blue overlap, there is the green of new life and vitality. The Austin Heights' angel always seems to be surrounded by green trees and shade and the green of environmental concerns. I don't think it

is an accident that we are surrounded by a green forest, with bright yellow sunlight shining down, and with a bluish clear water creek trickling around us.

The beauty of the place is a contrast to the very functional building. Plain and simple and to the point. The point being that we're here to get things done and that the Austin Heights' angel is practical. Practical and without deep pockets. And sometimes the angel of the congregation can be a little too proud that we don't spend much time or effort or money on such things as beauty.

At the same time, this notion can be misleading. There is beauty at Austin Heights but it comes through music more than anything else. From the beginning of the congregation in 1968 and the construction of the building in 1970, there has been a joy in singing. When the building was being completed, Dr. John Decker, chair of the SFA Physics Dept. with also with a master's degree in church music, made sure the acoustics in the room were maximized for congregational singing. Over the years you've sought to continue this emphasis, reminding each and every person in attendance that singing the hymns is both their responsibility and a gift from God that is to be practiced. It has nothing to do with how well you sing or if you feel like singing. Come Sunday morning you join with everyone and sing! Full-throated and with boldness, participating as the sounds of individuals blend together becoming one. This is church! This is joy! And it is beautiful!

I've always admired your willingness of trying to be faithful to Jesus Christ even if it meant swimming against the current of culture. In fact, as we've often mentioned over the years our vices are reflected in our virtues. For us, our willingness to swim against the current for Christ can, at times, become just another excuse to be oppositional.

Nevertheless, from the very beginning we've always sought to be Christ-like in including the excluded, crossing boundaries and building bridges, and being willing to ask hard questions. In the early days it had to do with including and crossing the boundaries of what was considered mental health care and crossing the barriers of racism. Since then you've included the care of persons with the HIV and AIDS virus, included those who are LGBTQ+, built Habitat houses, taught and led the city in recycling efforts, organized peace vigils and worship services for the community, ordained women when no one else did, and learned that the heart of the gospel of Christ is relational and communal, healing what is broken and making connections in a world that profits from and is proud of disconnection. We are created and redeemed to be in relationship – with God, with Creation, and with one another.

That's why Covid was so difficult. It struck at the heart of who we are and who we are called to be. It disconnected us. We discovered the hard way that our relationship with God, with Creation, and with one another is like a three-stranded rope. If one strand is broken or comes unraveled, the other two strands come unraveled too. The good news is that God heals and reconnects us, and renews our three-stranded relationship, though it takes time, and it takes effort at showing up and being there for one another.

These days it is all the more imperative that we show up. After Covid, it is easy to stay at home, wrap up in a weighted blanket, and binge watch our shows, while eating Cheetos – or some other version of us relapsing into our old addictions of isolation and individualism.

Instead, it's time to show up. A week or so ago there was a guest column in the New York Times written by Rabbi Sharon Brous called "Train Yourself to

Always Show Up” (Jan. 19, 2024). She talks about some of the teachings from the 2000-year-old Jewish Mishnah describing a pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem that happened several times a year. Thousands of pilgrims would walk counterclockwise around the Temple. At the same time, those who were brokenhearted, in grief, and those who were outcasts would walk clockwise.

As the pilgrims encountered someone walking against the current, the pilgrim looked the other person in the eye and asked, “Tell me what happened to you?” “Why is your heart broken?” or “Why are you outcast?” The person asked would tell them, and in response the pilgrim would say, “You are not alone.” “May the Holy One comfort you.”

Rabbi Brous writes that she learned two things from this: First, do not take your broken heart and go home. Don’t isolate. Step toward those whom you know will hold you tenderly.” She says that showing up for one another does not require heroic gestures. “Small, tender gestures remind us that we are not helpless, even in the face of grave human suffering. We maintain the ability, even in the dark of night, to find our way to one another. We need this, especially now.”

She said the second lesson is that in times of anxiety and trauma, we tend toward sticking to our own tribes and can become hostile to those considered outside of our tribe. Which is why it was so important that the ancient practice at the Temple included the outcasts. Each person was asked, “Tell me your story” and every person was reminded that no one is disposable. And each person received a blessing from the Holy One.

I bring this up because now more than ever we need to show up – show up to worship God and show up for one another and creation, to receive God’s blessing

and bless one another and bless and heal creation. To reconnect in a world that seems to be unraveling.

I bring this up also because I too am tired and need to readjust my habits. I'm 67 years old and beginning to feel the "old" part. I need to work on building stamina and recovering health, and other adjustments. This is why I'm going to half time with half pay beginning April 1. I'll still do most of the preaching and pastoral care, but you won't see me at as many meetings, especially out around town. I'll be working with Church Treasurer Bob Szafran and the Chair of the Finance Committee Barbara Cordell to work out the details of how I'll be paid, but it will not affect the total of the budget. In other words, it is imperative that you continue to give your ten percent tithes and offerings. Church staff member Judy Webb our education and formation person and deacons will be taking up some of the slack and some of you might be asked, as well.

I said earlier, from the very beginning we've always sought to be Christ-like in including the excluded, crossing boundaries and building bridges, and being willing to ask hard questions. This is why we're in the early stages of conversation about how we, as a congregation, can sponsor an immigrant family coming across the border. With climate change and political upheaval and xenophobia on the rise, it is all the more important that we open our arms to one another, especially those without a home and fleeing mistreatment and violence.

Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, February 14 and for those six weeks, every Wednesday night we'll gather together around tables here, bring and share soup and bread, reconnect, and do a study on the questions Jesus asked.

Dear Angel of Austin Heights. You just thought you were going to slack off. Now is the time to deepen your life in the Living God we know in Christ, broaden your reach, and heighten the vision of what we are called to do and be.

Your pastor, the Reverend Kyle Childress.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.