

I have grown to really like the short praise song Holy Ground, with its conviction that there are “angels all around!” I am very Trinitarian oriented, so praising just “God” can seem inadequate or limited, since God, the Great “I AM,” is ultimately a mystery beyond our words, beyond our comprehension. Also, praising just Jesus can be a bit mind-boggling, since Jesus was not only divine but also “fully human,” son of a carpenter in Nazareth, who “grew in wisdom and stature,” with his 3 year ministry of preaching and healing starting when he was about age 30. So a third aspect of God, the Holy Spirit, I think is most helpful! It includes people with differing views and spiritual experiences of God. To continue in this line of thinking, the mention of Angels I think can also be helpful; Angels might even be seen as a manifestation of the Holy Spirit.

We are at the beginning of Lent, the remembering of the 40 days that Jesus spent fasting and praying in the wilderness. He must have been very hungry, and must have welcomed the “angels” that could help him get his strength back. The Bible does not tell us exactly what form those angels took, and the gospel of Mark is particularly brief, so we have to use our imagination. While they could be ghostly apparitions that just appeared, I imagine that like some of the angels mentioned in the Hebrew Scriptures, the angels were actually human beings in the flesh, who were led by the spirit, and I imagine they brought actual food to Jesus, maybe some warm clothes, maybe brought him to a house for shelter.

Mark also does not tell us any details Jesus’ temptations, as do Mathew and Luke. Mark gives us a shorthand outline: Jesus was led by the Spirit to be out in the wilderness, was tempted or “tested” by Satan, was “with wild beasts,” and then angels ministered to him. That’s it. The Bible is full of symbolic images, so the “wild beasts” could be actual “lions and tigers and bears, oh

my"... but they also could be symbolic of evil in the world, dangers from outside a person. The "temptations of Satan" could represent dangers from within: Jesus may have had doubts and questions about his mission, fear of the Roman occupiers, and temptation to abandon the mission, or as we hear in Matthew and Luke, a key temptation is to be all-powerful. One great lesson of Jesus in the wilderness, may be that with any important mission or calling, there is probably a testing time... a testing of our will and dedication. (Helen Keller once said, Character cannot be developed in ease; only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened.")

Yes, there are plenty of wild beasts, plenty of evil "out there" in the world; we are living in a time of enormous violence. God famously said to Cain: "Sin is crouching at the door, its desire is contrary to you, and you must rule over it."(Gen.4:7) Cain did not rule over it, but killed his own brother. The temptation story in Luke says that when the devil had finished tempting, he left Jesus, *until an opportune time*. (Sin would be crouching even at Jesus' door, ready for a weak moment.)

Maybe it's a good thing that Mark does not give us a lot of details of Jesus' temptations to sin and evil; In Mark's version, we have to read between the lines and use our imaginations. We do well to know that we too will face "wild beasts" in this world. We cannot escape it. There will be the beasts of physical sickness. There will be beasts of antagonistic neighbors. And there surely is evil or sin coming from within; There are beasts of inner torment about bad decisions we have made... there are beasts of forces that tempt all of us to self-centeredness. We remember that the apostle Paul famously said "I do the things I do not want to do...it is sin living in me. (Rom7:17)

But we have to use our imaginations and open our eyes and ears also to the reality of angels that minister to us in the tough times of life. Since angel means “messenger,” angels can come to us not only in actions of comfort, but in words or images that give us a message. I think dreams are a kind of “proof” of messages from beyond. The “beyond” may be scientifically called our subconscious. Our Subconscious is not rational thinking, it surely can be influenced by a spirit from beyond.

Sometimes an angelic message can come to us from a good friend, a therapist, perhaps an inspiring reading. When the Bible speaks of dreams and visions, it is the reality that something is impressed upon our minds and hearts, even as simple as intuition, or a strong feeling that we are being called in a certain direction. Some feel messages from beyond... in nature, through animals, through plants, or through a rainbow as we hear from the story of Noah. A rainbow sends a message: the end of heavy rains, the beginning of sunlight coming back.

We do well to watch the patterns of nature, to look for lessons we can learn. The famous psychiatrist Carl Jung had a lifelong interest in “coincidences,” especially when they seem “more than just coincidence!” Jung used the term “synchronicity.” (A meaningful coincidence of events where something other than chance is involved). Some of us today might call them “God-incidences.” One of Jung's patients told him that shortly after the death of both her mother and her grandmother, a flock of birds appeared outside of her window. “Coincidentally,” or perhaps in God’s *synchronicity*, I had a similar experience! The very morning, early morning, after my father died, I looked out the window of our family home, and saw an enormous flock of birds in a very small maple tree. There must have been hundreds of them, that few up

into the sky when I looked at them. I DID take it as a sign, some sort of visitation from the world of spirit... maybe angels can visit us not only in human form, but through nature, even plants, pets, or birds!

Because sin and evil are are always lurking at the door, waiting for an opportune time, we need to be alert to goodness and angels that are also “all around.” We need to trust that the angels have the last word, that there are more angels around than demons, more peaceful visitations of animals than scary wild beasts. If we just read and listen to news, it seems that evil is more prevalent in this world, since what bleeds leads. Bad news travels fast! But we have good news, “news from another network” as one of my mentors once said. We know there are good news stories, many of them, that just never make front page or top of the hour headlines!

Howard Thurman, you may know was a black pastor and spiritual writer, died in 1981, who wrote spiritual inspirations. He wrote beautifully about angels, as follows: *There must be always remaining in every life, some place for the singing of the Angels. Some place for that which in itself is breathless and beautiful. Old burdens become lighter, deep and ancient wounds lose much of their old hurting. Despite all the crassness of life, all the hardness and harsh discords, life is saved by the singing of Angels.*

To listen for angels, whether in our dreams and visions, or in the voices of actual human beings can be the thing that “saves” us! It is having faith that goodness and mercy have the final say, and follow us all the days of our lives! It is not to give in to pessimism and despair, but to look for friends, even acquaintances, who offer a positive and caring presence. As with Jesus in his time of need, there are always some angels that will walk beside us and minister to us if we are open to receiving their care. Amen.