

Palisades Presbyterian Church
First Sunday of Lent – February 10, 2008

Waited on by Angels
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Yesterday, I had the chance to be with some folks who were preparing for the adult version of the Children's Shakespeare Theater called *Strange Bedfellows*. Cass was there, Mary Ann Garland, Roger Buck, and several others. At one point in the warm-up exercises, we were standing across from each other in two lines. Diana Green would ask a question, and if we responded in the affirmative to the question, we were to slowly cross over to the other side, spending a short time in the middle, seeing who else also agreed with the question.

"Do you believe in ghosts?" Diana asked. Several of the people moved into the middle and passed over to the other side. Some remained in their places. I crossed over.

Late last night, after finishing working in the office, I stepped into this darkened sanctuary, as I sometimes do before I leave. I sat in quietly in thought or meditation and after a few moments of centering, I knew that I was in a place that was alive with the presence of all creation – sitting in the dark, unable to see "anything," so to speak – I knew that all that was was right here. "Ghosts, too?" you might ask? No, but *ghosts*? Yes. Or something like that...I guess.

I have a limited vocabulary when it comes to describing or explaining what cannot seen or knows in "traditional ways." At best, I have a "sense" or some remnant of one that permits me, at times, to reach beyond the physical we know into the world of --- more than we know. Confusing? It is to me. It may be as Charles Dickens says, that "An idea, like a ghost, must be spoken to a little before it will explain itself." So let's talk a bit about and around such "non-things."

Some have suggested that over time we have lost our sensitivity to the spirit world that surrounds us. We have become distracted and disoriented by the material world: its challenges and offerings.

Most, who try it, attest to the power of regular quiet time away daily routines, affirming the refreshing, re-energizing effect of such practices from yoga to TM.

Do we go further to try to understand why? Are the positive effects of such practices indicative of a moment of unwittingly transcending our conscious-driven activities, slipping through a portal onto the edge of some other place where the

ontological – the nature of being – is expanded, changed, truly revitalized by the short-lived immersion into a more cosmic, expansive, unlimited “cloud”?

I know. You’re thinking: “He’s getting ready to leave us soon with a new minister soon to be found, and it’s probably a good thing because he’s starting to lose it! Hmmm. I wonder what’s back there to eat when we get to coffee hour.”

Well, you **know** there is good food back there, as always; and it is a good thing for me to gently remind everyone that my time here is nearly done; but losing it – maybe just a bit.

Actually, this wandering intrigue is reinforced by such readings as from this morning’s lectionary. In fact, it is throughout the Bible. From creation to revelation, the cosmic quality of thinking and practice and expectations are always about the unlimited authority of God, the unlimited power of God, the unlimited nature of God – and God’s participation in this world and our limited ability to perceive it – even in its most powerful presence – we catch but a glimpse; for as we are warned: to know God fully no human being could withstand. We would simply evaporate into God’s unbridled glory – perish, as we say. Or maybe reunited by ignition!

The Book of Daniel is a powerful example of this cosmic perception of God interacting with the physical world. Using the common literary structure of Hebrew poetry known as a chiasm in a doubled form: (an ABBA-ABBA construction); the book has two parts: a series of six narratives (chapters 1-6) and four apocalyptic visions – the last, more of a prophecy in chapters 7-12. There is debate about the time of its authorship – ranging from the time of Babylonian Captivity (6th C BCE) to the 2nd C BCE. You may recall some of the stories:

1. After being taken captive to Babylon, Daniel and friends choose to obey their god and not consume the non-kosher court diet. After a trial period they were judged 10 times better than all others.
2. [Nebuchadnezzar](#) dreams of an [idol made of four metals](#) and a mixture of iron and clay. The image is destroyed by a rock that then dominates the world. The idol's composition of metals is interpreted as a [series of successive empires ending with "God's kingdom."](#)
3. The story of the [fiery furnace](#), in which Ananias (Hananiah/Shadrach), Azariah (Abednego), and Mishael (Meshach) refuse to bow to the emperor's golden statue and are thrown into a furnace. Their god is credited for preserving them from the flames.
4. [Nebuchadnezzar](#) tells of his dream of a tall tree. His [pride](#) is described as causing him to lose his mind. When he, according to the text, accepts Daniel's god as his god he regains his sanity. The recurring image of a

tree representing a kingdom appears at least three times in scripture.

5. [Belshazzar's Feast](#), where [Belshazzar](#) insults Daniel's god and Daniel interprets [the writing on the wall](#) *mene mene tekel upharsin* to be: Mene: God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end. Tekel: You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting. Upharsin: Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.
6. Daniel in the lions' den.
7. [Susanna](#) and the elders (apocryphal to Jewish and Protestant canons)
8. [Bel and the Dragon](#) (apocryphal to Jewish and Protestant canons)

The function of these stories is pedagogical, that is to provide instruction. It is written by and for the chasidim – the Holy or Devout Ones – so they would know how to continue their holy lives.

The second half of The Book of Daniel has as its basic function the foretelling of the future.

1. [The vision in the first year](#) of [Belshazzar](#) the king of [Babylon](#) (7:1) concerning four great beasts (7:3) representing four future kings (7:17) or kingdoms (7:23), the fourth of which devours the whole earth, treading it down and crushing it (7:23); this fourth kingdom is represented by a beast with ten horns representing ten kings, an empire, the last person described arises out of the fourth kingdom and subdues three of the ten kings (7:24), speaks against the Most High and the saints of the Most High, and intends to change the times and the law (7:25); after a time and times and half a time (three and a half years), this person is judged and his dominion is taken away (7:26); then, the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven are given to the people of the saints of the Most High (7:27)
2. [The vision in the third year](#) of Belshazzar concerning a [ram](#) and a male [goat](#) (8:1-27) which, we are informed, represent Medo-Persia and Greece. The vision focuses on a wicked king who arises to challenge the "army of the Lord" by removing the daily temple sacrifice and desecrating the sanctuary for a period of "twenty three hundred evening/mornings".
3. The vision in first year of [Darius](#) the son of [Ahasuerus](#) (9:1) concerning [seventy weeks](#), or seventy "sevens," apportioned for the [history of the Israelites](#) and of [Jerusalem](#) (9:24) This consists of a meditation on the prediction in Jeremiah that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years, ***a lengthy prayer by Daniel in which he pleads for God to restore Jerusalem and it's temple***, and an angelic explanation which

focuses on a longer time period - "seventy sevens" - and a future destruction of city and temple by a coming ruler.

4. A lengthy vision (10:1 - 12:13) in the third year of [Cyrus](#) king of [Persia](#), regarding conflicts between the "King of the North" and the "King of the South" (= Egypt, 11:8). Starting with references to Persia and Greece it, again, culminates in the description of an arrogant king who desecrates the temple, sets up a "desolating abomination", removes the daily sacrifice, and persecutes those who remain true to the "holy covenant". n in the first year of Beshazzar, the king of Babylon

This morning's reading is the prelude to the third vision, when Daniel is about to converse with God's messenger, the Archangel Gabriel, regarding the future of the world.

The Book of Daniel is about eschatology – the “end time” as a great divide, a radical point of disjunction between this world and the fundamentally altered world of the new age. The scope, as biblical commentators describe it, is cosmic – with themes of the creation myths, divine struggles against evil, world catastrophe, a new Eden, and a new Adam – all these appear in the apocalyptic vision of the new age: the new age that lies beyond history as a recapitulation of the Eden that was before it.

This is cosmic, mysterious, and unfathomable theology, if you will.

It is about the physical world and its part in the larger spiritual world and an attempt by the “participant” to get it right so that when the divide comes they will be judged well.

Judgment in the face of an unknown, mysterious, foreign, imposing, promising God.

No wonder folks then, intensely involved, turned to meaning and guidance from visions and dreams, prophets, signs – and the “supernatural”: such, as angels: sephaim, cherubim, thrones, archangels – messengers that appear throughout the Old Testament and in the New Testament.

If we say something like, “Oh, yes, I was touched by an angel,” people raised eyebrows or look askance. Yet, throughout these times of the Bible, this was common-speak and occurrences, from what we can tell. Nothing askance about it.

Think of the mystical, cosmic, spiritual, ghostly description of just the last few months of readings: angels announcing the birth of John and Jesus, wise men being sent by an angel to the manger, the announcement of the heavenly voice at the baptism of Jesus, the transfiguration of Jesus, and this week the

Temptations of Jesus, most likely describing a vision of the evangelists and writers of Q, that have Jesus being attended to by angels following his test. The healings, miracles, and resurrection.

If these things, these events were happening now – or being claimed to know – how do you think people, in general, would respond? It might just be why people talk less about angels and their experiences with angels.

Was it just that these events and interactions were more the norm during the pre-scientific age? Was it that there was a greater belief in, a liminality or closeness to these occurrences and those are *present* beyond our reach?

Or was none of it true.

Sometimes, as we go about the “unpacking” of the texts, reflecting upon how texts have been altered and rewritten, how the poetic description of things written during different ages have much different meanings today – sometimes, I worry about leaving an impression that none of the Bible or its events are true or accurate.

Well, it's really the opposite for me. Everything that is written is true in that it describe peoples' experiences with their faith and their God and what they were willing to do based upon their beliefs. Did the temple wall rent at the moment Jesus expired on the cross – well, if I was there my temple would certainly have been torn in two. That's the truth in the poetry.

Was it a simpler time? I don't really know. As I said, I think it was a more intense time. In their lives, the balance of the cosmos was in play – not because of nuclear power, global warming, errant asteroids, .or tectonic plate shifts – but because they believed their behavior and practices directly impacted their relationship with God and that the events of their world were all connected to God in God's expressive ways.

And were they, those ancients, visited by angels, instructed by dreams and visions, prophets and prophecies -- protected and comforted by God's spirit as God sent it through God's messengers –

Yes. Somehow, yes. Like an archaic language that has passed on from lack of use but lingers in the roots of words we use today with their original meanings long ago forgotten – yes. Angels linger about...

In fact, I believe, there is a presence here as much as when the Book of Daniel was written.

Yes, there is a comfort and healing presence here, just like the one that surrounded Jesus following his many temptations.

Yes, there is still a new age that is coming – and everything is in play: from nature, to cosmos, to the universe – for it all is of and by God.

We compartmentalize our world into chapters: politics, economics, religion, science, arts, spirituality, and we place the pieces neatly in a row, too often turning inward to our own sense of power and control. Believing that we can solve any problem, work out any challenge, and fend off any threat – through our intellect, determination, and intensity –

And we sometimes miss the angels, the messages that God has placed all about us – in each other, in our world - affirming our beliefs and our being loved by God in the face of all the self-driven importance and control that this world so dearly seeks.

Mike Hucklebbe commented recently, when asked of his chances, “I didn’t major in math. I majored in miracles, and I still believe in them.”

Well, I still believe, too. I believe in more than I see. I believe that the loved ones who have left us are *in love* – in God, and within God’s presence all around us – they, too, surround us – in “real” ways.

I believe we are called to the new age, to see God in new ways and to come to understand what that means. To challenge all that is unloving, unjust, un-God.

I believe that this is what the Bible reminds us of and calls us to – time and again.

And so, yes, I do believe in ghosts, holy ghosts: angels, messengers, and all.

And you?

Amen.