

I Kings 19:4-8, John 6:35

word count: 2,327

Part of the old Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church still stands overlooking West Berlin. Badly damaged in an air-raid in 1943, only its spire still rises up. It is broken, disfigured, and known to Berliners as “the jagged tooth,” and a reminder of a war that tore our world apart. I would be remiss if I did not mention that it was sixty four years ago this week that very real weapons of mass destruction were unleashed on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

A new church was built around the bombed ruin, and the “jagged tooth” was re-dedicated in 1987. This is the year that Wim Wenders filmed his masterpiece, *Wings of Desire*.

One of the last movies made in Berlin before the wall fell, it is a film about two angels, Damiel and Cassiel. You may know the American remake, *City of Angels*. The angels see the world in black and white—they do not know color, feeling, taste, sensation...though they want to. They spend their days, as do the other angels we see in the film, trying to bring some relief and reassurance into the lives of the people they encounter. In the background, you hear the inner thoughts of those people. They move through public spaces, homes, streets, even the rooftop where the angel Cassiel is unable to stop a suicide from happening. They listen and hear the thoughts of people and place their unseen hands on them. Those touched by angels may be only slightly aware that a spiritual presence has come upon them.

I have a short clip from the film today—it begins with the fragment of the old Kaiser Wilhelm Church, where the angel Damiel in a black overcoat stands looking down at the humanity below and hears their thoughts. Only children notice him.

Moments later, he is standing near the old storyteller, Homer, a man near the end of his life who spends time in overgrown fields looking for where his beloved Potsdamer Platz once stood, and he laments, “No one has ever been able to sing an epic of peace.” An instant later, Damiel steps onto a moving train, hearing the thoughts of the people sitting on their way to somewhere, and he is the invisible hands of an angel to a man in despair.

**Cue video: Chapter 2 (2:32—about a minute, to the waving of a wing 3:30).
Jump to Chapter 7 (22:26 to end of subway scene at 23:58).**

At the end of each day, Damiel and Cassiel meet to trade notes on what they saw and heard while observing the pain of the people they randomly watch over, and the angel Damiel is finally determined to become human. He says:

“At each step, at each gust of wind, I’d like to say, ‘Now!’... I’d like to say, ‘now...’ and then ‘now...’ instead of ‘since always’ and ‘forever.’” He says, “I want to shout ‘Hey,’ or ‘oh’ or ‘ah’ instead of ‘yes and amen.’”

They spend their days in black and white, attending to the despair in the human heart.

In today’s scripture reading from *I Kings*, we hear about the prophet Elijah, in a situation where we see that even prophets can want to lie down and give up on life.

Elijah was one of the first of the great prophets; a prophet to the nation of the Northern Israel, to the people who would later become known as the ten lost tribes.

Like most of us, Elijah is on a journey. He travels into a journey of the Spirit. It has led him into terrible confrontations, even one where the powerful Queen Jezebel wishes him dead, and so he flees from the city and into the wilderness where he comes to a solitary broom tree in the midst of this wilderness, and sits under it and asks God that he might die.

I cannot believe that most people have not at some time in their lives, felt real despair like that of Elijah, a hollowness of the spirit accompanied by a heaviness of the body that pulls us down in depression. We might suffer the fear of being the odd person out, the one who was left behind, the person who has done what was right only to find that all who have stood with him or her have vanished away. A time when every hand seems set against you. A moment of feeling that perhaps, just perhaps, you are no better and perhaps even worse than those who have gone before you; no better even than those who stand against you.

The journey through life takes us through some very dangerous country; our pilgrimage can lead us into some very desolate wilderness. And so Elijah prays that he might die:

“It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.”

And then he lies down under the broom tree and falls asleep, a sleep that I know that each one of you here today understands; the sleep of exhaustion, the sleep of stress so high or depression so low, and the energy to go on fighting at such an ebb that it sweeps over you and is too soon gone.

In that sleeping something happens—some answer to his prayer. Suddenly an angel is there and touches him, wakens him to life, and tells him to “get up and eat.” And there is food—a piece of bread and a jar of water are set near.

He eats and he lies down again, till some time later suddenly an angel returns, touches him once more, and says: “Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.”

He rises, he eats and drinks, and goes on. There is bread for the journey once again from seen or unseen hands—the passage does not say whether or not Elijah sees the angel, or if perhaps the angel was in fact human.

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Jesus set out to overturn the tables that were set for a domination system that enriched the few at the expense of the many. In the face of imperial powers, he talked about his kingdom, implying that it superseded Rome. In the face of religious authority, he spoke of “the Son of God,” implying that God might be outside of the religious systems of the day. He touched the untouchable. He ate and drank with people of poor reputation, conversed with women, and care has been taken in the gospels to record that he cared for children.

As a healer who walked among these people, as well as those who were cast aside because of their disease and poverty, no greater advocate for affordable health care can be pointed to than Jesus Christ.

It was the late, great Walter Cronkite who said, “America's health care system is neither healthy, caring, nor a system.” In the decades since, efforts to reform it have been repeatedly thwarted by systems with no alternative plan, but the word, “No.”

Union Seminary preaching professor Barbara Lundblad, says, “Jesus came to the temple to overturn every barrier that separates us from the Divine. Jesus knelt down to wash his followers’ feet and overturned categories of master and servant, pure and impure forever” ...Where, in the all-inclusive love that we must share, there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free. There is neither male nor female, neither gay nor straight, neither black nor white; where there is no-one who can in love be excluded by anything that goes by the name of a modern purity system, be it a religious, social, political or economic system.

This is the only way in which there will ever be hope. This is the way Jesus asks us to follow, and the Gospel of John records him saying, “I am the bread of life.” A way for the journey.

Who is left to distribute that bread today? You are the ones to give hope to the hopeless, to stand seen or unseen at the shoulder of the person who, like Elijah, cannot go on without you

particular touch, the strength that only you can bring to lift someone close by to you up, or even to work to change the political and religious domination systems of today, as they struggle hard to maintain a broken status-quo.

It is not something two-dimensional, nor filmed in black and white, but in the full color of life that we stand as the bread-bearers, thirst-quenchers and givers of hope that we are. Imperfect, human, full of faults and sometimes people who contribute to the ongoing pain of the world instead of being the agents of healing we can be in those moments when we believe in our ability to care, and have that care mean something.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel put it this way, “A religious person is someone who holds God and humanity in one thought at one time, at all times, who suffers harm done to others, whose greatest passion is compassion, whose greatest strength is love and defiance of despair.”

The angel Daniel looks down from a haunting ruined church tower, a symbol of despair in the failure of humanity to understand what it means to live their faith as agents of change and angels of hope.

In “Man’s Search for Meaning,” Viktor Frankl wrote: “Ever more people today have the means to live, but no meaning to live for.” And, “Since Auschwitz we know what man is capable of. And since Hiroshima we know what is at stake.”

There are angels all around. Kingdom of God bringers, praise singers, planet healers, peace dealers—domination system breakers, health-care plan makers, smashers of barriers and hope carriers. Angels who live as humans (as Daniel wanted more than anything from his existence) all around us this morning. Are you one of those kinds of angels? Do you know of one?

Viktor Frankl also said, “Only to the extent that someone is living out this self transcendence of human existence is he truly human or does he become his true self. He becomes so, not by concerning himself with his self’s actualization, but by forgetting himself and giving himself, overlooking himself and focusing outward.”

Carved in wood or stone, perched on a ruined church tower, or most probably, fully human in living color, able to feel and sense and taste to the degree that it is sometimes overwhelming to live in such a world of vibrancy; angels appear in the guise of simple people merely wanting to change their world so that all, and not some, can fully participate.

In order to feel fully human and not to forget what a short, sense and spirit-filled journey being human is, the image of the angel standing atop a ruined church stays with me. The angel Daniel is determined to become human. He says:

“At each step, at each gust of wind, I’d like to say, ‘Now!’... I’d like to say, ‘now...’ and then ‘now...’ instead of ‘since always’ and ‘forever.’” He says, “I want to shout ‘Hey,’ or ‘oh’ or ‘ah’ instead of ‘yes and amen.’”

The venerable old church parent Irenaeus, once said, “The glory of God is a human being fully alive.” Completely animated—wanting to participate, wanting to serve and be served in the banquet of life, and wanting to make sure that a place is set for everyone. Not just at the table, but at well-funded schools where education is respected as the only door to our future, in decent housing, meaningful, paying work that erases the phrase, “working poor,” and affordable healthcare for all. Are you one of the angels come to earth to stand at the shoulders of the prophets who boldly declare these things necessary for a true vision of the Kingdom of God? Will you be one of the prophets yourself?

At one such banquet, Jesus broke bread and gave it to his disciples, asking them to remember him and what he represented—Bread of Life—the stuff of peace, love, hope, joy and justice. Ordinary stuff. But the ordinary is powerful, it is magical; it is immaculate and glorious and wondrous, for those who have the eyes to see—those who seek a greater connection to their sense of the Spirit, and are willing to get up and eat and drink what has been provided.

We are provided with bread for the journey. Suddenly an angel is at your shoulder (real or otherwise) whose presence you feel, who says, “take and eat that you may be strong in the Spirit and so reach the place that you are being called to, still able to say of life, “Now’, and then ‘now again’—to shout ‘Hey,’ or ‘oh’ or ‘ah.’ Fully human—fully alive, with everything needed to go on standing at great heights with life all around us—your life—still wanting to reach, to give—to feel a reassuring brush of wings, and to receive. AMEN.

Scripture Readings for Sunday, August 9, 2009

1 Kings 19:4-8

4 But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: “It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.” **5** Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep.

Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, “Get up and eat.” **6** He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. **7**

The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said, “Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.” **8** He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.

John 6:35

35 Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.