

“The Angels & Demons”

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As I was putting together the sermon list for the June newsletter last month, Ron Howard’s movie *Angels and Demons* had just opened across the country. It is based on a book by Dan Brown who wrote it three years prior to his phenomenally successful *Da Vinci Code*, and is a sort of pre-quel to that movie. I loved the book, which is a kind of murder mystery, and without much thought decided to make a sermon out of it.

Then, last week while I tried to write the thing, I realized that some people might begin to believe that I am possessed by non-human life forms. Back in the winter I offered several sermons about these supernatural beings, like “The Savior” (actually about our expectations for our new president), and then “The Savior and the Devil” (actually about our willingness to blame our bad behavior on Satan).

And now there are *Angels and Demons* flying wildly around in my sermonic brain. I am beginning to wonder about all this mayhem. Am I possessed? Do I hear “voices” from some other realm? This could be very dangerous.

Aside from the movie, voices from the beyond are currently in the news. The killers this week at the Holocaust museum and the Lutheran church in Kansas both heard voices from beyond and from Fox news and radio talk shows urging them on.

You got to be very careful about what and who you’re listening to, when you get ready to do some big thing.

So this sermon is *not* about the movie, which I haven’t even seen yet, but which I plan to see sometime. It is about the messages we all receive from beyond ourselves—messages which inform us in some way and lay the foundation for how we do what we do.

In this sense, today’s sermon has the same themes so often presented from this pulpit: *How and why do we do the things we do in our lives? How are we to live in the world and why do we live in the world? What is the connection between what we think and what we do? More relevantly, what is the relationship between what we believe and the things we do based on those beliefs?*

And finally, how is this complex relationship affected when we are within the realm of the Community of Faith? Or as Mariah Carey asks, “What’s love got to do with it?”

So we’re talking about *listening* now. Listening is an art, you know, and there are many ways to go about it—some better than others and some quite destructive.

How do we listen—really listen? And what do we expect to hear? Quantum physics informs us that when we seek to investigate the behavior of subatomic particles, our very presence alters the activity. So then when we seek to discover inner wisdom, do our expectations overpower the message? And, are we actually only hearing what we *want* to hear?

As in science, this desire for knowledge and wisdom is actually a mystical experience, not entirely unlike attempting to communicate with supernatural forces or, let’s say, beings as in angels or demons.

Throughout history and up until the Enlightenment (odd word, really—what does it mean to be *lightened*, for God’s sake”), humanity has believed that all human situations are the result of supernatural forces. Thunder and lightning was the evidence of the displeasure of the gods. Sickness and even death were caused by demonic forces working furiously against the welfare of humans. And of course, wars were initiated and carried forth because one god or another told the people to go out and conquer the land.

That was up until the Enlightenment, as I just said. But I’m afraid that great movement did not actually stop humans from listening to voices beyond. The Enlightenment was supposedly the historically documented time when humans began to listen to the voice of *reason*—human reason—and began to move away from the voices of the gods and devils.

But looking back on it, I think we simply changed the names of the voices, for we still live in a world where nations and cultures and individual people place credence in mystical voices from beyond. We still

are plagued with jihadists and fascists and ranting bloggers and bloviators advising us to kill the enemies of our way of life, the “others” who we think are destroying our society.

If we can make this personal, what and how and why do we receive the great messages which inform our own lives? As liberal religious people, how are we getting through the maniacal swarm of messages? How do we sort them all out? What is real and what is misleading and what is dangerous?

Last week, as some of you know, I had the fortunate pleasure of going on a cruise through the inner passage up to Alaska. I had never been on a cruise ship before, and I have to say I was very impressed.

When cruised up to Skagway and stopped also in Juneau and Ketchikan and went into the Endicott Arm, a real fjord, right up to the glacier there. Talk about a mystical experience!

Along the way we were given information over the PA system about where we were and where we were going. Very interesting. At one point we passed “Bear Beach” where the local animals often stroll. The voice over the loudspeaker informed us that at Bear Beach we were to be silent so as not to disturb the animal residents.

And in the silence, we were advised to listen.

Listen!

Listening in out of vogue nowadays, but I am not so sure that nature itself does not have something to say. We just don’t listen very well.

In her book *Teaching a Stone to Talk (!)*, Annie Dillard reported that when flocks of wild geese migrate high over a barnyard, the “roosters and even the dim, fatted chickens fling themselves a foot or so into the air and flap for the south. The fowl are hearing voices, faraway voices.”

She also points out that Eskimo sled dogs feed all summer on famished salmon flung to them from creeks. “I have often wondered if those dogs feel a wistful downhill drift in the fall, or an upstream yank, an urge to leap ladders, in the spring.”

(My own little Whipper, a dachshund who is a hound dog, often barks at certain videos of dogs on the TV. I wonder if he is dreaming of ancient days when his breed traveled the countryside in packs and how he misses the wonder of it all.)

Annie Dillard gazes at Ellery Channing, her goldfish, and she wonders if he can feel “a glassy vibration, a ripple out of the north that urges him to swim for deeper, warmer waters. To what hail do you hark, Ellery?—what sunny bottom under chill water, what Chinese emperor’s petaled pond?”

She writes, “I too hear the voices and I am not sure from whence they come. I hear a resonant musical note which comes to me to make harmony. I hear drums which, in some wild, pre-birth ritual long ago, taught me to measure the minutes in my life. These voices call me to return, somehow—to go back to some original state, a place of true rest, true joy. My mouth longs for the taste of some exotic, sensual fruit, located God knows where—maybe in the tropics or under the sea or just down the street in the woods by the road.”

The Native rituals I am now hearing and seeing make the voices more vibrant, working to make themselves heard. There is something sacred, yet not necessarily associated with the institution of the church, especially the historical Christian church. I remember the call in the trances of the ecstatic worship I experienced as a Pentecostal Christian. And I remember the same voices at the men’s gathering in California, and especially in the sweat lodge.

And I remember the voices from beyond in the fjord called Endicott Arm.

So what about the angels and the demons? Are they still around commanding us to do this thing or not to do that thing? Lincoln advised us to actively seek the voices of what he called “our better angels” in the midst of the terror of the Civil War. I fervently wish that they could find ourselves listening to those good voices today, even as we face the terror of a world of chaotic violence often caused by people listening to the evil ones.

Remember the old New Yorker cartoon series which depicted a man trying to decide something or other, while an angel hovered on one side above him and a devil on the other—each urging him to do things their way?

Each of us responds to all of this in our own ways. And here is the Good News: we are all extremely fortunate that we have a place like *this congregation* to consider these things. Of course, there are no conclusions here, just very good questions and a community of faithful folks who will hold each other's hands while we do the asking.

Whoever you are and to whatever voices from beyond you listen, you are welcome here.
Amen.