

Sermon

St. Michael and All Angels/Truth and Reconciliation Sunday

Sunday, September 28th, 2025

Church of the Ascension, Ottawa

The Reverend Victoria Scott

Readings: GENESIS 28:10-17; PSALM 103:19-22; REVELATION 12:7-12; JOHN
1:47-51

My Granny Hemings died when I was just a baby. We have some lovely pictures of her holding me, and my Dad assures me that she absolutely adored me. I'm sorry not to have had her in my life, but in a way, she has been. When I was in the second year of my undergraduate degree I shared a house with 4 other young women. As you might imagine, the atmosphere was often fraught with drama and upset. One night, I went to bed in tears, feeling desperate to restore some sort of equilibrium in myself and in the household. I was woken a short time later by the clamour of voices as the upset continued downstairs, and a shimmery figure appeared at the end of my bed. It was a young woman, smiling at me with amazing warmth and encouragement. I said "Hello?". She just nodded, but I felt a feeling of both peace and wonder surrounding me. Some weeks later, I came across an old box of photos at my parents house, and I found a very old one - I'd never seen it before - and to my amazement it was this same woman who had appeared to me! When I asked my parents, they said "Well, that's Granny Hemings when she was young." Is it possible that Granny Hemings was able to visit me as an angelic presence? I'm willing to entertain that possibility. I'm deeply curious about the possibility of a realm of angels - a place of mystery - right alongside us in this earthly realm.

Today we're celebrating the feast of St. Michael and All Angels, and we're anticipating National Truth and Reconciliation Day, which falls on September 30th. Our readings offer us an opportunity to entertain the possibility of angels and demons. We have an opportunity to consider other dimensions of spirituality - a mystical, mysterious dimension. We're asked to be curious today.

I've said before that recommendations, calls to action, reports, and laws aren't going to change our world. As we strive for truth and reconciliation in Canada, It's

our perspective that has to change. It is our relationships. Curiosity is part of that change...

I've just read the book "Your Brain on Art: How the Arts Transform Us", by Susan Magsamen and Ivy Ross (and I'm grateful to Anne for loaning it to me). These authors share research on how curiosity - and curiosity's cousin, wonder - are essential for human flourishing. An experience that is beyond curiosity and wonder is awe. Studies have shown that when we experience awe the "...default mode network regions of the cortex of [our] brain[s] downregulate. [We] stop analyzing...[and] something extraordinary happens. Neurotransmitter floodgates open, and [our] synapses are bathed in a state of sanctity." We experience what can be described as 'transcendence'.

Is this what Jacob experienced in our reading from Genesis? We hear that he dreamed of the angels of God ascending and descending. We heard about God's promises to Jacob. Jacob wakes and exclaims "Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it!" He is afraid, and says "How awesome is this place!"

What if this is an invitation to us to consider awe in our own lives? What if it's an invitation to be open to the possibility of angels, of a deeper spiritual dimension with us, right alongside us in our everyday lives? Bruce Epperly, one of my favourite theologians, writes that reality "is much more amazing and multi-dimensional than we can imagine." (**ANGELS, MYSTERIES, AND MIRACLES, page 5.**) Think of the poet Mary Oliver and her instructions for living a life: "Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it." Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it. God called Jacob to this, and he is calling all of us to it!

And what happened to Nathanael under the fig tree in our Gospel passage for today? Nathanael wonders how Jesus has got to know him. He is curious! Jesus says that he saw him under the fig tree before Philip called him. Nathanael experienced something in that moment that makes him exclaim "Rabbi, you are the Son of God!" Was this awe? Jesus tells Nathanael that he will see greater things than these, angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. Is this an invitation to Nathanael to open himself to a deeper spiritual dimension? Is it an invitation to us to do the same? I wonder...

Our reading from Revelation definitely takes us to a deeper spiritual dimension. One with angels and demons. One overflowing with mystery and mysticism. What does this feel like for you? Does this make you curious? Fearful? Does it make you wonder?

Something else that this book “Your Brain on Art” talks about is risk. A 2018 study demonstrated that those who experience awe have a higher tolerance for uncertainty, and for risk. The study looked at brain activity of those attending a *Cirque de Soleil* performance. As followers of Jesus, we’re certainly free to experience awe at performances such as this, but our faith alone is full of awe and wonder! Awe at the beauty of God’s creation. Awe at the immensity of God’s love for us, and of God’s relentless pursuit of relationship with us in and through Jesus. Awe at the Resurrection. Awe at the Spirit, active in us and in our world. Awe at sign and symbol and ritual in our liturgy. What does this mean for us? It means that we are held by God in our uncertainty, and we are free to be risk takers in the name of Jesus. We are upheld and surrounded by God and by God’s angels as we take risks in the name of love. We are free to be endlessly curious, knowing that God is with us in all of it.

What if the first settlers had been more curious when encountering the First Peoples of this country? We can certainly lament that this wasn’t the case. My heart aches at the damage that was done, at the lack of curiosity, at the “us vs. them” attitudes and actions. I said earlier that recommendations and calls to action and laws won’t change our world. Are we curious enough about the calls to action? Are we curious enough about how we could live into new relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in this country? Ascension has purchased a Survivor’s Flag. Unfortunately it wasn’t delivered in time for this morning, but we’ll be hanging it on our railing out front. We’ll include information about it in upcoming newsletters, too. I encourage you to see this as a symbol of our commitment to truth and reconciliation, but I invite you to add curiosity to the mix. Be curious, and be willing to step into uncertainty, and to take risks as we move forward on the journey to reconciliation in this country.

I’ve said to you before that one of my favourite understandings of why we come to church - why we share in liturgy and worship - is to experience a “concentrating of the Spirit”. There is no doubt that God is as present out in creation as inside our

church buildings, but when we sing and pray together, we experience the Spirit with a particular intensity. I'd add to this, that we come to experience awe and wonder. We do this through scripture and sacrament. We do this simply by being in this blessed space, its walls saturated with those who have sung and prayed and worshiped together in this place. This morning, may we also experience curiosity. May we feel upheld by God, and surrounded by God's angels, and may this free us to wonder, to be curious. May we take that curiosity out into the world, and may we take risks as we join in God's mission of love, in Jesus name. Amen.