

Story and Meditation: Angels, Please

January 17, 2021

1 Samuel 3:1-20

John 1:43-51

by *Eric Anderson*

One of the challenges of being a honu is that you can never be sure whether you've met your father or mother. When you hatch from an egg laid in a hole hidden on a beach during the night, a hole dug and hidden by your mother about two months before, a hole dug in a beach alongside other holes dug by other turtle mothers, well...

It's hard to know who your mother is. For that matter, if you're a honu mother or father, it's hard to know who your children are.

One young honu could have used a father or mother in his life. He had convinced himself that he wanted to fly. I have no idea how this idea got into his head or what dangers he risked to consider it. A small honu watching birds fly around is a small honu that may well be watching seagulls looking for a honu-shaped snack.

Regardless of the risks, he would watch gulls and 'ake 'ake and noio and lots of other birds as they wheeled and swooped around the sky. He envied the apparent lightness of their bodies and the grace of their turns. He wished he could soar or hover or go from level flight to a sudden dive. He wanted to fly.

An older honu found him watching a hunting koa'e kea one day. "Be careful," she said. "You're probably too big for that bird to eat, but he might not find that out until it's too late for you."

He didn't say anything, and she looked at him curiously. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"I'm... just watching."

"Why?"

"I'd like to fly. But I don't have wings."

The two watched the koa'e kea turn in another direction and fly away. Then the older honu said to the younger, "Follow me."

Honu may not know their parents or their children, but nearly every older turtle you meet could be your father or your mother or your daughter or your son, so honu have lots of parents and lots of children.

The two turtles sank beneath the waves down to the groves of seagrass.

“Watch this,” said the honu “mother,” and with subtle movements of her flippers she did rolls and turns just as graceful as those of the birds far overhead. The young honu marveled. He had never considered how his own flippers resembled the wings of birds. The two of them swam – no, the two of them soared – among the rocks and grasses of the sea bed. Overhead the sun rippled through the surface of the water.

They returned to the surface for a breath.

“You see?” said the older one.

“I see,” said the younger one. “I do have wings to fly – just underneath a different sky.”

Jesus promised Nathanael that he would see angels.

“Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree?” Jesus asked his new once-suspicious but now very impressed friend. “You will see greater things than these. Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

As miracles go, it wasn't terribly impressive, don't you think? It's not clear from the story itself whether Jesus had simply seen Nathanael and perhaps overheard his skeptical comment about people from Nazareth, or whether that fig tree was at some distance and required some extraordinary means for him to know something of it. I'm not entirely confident which of the two of them – Nathanael or Jesus – was underneath a fig tree.

Jesus did quickly turn this introduction into a Scriptural reference, something at which Jesus was very good. “An Israelite in whom there is no deceit,” refers to the third of the great ancestors of the Jewish people, Jacob, who tricked his brother and his father and his step-father and pretty much anybody else who came along. Jacob received the name “Israel,” “the one who strives with God.” Jacob had a dream about angels ascending and descending a ladder or a stairway or a ramp (the translation of that word isn't entirely clear).

Whatever else might have impressed Nathanael, I would guess that being associated with greatness from Scripture felt pretty special.

As for me: I'm ready for some angels.

At least I think I am.

Reading these words this week, I went straight to apocalyptic, since these feel so much like apocalyptic times. Here we are in a pandemic which is now infecting around 240,000 new people a day in the United States and taking the lives of over 3,000. Around the world, we

recorded the two millionth death from COVID-19 yesterday. Meanwhile, in the nation's capital, 20,000 soldiers have gathered to suppress a credible threat of violence against a new President as he takes the oath of office. The current President, who has been impeached for inciting violence against Congress, continues to lie about a stolen election and will not attend the inauguration of his successor.

Apparently he is not a person in whom there is no deceit.

One joke that's been making the rounds is that Mexico has now offered to pay for a wall along its border with the United States – and Canada wants one, too.

Come on, angels.

I got less enthusiastic about angels when I discovered who Augustine of Hippo thought they were. In his lengthy commentary on the Gospel of John, the fifth century bishop wrote, "But what saw he then on the ladder? Ascending and descending angels. So it is the Church, brethren: the angels of God are good preachers, preaching Christ; this is the meaning of, 'they ascend and descend upon the Son of man.'"

Oh. "The angels of God are good preachers, preaching Christ." In other words, I'm supposed to be one of the angels. *That* wasn't what I was looking for. I'm looking for angels to take me away from all this, not to be named as a messenger in the midst of all this.

Augustine, to be sure, had a rather elevated notion of the place of preachers in the world. Associating us with heavenly beings is definitely over the top (like overhead, like angels on a ladder, get it?). The word is right, though. The Greek word John used here, *angelos*, was used both for everyday messengers as well as for angelic spirits. "You will see messengers, Nathanael," is a lot less impressive but it cannot be denied that Jesus told Nathanael the exact truth about seeing that. He might have mentioned that Nathanael would be one of those messengers.

Discipleship, indeed, consists essentially of becoming a messenger of Jesus, by Jesus, and for Jesus, who so often referred to himself as "the Son of Man." That's true of the every Sunday preacher and it's also true of the every day of the week preachers, which is all of us. It's not necessarily complicated, even if it can look like flying through the air on a honu's flippers. As David Lose writes at davidlose.net, "Come and see. Such easy, warm, and hospitable words. The heart not only of John's Gospel but Christian evangelism, as we are called not to cram our faith down another's throat or question their eternal destiny or threaten them with hellfire, but instead simply to offer an invitation to come and see what God is still doing in and through Jesus and the community of disciples who have chosen to follow him."

Discipleship, messenger-ship, angel-ship, also changed Nathanael. Karoline Lewis writes at *Working Preacher*, "We tend to expect that Epiphany is about the revelation of Jesus. About

finding Jesus, witnessing Jesus in various epiphanic moments. It's not supposed to be about being found ourselves.

“But John’s Gospel invites us to imagine that these can be one and the same. That is, finding Jesus in those revelatory moments, those unexpected moments, or even in those transfigural (I made that word up) moments, is also when you find yourself — who you are, who you are called to be. When you realize your identity as a follower, a disciple, and get a glimpse, perhaps a new glimpse — and here is the epiphany — of something you have not seen before when it comes to your own faith story, your own discipleship, your own concept of what it means to believe.”

Like... being an angel. A messenger. Someone who tells someone else the truth. Someone who tells someone the truth about how much God loves them. Someone who tells someone the truth about themselves.

Nathanael, incidentally, translates as “Gift of God.”

Angels, please. Can we be angels, please? Can we understand ourselves as those who share the great truth? Can we understand ourselves as those who do not deceive? Can we understand ourselves as those who know they are a gift of God? Can we understand ourselves as those who tell others that they are a gift of God?

As we enter an anxious week, filled with uncertainty about potential violence, filled with depressing and depressingly accurate predictions about illness and death, filled with possible clarity surrounded by cloud, can we be messengers and gifts of God and truth-tellers and truth-sharers?

Can we be angels?

Amen.