Sermon, September 29, 2024
Feast of St. Michael and All Angels
"Graced and Gifted"
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Wilton, Maine

Welcome to Michealmas Day!!! Great you say – what am I supposed to do? Well in olden times it was a traditional time to bring in the autumn harvest, batten down the hatches for winter and of course have a feast. Foods at the feast you might want to try today: roast dragon, taken of course from our second lesson and St. Michael's victory over the dragon but I was at Hannaford the other day and didn't notice any, but you could also have roast carrots or something with blackberries since both of those were supposed to have been picked by this time. Food not getting you excited? Well there's the after-mealtime activities, traditionally archery and jousting. Now the Church Insurance Company, already upset with us for filing a claim to clean our moldy first floor, has specifically sent us a letter forbidding us to do archery (don't want a lot of old people with bad aim shooting arrows) or jousting (get on a horse in the parking lot and ride around with the processional cross) so what can we do? Maybe we should focus more on the centerpiece of our feast day – angels.

Angels are pretty popular today. A recent PBS Newshour poll showed that 70% of Americans believe in angels and if you can get 70% of Americans to agree on anything, that's pretty good. The chaplain to the aptly named Los Angeles Angels says the interest is because people are yearning for something greater than themselves – beyond their own understanding. And then there are those mysterious experiences where something or someone comes out of nowhere. To share mine I need to talk about my pilgrimage eight years ago on the Camino de Santiago in northern Spain. This is a very ancient pilgrimage from the early days of Christianity where people can walk a variety of routes for different amounts of time and end up at Santiago de Compostela – a city in Spain believed to be the tomb of St. James the Apostle. Those who walk are called pilgrims and one writes,

> *While on the Camino you will encounter other pilgrims and countrymen (or women) that will renew your faith in humanity and the sweetness of life. And whether you ask for it or not, when finding yourself struggling on the Way – as if by some divine force or intervention – an angel will show up on the path beside you, ready and willing to assist you in some form or fashion. The Camino abounds with these type of synchronicities and there are just too many to write them off as mere coincidence. It is obvious, even to the non-believers that there is a power or force much greater than themselves at play.*

Here are some of my own experiences with Camino angels:

- On my very first day of walking after a long climb and being somewhat disoriented on top of a mountain, thinking I was alone and unsure which way to go, an Australian fellow appears out of nowhere and calls, " This way, mate!"
- Navigating the subway system of Bilbao, I had just boarded a train ready to leave the station when a woman comes running toward me with the hiking poles I left at the fare kiosk, "Here, you'll need these", she said
- Again hopelessly lost in the large city of Oviedo and wandering into the Spanish version of the williwacks, I stop a man on a bicycle who speaks excellent English and takes time off from his route to personally lead me among myriad city intersections to get back on route
- at the height of my worse blisters, Serge the Camino foot doctor pulls out his mysterious jar of homemade potion and all of us in the albergue are treated and able to keep walking.
- And the yellow arrows, pointing the route, This way! And what it felt like to not see one for a long time, and then to see one!

And on and on and on. Camino Angels. So does that mean angels only exist in nothern Spain? No but removing ourselves from the concerns of daily life and putting ourselves in a place of vulnerability (walking in unfamiliar territory in a place of unfamiliar language are vulnerable enough) allow us to be more open to the angels among us. Our scriptures today support this idea.

Our first lesson features Jacob on the lam. He's just stolen the birthright and paternal blessing from his older brother Esau. His mother Rachel sends him on the road to keep him from being killed – another stranger in a strange land, mid-journey, at a site chosen because of nightfall, Jacob has an extraordinary dream that changes his life. His dream discloses the hidden yet active presence of God at this chance stop along the way. God's ongoing engagement in the world and in Jacob's disrupted life is portrayed through a striking vision of stairs reaching from earth to heaven.

A Jacob on the move encounters a vision full of movement. Divine errand runners continually ascend and descend to do God's work in the world. Angels. Jacob's life is forever changed. He bears twelve sons and becomes the patriarch of the Jewish people.

Unlike Jacob and modern Camino pilgrims, in today's gospel Nathaniel was at home, under his fig tree. Standing under your own fig tree is a symbol of comfort and blessing in the language of the Old Testament. Again and again the prophets used the image to evoke feelings of longing for peace and consolation. Nathanael was standing in that space. Nathanael had life all figured out and wasn't impressed with Jesus. "*Can*

anything good come out of Nazareth?" Prejudice and arrogance make us so unteachable. But the three most powerful evangelical words are spoken by friend Philip, "come and see". Jesus tells Nathanael he will see heaven opened and angels ascending and descending. By all accounts it would seem Nathanael never did see what Jacob saw. Instead he saw the Nazarean Jesus, whom he ended up following; despised, rejected, crucified and utterly destroyed. It wasn't much of a dream! It was a nightmare!

The next and only other time we hear of Nathanael is on the shore of the Sea of Galilee in one of those mysterious post resurrection events. Jesus has cooked breakfast on the shore; Nathanael sees he is risen, his life is forever changed.

Jacob the schemer and usurper, Nathaniel stuck in his own biases, the angels of heaven seemed to penetrate their defenses. But what about us? Can we see, whether with eyes closed in the world of our dreams, or through the fog of our busyness and prejudices how many angels have appeared to us in our own lives? Why one might be sitting next to us right now! Can we see how graced and gifted we have been in our lives? That doesn't deny struggle, challenge or adversity. Heck the pilgrim never notices the Camino angels without adversity and we wouldn't either. Jacob, Nathanael, they experienced much challenge, but also many blessings.

I leave you with the words of one Camino pilgrim reflecting back on her experience,

I continue to be guided every day of my life and I know now that my yellow arrows are to be found in the pages of my Bible, in the words of wise people who cross my path, in the stones that are scattered on my beach and in the innocence of little children. I am richer in so many ways after this experience but most of all, I am thankful beyond words.

I invite us to see our riches, to remember and see those moments of grace in our lives that have guided or redirected us, and aim to be thankful beyond words.