



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea
The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida

The Third Sunday
After Epiphany
JANUARY 21, 2024

A Homily by the Rev. James J. Popham

In his first letter to the nascent church in Corinth, Paul warned these new followers of Christ that “the present form of this world is passing away.” Paul’s expectation was the imminent second coming of Christ. That’s why he said nothing else, even marriage at that point, was important. The appointed time has grown short. Drop everything. Be prepared. Jesus will be here any moment.

And we are still waiting. Paul later in his ministry and travels would come to realize that maybe the second coming was much more down the road and hardly around the next corner. So he would walk back his advice and, for example, call marriage important, even comparing the marriage relationship to the love of Christ for his Church.

Expectations are so often a snare and delusion. When they are fulfilled, we take them for granted. When they are shattered, we often are shattered, too.¹ And we need to be just as wary of our expectations when they insist that we not expect something.

The late Fred Buechner, our ever go-to theologian and preacher – he was Presbyterian, by the way – offered this example:

Sleight-of-hand magic is based on the demonstrable fact that as a rule people see only what they expect to see. Angels are powerful spirits whom God sends into the world to wish us well. Since we don't expect to see them, we don't."²

It’s ironic, even sad. We have a theology that admits to what we call the supernatural, and yet how often do we hesitate let it interfere with our myopic earthbound perceptions.

¹ Some of our best advice to couples planning marriage is to beware of expectations of marriage, most of which were formed by our home life as children and adolescents, and most of which exist at a very subconscious level. They only rise to the surface when the couple wakes up the morning after their wedding. The present form of the relationship has passed away. Sometimes we need to be mindful, even wary of our expectations.

² Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking* (Harper One 1993).

Or do we? Do we see angels? Do we appreciate their presence, inspiration, and assistance? Do we have guardian angels, as many of us were taught in our childhood?

Personally, I will admit to enough truly close calls in 60 years behind the wheel that might easily have killed me, but for a glance or a nudge or a last nanosecond's reaction that thwarted catastrophe. I cannot rule out a guardian angel's work as saving me in those situations. Likely because I have learned to accept their presence. Though I do admit that some other manifestation of God may be at work.

Which takes us to what is called the third man syndrome, a phenomenon of possible spiritual or supernatural origins. It might be "angels and long-deceased ancestors" or "our brains psychologically protecting us in moments of extreme stress."³

The term "third man syndrome" originated in a poem by T.S. Eliot that was based on the experience of Antarctic explorer Ernest Shackleton in 1916. Shackleton, whose boat was trapped in ice, walked for 36 hours across mountains and glaciers with two colleagues to a whaling station, seeking assistance. He would later write:

I know that during that long and racking march of thirty-six hours over the unnamed mountains and glaciers, it seemed to me often that we were four, not three.⁴

Eliot, based on Shackleton's report and with the benefit of poetic license, wrote:

Who is the third who walks always beside you?
When I count, there are only you and I together
But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another one walking beside you
Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded
I do not know whether a man or a woman
But who is that on the other side of you?

³ "I Just Learned About "Third Man Syndrome" And Can't Stop Thinking About It, So Here Are 23 Stories From People Who Experienced It Themselves," *Buzzfeed*, January 16, 2024, <https://www.yahoo.com/lifestyle/just-learned-supernatural-phenomenon-third-141602734.html> (accessed January 16, 2024).

⁴ "Guardian Angels Or The "Third Man Factor," All Things Considered," National Public Radio, September 13, 2009, <https://www.npr.org/2009/09/13/112746464/guardian-angels-or-the-third-man-factor> (accessed January 18, 2024).

Writer John Geiger in his book *The Third Man Factor: Surviving the Impossible*, calls the Third Man “an unseen being that intervenes at a critical moment – when people are in great stress or in a life-and-death struggle – to give comfort, aid or support.”

He readily admits to a “religious or spiritual explanation” for this phenomenon, though scientific explanations are emerging as well.⁵

Now *BuzzfeedNews* is not the word of God, but a recent article offered 23 reported experiences of third man syndrome that might reinforce our belief in angels. Most are anonymous, and no one would fault us for reading them with a hermeneutic of suspicion. But then how many of us would be reluctant to attach our names to a story about meeting an angel in the 21st century?

Here is just one that particularly suggested to me that we are more rightly in the realm of angels or the divine:

I was driving north from Portland to Seattle for a last-minute appointment. I was very tired and the rainy weather wasn't helping at all. I was using my phone as a GPS and it fell off the mounted dashboard holder and onto the footwell below. I was on a major freeway, and – in my tired state – started to scramble to find the phone. I know it's dumb, but I didn't know where I was going. At this point I could barely see the road as I was looking down for the device, and all of a sudden I felt my steering wheel jerk to the left and then to the right again. I popped back up to see what was going on. I narrowly missed hitting a road worker by maybe a foot by swerving out and back in the lane again. I had not moved the wheel...."

"Grandma used to say, 'Don't drive faster than your angels can fly,' and I could feel her in that moment."

Perhaps, in some way we have yet to discover our brain conjures these visions. Or maybe we do have angels in our midst.

As a child I would pray:

Angel of God,
my guardian dear,
to whom God's love commits me here,
ever this day be at my side,

⁵ *Ibid.*

to light and guard, to rule and guide.
Amen.⁶

Maybe it just depends on what we expect ... or fail to expect.

Last week I stopped by the church before office hours. As I was entering, a gentleman whose appearance did not quite fit my expectations as one of our unhoused porch sitters, said to me, "thank you for what you do here." In my typical hurry I mumbled something about the Blue Door being closed due to COVID. And he said again, "Thank you for what you do here." I walked toward the door to go in and turned around, but he was nowhere to be seen. I have been unable to convince myself that he was not an angel, and, as I recall his words and write this, I am struck by the palpable presence of the divine surrounding me. I take that as a good sign.

And for anyone who volunteers at the Blue Door, that you in his thank you definitely was the plural form. That was an angel speaking to you.

Now, as Paul Harvey used to say, "Page two."

⁶ *Vatican News*, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/prayers/angel-of-god.html> (accessed January 18, 2024).

Midrash

All who entered the Temple Mount entered by the right and went round [to the right] and went out by the left, save for one to whom something had happened, who entered and went round to the left. [He was asked]: "Why do you go round to the left?" [If he answered] "Because I am a mourner," [they said to him], "May He who dwells in this house comfort you."

[If he answered] "Because I am excommunicated" [they said]: "May He who dwells in this house inspire them to draw you near again," the words of Rabbi Meir. Rabbi Yose to him: you make it seem as if they treated him unjustly. Rather [they should say]: "May He who dwells in this house inspire you to listen to the words of your colleagues so that they may draw you near again."