



The Unitarian Church in Westport

SERMON TRANSCRIPT:

In the Arms of the Angels

By Rev. Dr. John Morehouse

Sunday, December 8, 2019

"You spend all your time waiting for that second chance, for a break that will make it O.K.. There's always been some reason to not feel good enough and the memories just seep through your veins." Sarah McLachlan's haunting words have a special place for so many of us here today, especially now at this darkest time of the year. Christmas is a paradoxical holiday; so bright and cheery on the wide avenues of shopping and giving and parties, yet considerably darker on the side streets and in the alleys where we feel the loses in our lives more in keeping with the encroaching darkness. Hope is hard to find at Christmas time and we all have hopes, from a child who is struggling to overcome a learning disability to one coming to terms with a divorce. And to aging, and illness and money woes. And then there is our government, lost somewhere between charges and counter charges, tweets and fake news. It can be as easy as going from a ho, ho, ho to a oh, no, no, no.

When my first business failed in 1983, I felt exiled and alone. I was a thousand miles from anywhere I would want to call home and Christmas was coming. I watched slowly, painfully, as the auctioneer bided my hard work and dreams away, knowing full well that whatever I had left would go to the banker and still leave me bankrupt. Three months before this moment of darkness, my divorce was final and my life was on a downward spiral. My best friend at the time was a bartender, and nothing seemed right in the world. Iowa is cold in December; that year it was colder than ever.

I spent the next year waiting for that second chance that would, in Sarah McLachlan's words, "make it O.K.." But nothing -- not the alcohol, not the drugs, not the new job and not even a new relationship -- made anything about that dull pain O.K..

It was this season 36 years ago, that I first found out that it would be O.K.. I was alone on 38th Street just off Fifth Avenue in New York City walking back from a party I didn't even want to be at, when I saw an angel. Not the cherub looking creatures of Byzantine but a man, a rather wealthy man, walking on the other side of the street quite briskly, when he passed by a homeless man lying over a steaming grate. He took two steps past the man, stopped, turned around, and kneeled by his side. It was then that I saw the miracle. The well-dressed gentleman took off his camel hair overcoat and draped it over the sojourner's shoulders. This was an expensive coat mind you, easily over a \$1000 and then he patted the old man gently reaching into his pocket and handing him a wad of money. No words were said. The well-dressed man got up and walked away, ever more briskly than before as if he was trying to make up for lost time.

"There is always some reason to not feel good enough...." she sings, and I remembered the verse from Luke: "And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no room in the inn. And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock at night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were sore afraid. And the angel said to them, `Be not afraid; for behold I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to ALL people, for unto you is born this day in the city of David, a savior, who is Christ the Lord.'" (Luke 2: 7-11)

Somehow, I knew in that moment that there would never be enough reasons to feel good enough about my life if I kept looking beyond myself for salvation. Salvation for any of us starts from within, like the Grinch's heart, and grows and grows. Sometimes we just need a little nudge from our angelic hosts. "In the arms of the angels I will fly away from here...." she sings but here was not a place, not even a cold December evening in New York City, here was a state of being. A revelation, an epiphany, the first light of my own salvation from none other than my own sorry self. The angels were all around me: in that man, who was as much a part of the problem as his overcoat solution; they were around the old man lying in the street

keeping him warm enough to remind us that we, Yes WE my friends are the hands of God that make a difference; and I, lonely, sad, self-pitying, John Morehouse, was right there in those same angel arms, finding for the first time in years, a peace in my soul. In fact, those angel arms are around all of us now, in the embrace of this community, by the very fact that you came today and sat down here next to someone else.

I knew then for the first time that angels are real. Not in physical manifestations of themselves (although even that has begun to shift for me of late), but more importantly in the actions the love of our better angels lead us to. How many of you today, have been searching for something in your life to put an end to, as Sarah McLachlan sings, "the endlessness that you feel"? I ask that you begin by remembering the words of Luke, "for I bring you good news of great joy which will come to ALL people." All people, not some people, not these people or those people, not just the people on 5th Avenue but also those in the alleys, in Flatbush, in South Bronx, in the Bowery, in Westport or Bridgeport, on warm sofas or benches made home for a night. The good news is for all people. A savior in the life of a child is born. The same savior that is being born in every second of every day in children everywhere, indeed in the children within ourselves. It's not about Jesus or a Christ or any prophet, it's about life. The angel of the nativity wasn't speaking to Jews or Palestinians or even early Christians, the angel was speaking to you and to me and to every child of this planet for all time. Life and the will to live in it are the arms of our angels.

I really don't care if you believe in "real" angels or not. The experience of divine messengers ranges from physical manifestations to a sense of intuition, and the mention of these guardians is in every religious tradition of the world. My point is not to "prove" to you angels exist, but to suggest, nay to convince you, that the arms of the angels are all around us, even in our darkest hours. We don't perceive them because we take our being here for granted but instead realize what an amazing miracle it is that you were even conceived, much less that you survived. As G.K. Chesterton once observed, "Angels can fly because they take themselves so lightly." Well, good news: we can fly as well. Can you hear me?

My healing from that moment off Fifth Avenue was not sudden or complete. It only started there. For the better part of six months, I kept that experience buried deep in my psyche.

When I met Francis in the summer of 1984 on her 30th birthday, I awoke to my second "visitation." In her house somewhere in Northern Indiana, I had a dream of being pulled from a smoldering wreck. Over coffee that morning the paper told me what I had already dreamed. A mother and her young daughter pulled, bruised but not hurt from a car wreck by which the authorities could not understand how they survived. Why, I asked Francis, do some live and some die? She looked right at me with those piercing blue eyes, "The ones who live still have work to do in this life." I was in that moment "pulled from the wreckage of my silent reverie." Why do innocent children suffer from disease and abuse? It's the wrong question. The angels are whispering instead, "What are you going to do about it?" I moved in my journey from feeling the arms of the angels around me, to understanding for the first time, that we are those angel arms.

"For unto you is born a savior..." but as we will learn – as we are still learning – we aren't always ready to be saved, especially from ourselves. "Tied up in straight lines, everywhere you turn, vultures and thieves at your back...." sings Sarah McLachlan; her lines were still a part of me those many years ago. They are still a bit of a part of me now, every time I distrust someone else, or turn angry or hurt – and believe me, my friends, there is plenty of hurt in my life as well as yours.

Those straight lines are a part of most of us sitting here. How many of us today are tied up in straight lines? How many of us are convinced that someone, some thief or vulture, is trying to take something from us, or worst yet trying to put something over us? Maybe you feel that way right now, what with all my talk about angels and the baby Jesus. But my friends, the salvation that Luke speaks of is not a prison but a freedom. When we give ourselves up to the imagination that there just might be something greater than we are, some force, some reason

to our lives beyond making money or making sense, than we just might break free from the shackles of measurable reason alone to fall into a faith that everything does happen for a reason. That the reason there are alleys of darkness is because we need to turn them into boulevards of light.

Because, you see, we are no different than Mary or Joseph or the shepherds or baby Jesus. We are all poor and wandering, somewhere there is a wound that doesn't heal, an event that doesn't make sense, a failure that keeps us, in Sarah McLachlan's words, "building the lies that we keep making up for all that we lack." What are those lies we have been telling ourselves in order to keep the pain back? Mine have been laced with arrogance and anger. Long the demons of my soul, and I told myself a lot of lies to keep the truth back: that losing my first business was because Ronald Reagan became president, or that my first wife left me because she was emotionally unstable. Instead of the truth: that I lost interest in the business in the course of the divorce and that my anger had driven her away. Or that I didn't need to face my inability to see what I failed at. Admitting mistakes and apologizing has been a lifelong project for me.

These angel arms, like a hug we receive regardless of how we feel, reminds us that we are only human, only frail, only wounded, only ourselves. We are all a little like the family of Jesus wandering for a place to be born, if only in a manger. No matter how strong you think you are, I know that there is emptiness to be filled. That, my friends, is the reason for this season. To be reminded that we have an emptiness to fill.

"In the arms of the angels, you will fly away from here." Not here in this physical place, but here in this "sweet madness" of shopping, bills, jobs, kids, arguments, and short forgiveness. When we, as those wayward Shepherds did, those poorest of the poor, give way to the faith that this life holds a great promise, that everything happens to us for a reason and that we are here to bring comfort to those around us, then and only then will we surrender our "glorious sadness that brings us to our knees." We will, I am convinced, surrender the

madness and the sadness to the faith that we are going to be just fine so long as we remember to reach out to others in need of love. This flight of angels is not to be taken alone, but with those you love. Arms are for hugging. Have you ever tried to hug yourself? It doesn't work. We need each other, just as those in my Hebrew fable of heaven needed each other to be fed across the table because their arms wouldn't bend.

The real miracle here doesn't lie in being swept away by some celestial force but in being held in place by each other against the storms of life. When tragedy strikes, the real ministry is not in answers but in the ears and arms that hold us through that tragedy. Years ago, Francis and I were in a very different place. We almost left each other. You can call it voice, or an intuition, but I call it angels, who reminded us that the arms of God are right here by our sides. We survived that storm, we have faced others. So have all you. We will face still others. We will return to a time of darkness like this again and again. We will always be searching for some comfort, some room at the inn, and we will be turned away. What will sustain us is what we have right around us, right now. What will hold us will be the gift of simple love, without criticism, without judgment, simple love. Darkness is only the absence of light. In the arms of the angels may we find some comfort here.

Blessings be onto you and yours. Amen.