
You Will See Angels

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
Epiphany 2 – Year B

“Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” –
John 1:51

Oh, I would like so much to hear what Nathanael heard! Jesus told him he would see angels! “You will see angels,” Jesus said, “ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

I tell you, I sure would like to see angels.

I bet Nathanael did, too. Apparently, Nathanael had been outside, sitting under a fig tree. Now, fig trees can serve many functions, but they were also the frequent setting for teachers to speak to their students. Maybe that is why Nathanael, the student of scripture, calls Jesus “rabbi,” the title of a teacher.

Nathanael was looking for something, like all of us are. I sure was, when I was growing up. I would take my books outside to the pastures of Coweta County and I would sit under the shade trees, reading for something, looking for something. I would walk along the creeks and rocks, looking for things. I would see animals and birds, and beautiful trees and flowers. I would watch the sunrise each morning, and the sunset each night, out over the hills, looking for something. I remember those days of searching with great anticipation, but also with frequent frustration and disappointment. What was it that I was looking for?

Nathanael, and all the early disciples, may not have known exactly what they were looking for. Some were looking for the Messiah, or the Son of God, or another great prophet. Maybe they were looking for someone who would baptize in the Holy Spirit. All those titles are used to identify Jesus here in the first chapter of the Gospel of John.

In his searching, like all of us, Nathanael becomes frustrated and impatient. When he is invited to meet this man from Nazareth, Nathanael grumbles, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” I wondered the same thing in my searching, “Can anything good come out of Coweta County?” Others today wonder in the same way, “Can anything good come out of Appalachia, or Alabama or Georgia?” “Can anything good come out of the Middle East or Mexico? Haiti or Africa?”

And when Jesus sees Nathanael, he declares, “Here is a struggling man who speaks directly.” (That’s the meaning of the phrase, “Here is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!”) Here is a struggling man who speaks directly. Jesus said that he has known Nathanael for a long time. Jesus says he has seen Nathanael, reading, searching, under the fig tree.

Nathanael is impressed! Jesus asks, “Do you believe because I saw you under the fig tree? No, you will see greater things than these. You will see angels.”

“You will see angels,” Jesus promised Nathanael. And Nathanael becomes a follower of Jesus.

Nathanael is hardly mentioned, anywhere else in the Bible, after this morning’s encounter. But, as a follower of Jesus, what can we imagine Nathanael saw? Well, he saw everyone, flocking to Jesus. They came to Jesus to be healed and to learn.

Nathanael saw the blind, the lame, the tired, the poor, the “huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” And he also saw the Pharisees and Sadducees and chief priests. He saw everyone who was searching.

But we do not have any evidence that Nathanael ever saw any angel come down from heaven.

After I became an intentional follower of Jesus, I continued to walk in the woods and fields of Georgia. I sat under trees and at the tops of mountains. But I also walked the streets of big cities like Los Angeles, where I went to college. And, then as a priest, I also saw people, all sorts and conditions of people, from countryside to downtown, all shapes and sizes and colors. I continue to see them.

But, I have never seen an angel come down from heaven. I have seen all sorts of wings on creatures, but I have never identified any of those creatures as an angel.

Or have I?

Jesus told Nathanael, “You will see angels! You will see angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

Listen again, carefully, to how Jesus describes the movements of those angels. “You will angels ascending and descending.” Where, then, do the angels that Jesus mentions, start from? Where do they begin?

In short, they begin on earth! Their first movement is upward, ascending! In this passage, angels do not start from heaven; they start from earth!

The word “angel,” or “angelos” simply means “messenger,” “someone who is delivering a message.” An angel is meant to be, simply, someone with a message.

But, if the messengers – the angels—that Jesus speaks of, start from the earth, that means that the divine message they are carrying also starts from the earth. God’s message starts, not from heaven, but from earth. God starts, not from heaven, but from earth.

“You will angels,” Jesus said, “ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

Yes, Nathanael did see angels! Yes, I have seen angels! The angels are the divine messengers of God who Nathanael saw during every step of his journey with Jesus. They were the poor and the sick who took the needs of humanity to God. The angels of God are the divine messengers of grace whom I saw years ago in Los Angeles, the city of angels. And they are the messengers of God whom I can see any day of the week in this city of Atlanta. These messengers ascend from, and descend upon, the Son of Man, said Jesus, who is all of humanity.

And the messengers of God are, indeed, in the trees and the flowers, and the birds and animals, who carry the Holy Spirit outside in the natural fields and woods of the world. The Book of Job, and St. Francis, as adapted by Paul Winter, says “Ask of the trees and they shall teach you, the beauty of the earth. Ask of the beasts and they shall teach you, the beauty of the earth.”

“You will see angels!” said Jesus to Nathanael, and to me. And Jesus says the same thing to each of us today. “You will see angels.”

But, if we want to see angels, we have to start with right where we are, looking directly at what is right down here, in humanity, in the Son of Man. Angels start from below, in the humble dirt of the world, along paths and creeks and under fig trees. Angels start from below, in the poor and the tired and the sick along our city streets. Angels start in our own families and households and neighborhoods, right next to us.

God sends his word of grace and glory through the creatures who are right here next to us. God sends his message of grace and glory through creation.

“You will see angels!” said Jesus to Nathanael, and to me, and to us. Thanks be to God! We have.

AMEN.

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