

“Angels with Dirty Wings; A sermon for the Third Sunday of Advent”

The Very Rev. Gideon L. K. Pollach

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[Readings: Micah 5:2-5a, Luke 1:39-45-55, Canticle 15](#)

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For those of you were here last week, you can tell everyone how much fun we had. We had fun last week didn't we? A lot of laughs. What a difference a week makes! It's hard to joke around with this week's lessons.

May 17, 1968. The parking lot of the Catonsville, Maryland draft board. Nine figures moved with purpose, carrying baskets filled with draft files. The spring air carried a hint of warmth, but nothing like the heat that was to come. Father Daniel Berrigan lifted a gallon of homemade napalm - the same substance burning children and forests in Vietnam. The files went up in flames. The accelerant caught. Papers curled and blackened. Nine Catholics prayed over the ashes of what had been the state's power to send young men to war.

"What are we doing with our lives?" Berrigan would later ask. The question hung in the air like smoke.

I've been thinking about that question a lot lately. Because it was the last conversation I had with my mother before she died recently. We sat in a diner in Catonsville, talking about Berrigan and the famous Catonsville Nine. She knew their witness well. She had been a Sister of Mercy in Baltimore in that same era before becoming an activist in her own right, and she understood what it meant to answer that question with her life. To her, their actions weren't just history - they were a reminder that each generation must decide how to live faithfully in their own challenging time. "What will YOU do?" she would ask me. It wasn't rhetorical - she was looking for an answer.

Two thousand years earlier, on the banks of the Jordan River. A wild-eyed prophet in camel's hair held another crowd in his gaze. He said: "You brood of vipers!" His words cracked like summer lightning. The comfortable religious leaders shuffle their feet. They thought baptism would be a simple ritual, an easy washing. Instead, John's words stripped them bare: "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

Look at this icon of John the Baptist hanging here on the pulpit before me. In it, John appears as an angel - but not the kind of angel we typically imagine, not an angel with pristine white wings. His wings are brown as if sullied by the desert dust, stained by his wild existence on the margins. These are wings that have done their work in the world's dirt and grime. They remind us that God's messengers don't descend in sterile perfection.



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They come among us with wings dirtied by the same earth that we walk on, bearing messages we may not want to hear. The Greek letters beside him proclaim: “Repent.”

“What then should *we* do?”

This question echoes across the Jordan’s waters. It echoes across time and space. It’s such a human question, isn’t it? When confronted with our complicity in evil, we want a checklist, a program, three simple steps to righteousness. John’s answer *was* specific: “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.”

He goes on: “Every tree, therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

Fire in Catonsville, Maryland. Fire in John’s prophecy. Fire that destroys and fire that purifies.

Berrigan, and his companions were angels with dirty wings. Their halos were prison uniforms. Their wings were stained with the soot of burning draft cards. They didn’t speak from comfortable pulpits but from courthouse steps and jail cells. They knew, as John knew that God’s messages often come through those who aren’t afraid to soil their hands with the work of justice.

Stir up your power O, Lord and with great might come among us. John’s hearers ask: “What then should we do?”

The same question arose in courtrooms, churches, and homes all across 1968 America. The Vietnam War was consuming hundreds of lives each week. Napalm was destroying forests and people in Vietnam. The draft was feeding more young men into the fires of war, many propelled to do something they believed was noble and good, at the cost of their lives. Berrigan asked the question that still haunts us: “How can we be human beings in inhuman times?”

His answer, like John’s, was specific: Take the files that feed the war machine. Burn them with the very substance that burns our enemies. It’s one thing to volunteer; it’s another for the government to compel people to fight against their will. Berrigan was ready to accept the consequences and he encouraged others to willingly stand up for a future they believed in. “What are you afraid of?” he challenged. “Don’t be afraid. Don’t live in fear. Live in faith. In hope. Live in peace.”

Now, not all of us feel called to dramatic acts of civil disobedience. But all of us *are* called to faithful witness.

Sometimes faithful witness might mean filling backpacks with school supplies. Sometimes it may be serving meals for HIHI. It could be showing up at town meetings to speak for those whose voices aren’t being heard. But, any of these or similar acts, in their own way, challenge the structures that harm our neighbors.

When the police came to Catonsville that day, they found the Nine waiting, praying over the ashes. Berrigan famously declared to the police: “Our apologies, good friends, for the fracture of good order, the burning of paper instead of children...We could not, so help us God, do otherwise. For we are sick at heart.”

John the Baptist declared: Bear fruits worthy of repentance. What fruit? In John’s time, it was to: Share our coats. Share our food. Not to exploit the poor. In Berrigan’s time: Stand up against needless slaughter. Save children from the war. Be bold and courageous. Speak truth to power. And yes - still - share your coat. Share your food. Don’t exploit the poor. The basic commands of mercy don’t change; they just take new forms in every generation.

And the fruits of repentance grow in many gardens. I see them growing here - in our monthly blue bag food collection, in our winter coat drive, in our advocacy for affordable housing, or our partnerships with Rural and Migrant Ministries. They grow in our sustained partnership with our sister church in Haiti, where we’ve learned that sharing resources *also* means sharing relationships, sharing struggles, sharing hope. These might seem like a less dramatic witness compared to burning draft files, but all are from the same tradition of action: the daily work of saying no to systems that harm and yes to God’s vision of abundant life for all.

Stir up your Power, O Lord, and with great might come among *us*. “What then should we do?”

The same question burns in many of our hearts today and Berrigan famously refined it by asking: “How is a human being to live today? Is there a way to live here and now that will allow future generations to live their lives differently from the one that is sanctioned today?” These words still pierce our comfortable certainties.

And the ax of resistance still lies at the root of the tree of evil and complicity. While systems of oppression still grind on, prophets *still* call out for change. Many of us still hold on to our *second* coats while others freeze. Can *we* bear to *look* in our closets? Can *we* stand to honestly *see* our overflowing pantries? Can *we* admit our own complicity in systems that deprive people of their basic needs? How much prophetic witness are *you and I* willing to bear?

Today, we are being invited to be like John. To be angels with dirty wings. Not pristine messengers of easy comfort but bearers of *hard* truth and companions in *enduring* hope.

Now look, your wings may get stained by engagement with the world’s pain. Your feathers may be singed by the heat of resistance. But perhaps that’s exactly how angels *should* look in times like these - a bit scorched, a bit soiled, but still flying. Still bearing witness, still pointing the way toward repentance and renewal and amendment of life.

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You might wonder - as I often do - how any of this is “good news.” An ax at the root? Unquenchable fire? Prison sentences for the righteous? Where’s the good news in that?

Perhaps the good news lies precisely in this: We are not abandoned to our complicity with evil. We are not abandoned by god to systems that dehumanize. The ax at the root of the tree *still* makes space for new growth. The fire that burns is a fire that purifies. The Spirit that challenges us is also the Spirit that can *empower* us to do our part to construct a better world. After all, a spirituality of resistance is really a practice of hope. It is the power of that spirit coming among us that stirs us up to see, and, hopefully, to act.

When John told the crowd to share their coats, he was telling them they have the power to act. When Berrigan burned the draft files, he was declaring that complicity in evil is not our destiny. This is good news: we are not helpless. We are not hopeless. We are not bound forever to a dehumanizing future. We can, through our efforts, make the future better.

The work we do in this season: gathering food for the pantries, or making dinners for the homeless, or buying toys for the poor, or gathering clothing for our neighbors - it is all part of this same work of resisting evil and challenging the power of poverty in our region. It’s holy work for holy people, and we are doing it, *together*.

The chaff may burn. But the wheat - ah, the wheat is gathered into God’s granary. And there’s room in that granary for all who dare to harvest the fruit of repentance. Even now, with our dirty wings and our imperfect courage, we are joining a long line of faithful witnesses. John’s voice still cries out from teh wilderness. Berrigan’s witness still inspires so many years later. My mother’s question still echoes: “What will YOU do?” And God’s grace *still comes to* us in our attempts to answer.

What will we do? Well, we’ll do what we can. We do our best. We pray that our efforts show the fruits of repentance.

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us. *Amen,*