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**“Jesus was No Angel”
A sermon by Joseph S. Harvard
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Duke University Chapel**

You may have heard about the preacher who stood up to preach, and began this way: “Before I begin my sermon, I have something important to say!” Before I begin my sermon, I want to thank Dean Sam Wells and Craig Kocher for the invitation to preach today. I am pleased to share in a service with Nancy Ferree-Clark, a dear friend, whose leadership for Durham Congregations in Action over two years as our president was exemplar.

For the 26 years that I have been a pastor in Durham, being a neighbor to the Duke Chapel has been enriching for my life and the life of the congregation I serve. I sense a deepening of this relationship as you reach out to develop a stronger friendship with Durham. It is exciting to have Gaston Warner and Abby Kocher as a presence serving among us. I look forward to the new ways God is calling us to be faithful and to address the needs of our community together.

Let us pray: Gracious God, here we are once more gathered in your presence, as we and our ancestors have gathered in places like this over the centuries, to hear your Word. We are surrounded in our culture by words soliciting our loyalty, our affection, our commitment, but none of them nourish our souls like your Word. May these ancient words of Holy Scripture come alive today by the power of your Spirit and be a lamp to our path and light to our feet – so that we may follow in the way of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Jesus was no angel!” I was intrigued when I read the heading in a commentary by Tom Long. Tom is a teacher of preachers, and a frequent preacher here at the Chapel and a fellow Presbyterian. He was discussing the texts in Hebrews we read this morning. (*Thomas G. Long, Hebrews p.17*)

“Jesus was no angel!” The title reminded me of the times I heard someone say: “Mercy me, she was no angel! She gave her parents fits!” or “He was not a bad kid, but he was no angel.” You have heard such conversations and they may have been about you. We won’t go there! It was shocking to me to see the bold statement: “Jesus was no angel.”

What does it mean? The Preacher in the letter to the Hebrews begins his epistle this way:

“Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son whom he appointed heir to all things, through whom he also created the world.” This Son through whom God speaks to us is remarkable. Not only has he sat down at the right hand of God, “but also having become even superior to angels.”

So we have a description of this magnificent figure who shares in creation and is heir to all things. In the next chapter, the Preacher quotes the familiar Psalm 8 about how

God has made us humans a little lower than the angels and then the Preacher says this Majestic One who was “superior to the angel – became lower than the angels.”

So what does all this talk about being superior and lower than angels mean to us?

Timothy Luke Johnson, a biblical scholar, understands the question when he writes:

“Present day readers are likely to find this section of Hebrews either trivial or quaintly irrelevant having nothing to do with the serious reality of the world they inhabit.” (*Luke Timothy Johnson, Hebrew: A Commentary, p.82*)

“Trivial or quaintly irrelevant”, that is not an attractive choice. Angels don’t have a significant place in our world. They have nothing to do about a war in Iraq or Afghanistan, with the violence in our streets, with the struggle to hold our families and our community together, and with our search for meaning and purpose in our lives.

So is this talk about Jesus and angels trivial or irrelevant for our times? It reminds me of the caricature of theology: “It is a discussion of how many angels you can get on the head of a pen.”

Wait a minute! Not so fast! Before we dismiss these words as irrelevant, take a moment with me to consider the congregation to which the preacher addressed these words!

It has been suggested that the congregation to which these words are addressed is exhausted. They are tired, tired of serving the world that could care less, tired of worship, tired of the struggle of day to day life. Tired of Jesus, tired of being tired! (*Thomas G. Long, Hebrews p.3*) Have you ever felt this way? Some times even those we consider heroes in the faith have felt exhausted. Dietrich Bonhoeffer did. He wrote in a poem from a Nazi prison about how he felt:

Restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage, struggling for breath, as though hands were compressing my throat, weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making faint and ready to say farewell to it all. (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letter and Papers from Prison “Who am I?” p348)

For those of us who know what it means to be soul weary, at the end of our rope and holding on some days for dear life, the eternal and exalted Son of God on purpose went to the depths of our suffering and weakness. He got down in the trenches with us – so he was despised and rejected for us and our salvation. He suffered with us and for us, not to keep us from suffering but because suffering is our lot.

He did not flinch but faced the harsh realities we face. We live in a broken world and he knew our brokenness. This helps us hear those words Jesus spoke about divorce, which sounds harsh to our modern ears. They sound hard for those who know the pain of giving their all to a marriage, and it not only did not work, maybe it was even destructive.

Jesus was not seeking to inflict more pain. His words are not intended as a “guilt trip.” He was addressing a law that enabled men to discarded women simply by signing a petition. Remember what it was called: “a certificate of dismissal!” The woman was abandoned and left to her own resources that were meager.

“NO! NO!” Jesus said to this oppressive practice. He frames marriage in the context of creation as God’s good gift. God has created us for life in community. Those who God has brought together let no one put asunder. God is interested in repairing our broken relationships and restoring our broken promises.

To further emphasis this point Jesus invited little children to come to him. Children were also extremely vulnerable in Jesus’ day, even more than women. They were often abandoned and abused. He took a little child as a sign of the coming among us

of God's kingdom. We are called to strengthen the ties that bind us to each other and especially to the weakest and most vulnerable among us. Fidelity to each other and to mend our brokenness is a sign of hope so desperately needed.

In the midst of our exhaustion over the brokenness, occasionally a sign of the beloved community Jesus Christ initiated breaks out. A light shines into the darkness. In the face of the five young girls being killed by a gunman in school this week in Pennsylvania, the response of the Amish community was astounding. Instead of seeking revenge, they reached out to the family of the gunman who killed the girls and himself to offer their support. What a hopeful note of healing and hope!

They got it! Do you get it? Do we get it? The Preacher said that when you are exhausted and empty, look to Jesus, Jesus was no angel, but he who reached out to rescue those being abandoned, women and children and who still are being "dismissed", these children of God need not our condemnation but our encouragement and love. When we reach out in Jesus name to those who suffer, the least, the left out, the lost, the lonely – we will not be tired. Our energy will be restored, that is the promise.

Years ago when I was a pastor in Tallahassee, Florida, an elderly African American woman told us her story. She had been "tired of being tired," tired of the bigotry and discrimination. She was a woman of deep faith, a follower of Christ. This led her to join the bus boycott, which meant she walked two miles to work each day, worked all day as a domestic and then she walked home. One day she was asked, "How do you feel? Aren't you tired?" She replied: "My feet are tired, but my soul is rested."

Are you tired? Take a moment to be nourished by the One who shared our exhaustion, who broke bread so that you might be made whole and offered a cup that promises a new community of healing and hope. Look to Jesus who was no angel but God with us and who still says: "Come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden, I will give you rest. Take the yoke of love upon you. It will rest your soul." Try it!