

Title: The Sharper Side of Jesus

Date: 8/14/2022 (Proper 15, Year C)

Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church

Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)

Readings: [Isaiah 5:1-7](#); [Psalm 80:1-2, 8-18](#); [Hebrews 11:29-12:2](#); [Luke 12:49-56](#)

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/yhB6EE1rOTQ?t=1476>

Turn now, O God of hosts, look down from heaven;
behold and tend this vine;
preserve what your right hand has planted. (Ps 80:14)
Amen.

The words “God of hosts” flow so smoothly off the tongue, don't they? These words are so familiar to me that every once in a while, I have to remind myself that in the Bible, the term “hosts” isn't referring to gracious coffee hour hosts, who provide coffee and treats after the service. Nor is it referring to the charming and capable emcees who keep the program running at an event.

It's referring to...an army of angels.

How many of you have seen the meme “Biblically accurate angels”?

The point of the meme is that the way angels are described in the Bible isn't necessarily the way they are portrayed in western art.¹

In February we get cupids armed with heart shaped arrows. Around Christmas we dress up our kids with golden halos and wings of white. In paintings we see humans that conform to western standards of beauty, with the addition of wings and maybe a halo behind their head. Sometimes they're dressed in white robes, sometimes in armor.

In the Bible there's quite a range. We are told that angels take human form, like the two who accompanied God to visit Abraham and then went to investigate the complaints against Sodom and Gomorrah.

The prophet Daniel saw a man clothed in linen, with a belt of gold. His body was like beryl, a transparent green, blue or yellow mineral. His face was like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and the sound of his words like the roar of a multitude (Dan 10:5-6).

The prophet Ezekiel describes cherubim as each having four faces and four wings. “Their legs were straight, and the soles of their feet were like the sole of a calf's foot; and they sparkled like burnished bronze. Under their wings on their four sides they had human hands...As for the appearance of their faces: the four had the face of a human being, the face of a lion on the right side, the face of an ox on the left side, and the face of an eagle” (Ezekiel 1:5-11).

Imagine an army of **that** coming your way.

I *could* spend more time talking about angels, but that would just be a blatant delaying tactic to keep from having to talk about today's gospel.

Today's gospel reminds us that just as the God of hosts is a commander riding at the head of an army of angels, however you picture angels, Jesus has this sharper, harder edge to him that we don't talk about very much.

We talk a lot about the Jesus that came to heal and teach,
the Jesus that teaches us to question and to ask good questions. We've also talked about the Jesus that came to

challenge political and religious authorities,
and how this led them to crucify him on the cross.

But to have Jesus say explicitly that he came to bring fire,
that he intentionally came to cause division **within families**,
to set father against son and mother against daughter?

This feels complicated and very tricky to talk about. (But here we go)

In the early church, the choice to follow Jesus caused divisions within families in a very real way. In Roman culture the *paterfamilias*, the male head of the household, was supposed to rule supreme over his wife, his children and his servants. So, when his wife or children or servants decided to convert to Christianity and join the household of God, that was a real challenge to his authority.

Even if he also converted, he would technically become their brother in Christ, a fellow child of God, for there can only be ONE head of household. Likewise, Jesus alone is the head of the body of Christ; there cannot be more than one head. Theoretically, **all** the members of the household would be on the same level: all of them equal in the eyes of God, and all of them are to follow the word of God.

In practice, those who are used to having power and deciding how things should be done had a hard time with NOT being in charge. This applied to husbands over their wives, parents over their children, and masters over their servants. Back then, just as it is now, the stability of the nuclear family was seen as the basic building block for a stable society and a stable nation. Any threat to that was seen as a threat to peace.

So, even though baptism is supposed to erase these kinds of hierarchies, even though Jesus did **not** come to bring peace, these hierarchies of dominance and submission are still reinforced in letters found in the New Testament.

Known as the Household Codes, these instructions represent a very human struggle for early Christians to live in the world as it is and the world as God envisioned it to be, as communicated to us through Jesus. They want to be seen as separate from the status quo, and thus attractive to converts, but not so different that they'd be seen as a threat (or be a threat) to the stability of their society.

At the same time, we don't need to look all the way back to the early church in the time of the Roman Empire to see the kinds of divisions Jesus has created among those living in the same household.

Though I wonder if it would be more accurate to say, "the divisions created in the households **of** those who follow Christ" or "the divisions created in households **by** those who are following Christ."

In the first instance, division sound like a natural byproduct. It reminds me of last Sunday's reading from Hebrews 11 about those who died in faith without having received the promises.

"[Our ancestors in faith] confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth...they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one" (Heb 11:13-16).

Once Jesus helped them see that things *could be* and *should be* different than they are, they couldn't unsee it. Once Jesus showed them that he is the Truth, the Way and the Life,

they started turning away from
the people, practices, and beliefs
that were telling them lies,
away from the people, practices, and beliefs
that were NOT giving them life.

They became strangers in their own households because they found a sense of belonging and acceptance elsewhere. With God as the head of their household, they found those who would care for them and support their flourishing. They became foreigners in their own land because they recognized it had never been and was not yet what it aspired to be. They began praying that God's kingdom would come, God's will would be done, on earth as it is in heaven. They came to care for the vulnerable as God and the prophets of God often reminded them to do.

In the second instance, "the division created in households **by** those who are following Christ," division sounds less like a natural byproduct and more like something that is deliberate and intentional. It's hard to talk about this without putting a value judgement on division.

During the Civil War, Episcopal churches in the South established The Church in the Confederate States. However, The Episcopal Church did not split as some other denominations did because the church framed slavery as a legal and political issue; based on their theology and their interpretation of Scripture, slavery was **not** a moral or ethical issue.² The Northern churches refused to recognize the separation,³ and since the separation wasn't based on a difference in doctrine between the Northern and Southern churches, after the war they simply passed a resolution of thanksgiving for the restoration of peace in the country and unity in the Church.⁴ Then they back together.

Recently the Diocese of Northern Texas and the Diocese of Texas voted to reunite with each other.⁵ The reason we have a Diocese of Northern Texas is because in 2008, a majority of clergy and lay leaders in the Diocese of Fort Worth voted to separate from The Episcopal Church. Fort Worth is now part of a group called the Anglican Church in North America. So, when you see a church that calls itself “Anglican” in the United States, in places like Austin and Chicago, it is either a church that voted to leave The Episcopal Church or a church that holds similar beliefs to those who did.

These folks saw the ordination of women and LGBTQ+ people
as a liberal shift in doctrine;
we see it as a faithful adherence to the tradition of our faith,
to see the image of God in all of God’s children
and to love one another as Christ loved us.

They had a fundamental disagreement with our understanding of Scripture, so they split. The churches that are reuniting with us are the ones who separated themselves from the churches that left.

I wonder what would have happened if the church **did** split during the Civil War. What did that kind of unity cost us? Sometimes churches focus so much on keeping the people who are there that they don’t think about how they are keeping away the people who might be there otherwise.

I wonder what things would be like if dioceses like Fort Worth **stayed**. What did this separation cost us?

I wish I had clear answers for you.
Division is hard.
Unity is hard.
Walking together is hard.

We all have things to figure out, and sometimes we get it wrong before we get it right.

So, as in today’s reading from Paul’s letter to the Hebrews, we come to church to be surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses, those who are here with us, those who came before us and those who will come after us. We ask for their wisdom and look to their example, whether old or young.

We lay aside every weight and sin by confessing our sins and making peace with each other before we approach Christ’s table.

Then we look to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, recognizing that sometimes love looks like division, and sometimes love looks like coming together, but it should **always**, **always** look like loving one another as Jesus loved us.

Amen.

¹ <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/biblically-accurate-angels-be-not-afraid>

²

https://www.diomass.org/sites/diomass/files/attachments/Reparations%20Toolkit_Episcopal%20Church%20and%20Slavery%20Historical%20Narrative_2021_11.pdf

³ <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/who-we-are/history-episcopal-church/american-church/>

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/1865/10/06/archives/the-general-convention-of-the-episcopal-church.html>

⁵ <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/publicaffairs/episcopal-church-general-convention-approves-reunion-of-texas-dioceses/>