

ANGELS ON ROLLER SKATES¹
John 1: 1-14
A Communion Meditation by Thomas R. McKibbens
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You may have missed this little news blip over Christmas: the Orly Airport in Paris added a twist to their Christmas decorations. They hired people to dress up like angels and ride through the concourses on roller skates handing out sweets to travelers. Leave it to the French to get the most *joyeux* out of *Noel!*

I

What is most intriguing about this to me is how angels on roller skates combine two opposites. We imagine angels as heavenly, ethereal, other-worldly. Most of the time when television or movies depict an angel there is a shimmering light surrounding the angel, indicating a kind of numinous quality.

But roller skates? Roller skates are associated with kids and skinned knees. Kids may be angelic at times, but usually roller skating is not one of those times. Angels and roller skates usually don't go together.

But that is true to life. More often than not our angels are ordinary folk with skinned knees or skinned hearts or skinned histories who are always

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doing things angelic. Maybe we don't see the angels among us because we are looking in the wrong places. Instead of looking for wings and halos, maybe we should be looking at volunteers cooking meals for the homeless, or to people who visit faithfully in nursing homes, or to those who quietly go about making a difference in the community.

II

This juxtaposition of heavenly and earthly appears in the opening chapter of John's gospel. You can hardly find more high-flying theological language than the first words: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* It employs the language of Greek philosophy and ancient Jewish theology. It is academic, theoretical, scholarly, theological language. It is angelic in its majesty. Perhaps it should have a shimmering light around it!

But then this soaring statement is put on hold. Out of nowhere, it seems, comes this humble description: *There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.*² I have always been jarred by that verse. It seems to come out of nowhere. It is like the first sentences of the gospel are angelic, and then we hear roller skates grinding over the sidewalk! It is as if the writer of this

² John 1: 6.

gospel wants us to keep our feet firmly planted in human reality even as we contemplate the sublime.

Usually, the people of our world who are most angelic are not overtly pious. Scottish poet Robert Burns wrote a famous satirical poem entitled “Holy Willie’s Prayer,” a scathing attack on a local deacon of the Church of Scotland who was so sanctimonious he was obnoxious.³ We have all encountered that kind of false piety.

III

Those angels sit in pews at many a church. They do all kinds of angelic things quietly. It is due to these angels who give their emotional energy and time and exceptional talents that the church program hums throughout the year. I am in a unique position each Sunday to look out at this congregation as a whole. It is a beautiful sight, for I see an angelic choir before me. (There is also an angelic choir behind me, but I am talking about the whole congregation as an angelic choir!)

I look out and I see angels with skinned knees, angels with regrets and mistakes, but angels with determination to follow the way of Christ. It calls to mind the last sentence in Lincoln’s first inaugural address: “The mystic chords of memory stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every

³ Ian Grimble, *Robert Burns* (London: Lomond Books, 1994), p. 37.

living heart and hearthstone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the organ when again touched, as surely they will be by the better angels of our nature.”

Standing on the East Portico of the Capital building, the dome above was sheathed in scaffolding because the original copper and wood dome was being replaced by a cast iron dome. Lincoln himself had come to his inauguration by a secret route to avoid danger, and he was heavily guarded by soldiers. He was facing what would become four years of savage war before him in which 600,000 people would die. Jefferson Davis had just been inaugurated as President of the Confederacy two weeks earlier. Yet Lincoln was calling for, yearning for, entreating “the better angels of our nature.” In using such language he was calling for humaneness, compassion, good will, tolerance, and genuine caring for others.

Four years later, in his second inaugural address, delivered in the same location, but this time after weeks of rain which made the capital grounds a sea of mud, thousands of people stood ankle deep in mud to hear him once again call for the better angels of our nature. But this time he concluded his address with these memorable words: “With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care

for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”

In a little more than a month, Lincoln would be assassinated. But his words live on, and the “better angels of our nature” still call us to live as a church “with malice toward none, with charity for all, [and] with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right....” And as for “binding up the nation’s wounds,” it starts with binding up the wounds of those around us, the wounds in our neighborhoods and our community, and sometimes the wounds in our own hearts. That is a New Year’s resolution worth considering.

IV

The “better angels of our nature” still call us, and when we take the bread and wine of communion, we hear the “mystic chords of memory,” stretching all the way back to a time when Jesus served the bread and wine to those whom he loved.

In a symbolic way, he still does, and Christ still extends a warm invitation to take and eat. We receive the bread and wine in the faith that “the better angels of our nature” will be strengthened and confirmed.