

FOLD YOUR WINGS

“Before the marvel of this night adoring, fold your wings and bow, then tear the sky apart with light and with your news the world endow Assemble here, celestial throng, in royal splendor come arrayed. Give earth a glimpse of heav’nly bliss, a teasing taste of what they miss ... sing peace, sing bliss, sing love.”

(“Before the Marvel of this Night,” music and lyrics by Carl Schalk)

One of my favorite activities is singing in our church choir. I love the camaraderie of the group and our shared doggedness in mastering, as best we can, the music. With help from a few exceptional singers, the leadership of a first-class director, and an accomplished accompanist, we make good music together. As the last note is released at the end of our anthems, I am moved by what we have created.

Early Advent, as we were preparing our selections for the season, the director introduced us to “Before the Marvel of this Night.” I was swept up by the beauty of the piece and captured by images of God coordinating the multitude of angels for the marvel of the evening. I was dumbstruck by the phrase, “fold your wings and bow.”

Angels were a benign presence in my childhood. I remember them, or the thought of them, particularly as part of my nighttime routine. My memories of childhood bedtime are warm and comforting. I loved being tucked in by my mother. She’d sit close to me, perched on the edge of the bed. Mom would smooth the covers, brush my hair back from my face, and begin softly, “Now I lay me down to sleep.” She’d close with, “If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.”

My grandmother would do likewise when I stayed at her house. Same routine, same comforting, and same time of whispered prayer. The words she used began differently, “Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, bless the bed I lay upon.” She’d conclude with, “Four angels round my bed, one to watch and one to pray, and two to bear my soul away.” The cone of security was the same. I always felt safe, never frightened—even though both of these nighttime prayers brought up the possibility I might die before daybreak—and that angels were there specifically to carry me off to heaven.

By today's practices and current Christian curriculum choices, my religious rearing would seem to be quaint. Children of the 1950s learned a jumble of messages: crosses and sacrifice, grape juice and bread as the blood and body, Old Testament wrath and judgment. Those dark images were woven into a setting of spirited hymn singing, children's pageants, potluck dinners and an overlay of "Jesus Loves Me".

Angels were part of the package. Gabriel came with news for Mary, angels sang "Gloria" at the birth of baby Jesus. They also spoke to the shepherds, reassuring them with "fear not." They provided the model for the choice role in the annual Christmas pageant: the prettiest costume, a star to carry, and a couple of stirring lines to say. And, of course, angels were "real," for each night they were guarding us, transporting us off to heaven if necessary.

Over seventy years have gone by since my mother led me through my evening prayers. Although I have spent years in church and attended uncountable religious classes, don't think I've spent a bit of time since childhood thinking about angelic companions. I recently spent two years in the intensive theological study—angels didn't come up once.

But, that night at choir practice, angels burst into my mind and imagination. It's a challenge for someone dumbstruck to put emotion into words. The condition of confusion, though, is rich territory for exploration. The angels had been told to fold their wings and bow.

We are accustomed to humans choosing a behavior that indicates reverence, respect, or honor. The queen's subjects curtsy or a bow in her presence. At the sound of "Ten-Hut," soldiers snap to attention. Some Christians genuflect upon coming into worship, Muslim men prostrate themselves in prayer. As humans, we humble ourselves to show our respect for others' power and authority.

Angels, though? Those powerful messengers and guides, greater by far than any mortals, being told to "fold their wings and bow." God told them to take on a posture of humility and to offer a gesture of honor. The angels were told to behave as never before in honor of the God-child, lying in a manger, poor and as yet unknown.

The beauty of that image would be enough. I could rest comfortably in that homage. But then, as so often happens when my mind is alert, the message I was supposed to receive

became clear. I'm supposed to behave differently myself. Just as I was pondering the message of folded-wing angels, I happened upon an excerpt from Howard Thurman's *The Twelve Days of Christmas*.

Thurman, an African-American philosopher, theologian, and civil rights leader, wrote, "There is more to life than we previously imagined. Angels hide in every nook and cranny, magi masquerade as everyday people, and shepherds wear the garments of day laborers. The whole earth is brimming with glory for those with eyes to see and ears to hear."

Those words were the challenging message I needed. Just as the angels were told to believe that a baby born in a stable was, in reality, God's own self, I was pushed to remember that the embodied God is all around us in our lonely, our poor, our neglected. Their terrible, magnificent glory is all about, just waiting for us to see and hear, to bow and serve.

Copyright ©Poetry Club ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. This blog contains material protected under International and Federal Copyright Laws and Treaties. Any unauthorized reprint or use of this material is prohibited. No part of this blog may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without express written permission from the author/publisher.