

**“Nurturing the Church’s Angel”**  
**Sermon by Rev. Tom Warren**  
**Peace United Church of Christ**  
**Sunday, June 7, 2015**

On the upper west side of Manhattan, in the midst of all the hustle and bustle of New York City, lies one of the most famous mainline Protestant churches in America, pastored over the years by such powerhouse preachers as Harry Emerson Fosdick, William Sloane Coffin and James Forbes. Riverside Church was long understood as the mecca of progressive Christianity. Riverside Church, which holds membership in both the United Church of Christ and the American Baptist denomination, has lived over its 82 year history a deeply active faith dedicated to the social gospel and the cause of an inclusive church for all people long before it was popular to be inclusive. It’s history is quite impressive on many fronts, but in the last 20 years, it has been in the news—not for the great things it has done in the world, but for the nasty fights that they have had behind closed doors. Riverside Church has been fighting over how their money should be spent. They have been fighting about whether funds have been misappropriated. They have been fighting as to what worship style should prevail in their Sunday morning services. They have been fighting about who has the power in the church. Riverside Church, with its great social reputation, has more recently set the standard for petty and contentious church fights.

In our scripture reading this morning, we enter into the world that is wild and wooly, the world of the Book of Revelation. This Book, so despised and feared and misunderstood by Christians throughout history, is probably one of the most important Books of the Bible for our day and time. It is a Book about the early church’s struggle with the Roman Empire. It is Book written in a unique and particular style of writing called “apocalyptic”, which simply means “to reveal”. This is its genre. It is a type of writing, and it is a type of writing which includes a lot of symbolism and disturbing images that people have used and abused. It is, in the end, a Book of great hope for Christians of any age because it is a Book about God’s victory over the unjust empires of the world.

What I want to focus on with Revelation this morning is the audience to whom this letter is written, crafted by John of Patmos, probably a Jewish Christian imprisoned on the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea. John, in this letter, has received a revelation from God and is instructed to write this revelation to the seven churches in Asia. Now, what is interesting is to whom at each church John addresses this letter. You would think, perhaps, that this letter would go to the Consistory or perhaps the church president, or maybe, back then, to the bishop, but the letter goes to the angel of the church, and we are tempted by our popular images of angels to think of winged creatures or messengers who guard over the church, like Riverside Church which has a carved image of the angel, Gabriel, over its doorway, but in John’s letter to the churches, he consistently uses the singular form of the Greek word “for you”, and we might naturally assume that the “you” in the Book of Revelation and in this letter would be in the plural form because it is referring to all the people in the congregation as if I was to say to you, I would be referring (and you would assume that I would be referring) in the plural to all of you, but the “you” in this letter is singular and refers to the angel, so who is this angel to whom John is writing?

In his book “Unmasking the Powers”, Walter Wink writes that the angel of the church to whom John writes in the Book of Revelation is not something separate from the congregation, but it represents the spirit of the congregation as a whole. Through the angel, the faith community steps forth as a single collective entity. The angel represents the actual spirituality of the congregation as a whole, so the corporate personality of the church and its angel has no separate existence apart from the people and, conversely, the people have no unity apart from this angel. The angel of the church, and the people of the church, are the inner and outer aspects of one and the same reality. The people incarnate or embody the angelic spirit, and one cannot exist without the other, and what Wink says is “Every social

institution has its own angel. It has its own corporate spirit". Probably the best way for us to think about this is school spirit—what's going on there when school spirit is alive and engaged. Something is taking over there, the school spirit, and what Wink is saying is that every church has its angel which is its corporate spirit and that that corporate spirit actually influences the way we live, worship and do our activities in the local church, so some spiritual force is at work when we come together as Peace Church.

Now, what is important for us to focus on this morning is not simply to realize that every church has its own angel—that is, that every church has its own corporate spirituality—but what is important for us to realize is that church angels are not neutral. They are NOT neutral. Church angels can be healthy, whole and alive, or they can be disturbed, destructive, and even demonic, and church angels are healthy, whole and alive when a faith community is in sync with God's will and mission for that church, and the angel of a church turns demonic when a congregation turns its back on the tasks that God sets before it. Like many other churches in our world today, it could be said that perhaps Riverside Church has a disturbed angel.

I was thinking about this when I was in seminary, when we used to have workshops, and one of the workshops we had one day was the pastor of a local church who came in to talk to us about the angel of the church he was serving. He said to us "I didn't believe in this concept of local churches having angels until I came to this particular church." What he said was "When I engaged that church one-on-one with the individual members, they were beautiful, friendly, kind and generous, and then we would have our congregational meetings, and they would go nuts." The angel of the church would engage when that congregation came together, and because that angel was disturbed and congregation members were disturbed, those congregational meetings would be disastrous because there was an angel that was at work in that congregation.

Now, what John's letter to the angel of the churches in Revelation reminds us is that we must not only acknowledge our own church angel—that is, we must acknowledge our own collective spirit—but we must always work to nurture our angel. We must work to keep our angel healthy, to keep our corporate spirit whole, to pay close attention to how we behave as individuals within the congregation, being conscious of the fact that our behaviors affect the health of our corporate church angel and that our corporate church angel impacts the way that we behave.

This gentleman who came to our seminary, this minister, said "The nicest people in the church acted like nuts when they got together" because the angel was engaged, and he had to work long and hard to get that angel of the church healthy again.

So, what John of Patmos was saying to the churches was that, under this most difficult time in that century, under this time when the values and the behaviors of the culture around those early churches was hostile to the gospel, during this time he was encouraging those churches to pay attention to their community life, to pay attention to how they treat one another, to pay attention to how they speak to one another, and to how they deal with struggles in the local church, and that it is very important in terms of how to become a healthy congregation.

Now, my sense is that, at Peace Church, it seems that we are at a place where our angel, our corporate spirit, is relatively whole and healthy again, and our angel is well. As we continue to push forward into an unknown and exciting future, this is good to have our angel intact, and it is up to us to keep it that way. As we move into a time of vision, as we move into our awakenings process that is to come, as we start to grapple with some of the more difficult issues of what it means to be the church in 2015, we should do so always conscious of our angel, of keeping our angel healthy, of keeping our corporate spirit friendly, whole and open, and if we keep in sync with what God's will is for us and with what God's mission is for Peace Church, we will be okay because our angel will be well, and we will continue to grow in the faith.

So, we give thanks today for the reality of John's letter and that there are invisible forces at work in our world and in our churches, forces that can be powerful, productive and healthy, and we at Peace Church must remain committed to keeping our angel healthy, whole and going forward. Thanks be to God. Amen.