

HIGH HORSES STABLED

There's presence and absence in our relationship with God. We can be both far from God and near to God. This is why recent gospel readings have been emphasizing repentance; the process of turning back in God's direction so we might be near to God rather than far from God when salvation appears. But it's not just us who can be near and far. God also can be both present and absent; both near and far. The book of Exodus has been revealing this to us with some consistency.

This is now the ninth week that our first reading has come from the book of Exodus. A while ago now we heard of how God drew near to Moses in the form of a burning bush. God had heard the cry of God's people and was going to do something about Egypt's oppression of Israel. But here's the thing. Egypt had been oppressing Israel since Moses' birth and Moses is eighty by the time God shows up in the form of a burning bush. Where's God been all this time? And the burning bush is nice, but why not a face-to-face encounter and a handshake instead? God is present, but not altogether so. God draws near, but with reserve. God is both near and still far.

It's the same story today. God reassures an anxious Moses that God's not going to pull a disappearing act. God's presence shall remain and Moses and Israel shall have rest because of it. God is present. God is near. But God is also distant and far. Moses asks for the face-to-face encounter he didn't get at the time of the burning bush and God refuses. No one can see the face of God and live we're told. The closest God gets to Moses is the hand of God over his eyes until it's safe to look not at God's face, but at God's behind instead. Here too, there's presence and distance in our relationship with God and distance is not good for a relationship.

Recently I read an article about how life was for many children in communist Romania. In an effort to beef up the country's economic potential the communist dictator ordered that mothers and fathers have as many children as possible. Procreation to the greatest extent possible was labeled an act of patriotism. The end result was that already impoverished families had all kinds of kids they couldn't feed and many of these kids ended up in communist run orphanages, as did the kids who were born different in some way. This proved to be a disaster. It created a generation of zombies. The kids got little to no attention in the overrun orphanages. There was all kinds of emotional and social distance, and again, distance is not good for relationships. As studies of the children I've mentioned have now revealed, if a child is not a part of a loving, healthy, supportive relationship by the age of two at the latest, they never will be. To protect themselves from more pain and disappointment abandoned and neglected children will shut down. They'll withdraw into a shell from which they'll never fully emerge. Nothing could make it clearer that distance is not good for a relationship. I suppose this is why God created angels.

With none of us being able to see the face of God and live, God had to create some sort of workaround if God's relationship with us was every going to prosper. Angels, as in the heavenly creatures with wings and halos, are one such workaround. Angels are go-betweens. As they go about their business, angels sometimes close the gap between God and humankind and sometimes to great effect. The hymn "Angels We Have Heard on High" is an example of how effective angels can be. First an angel of the Lord and then a whole sky full of angels singing, "Glory to God in the highest" awaken and ignite a group of shepherd's relationships

with God. Thanks to an effective bunch of angels, the shepherds drop everything and travel into Bethlehem to see the Savior born for them; then telling everyone they encounter about this episode in their lives. Quite clearly angels, as in the heavenly creatures with wings and halos, can be quite effective at closing the gap between God and us. But angels also stand at a distance from us. Psalm 8 says we're a rung or two below angels and this can create problems. Distance of any kind simply is not good for relationships.

This is why God sent Jesus to become human in every respect. In Jesus, the gap between God and humankind has forever been closed. In Jesus, God and humankind are in the same place and on the same page all the time. It's why at the Last Supper Jesus tells Thomas whoever has seen him has seen God the Father. Jesus, it turns out, is even better at closing the gap between God and humankind than angels of the heavenly sort and what a difference this makes. Jesus gets people so excited about God that they drop their nets, leave their families, and follow after their Lord and our Lord. Jesus eventually gets people so excited about God that they get up and go to every nation, making disciples, baptizing in the Triune name of God, and encouraging obedience to Jesus' every command. But then, after about thirty years or so, Jesus ascends into heaven where he's been seated at the right hand of the Father for what will very soon be two thousand years. Once again, there's distance in our relationship with God. Once again, God is far, as God also remains near until the end of the age through the Holy Spirit and these mutual gatherings around word, water, wine, and bread. Jesus remains near. Jesus remains Emmanuel, as in God with us, but not as before. After the ascension, there's again distance in our relationship with God and this can be problematic. Just think about the time and place in which we live.

Everyday I drive to work and see either angrily worded or profanely worded political signs. Why are people so hot and bothered these days? Everyday I encounter flammable material on Facebook, as I also hear it and see it around me. Why have people become so uncouth and uncivil? Earlier this year every day brought more violence and unrest to our streets. Why? Just this month it was announced that 8 million American families have fallen into poverty since May thanks to COVID-19. Why are so many people falling through the cracks? Why is there such a tepid response to what's happening before our very eyes? In every case, I'd say it's because there's distance in our relationship with God and this creates all kinds of problems.

When God is perceived to be distant, people feel they have no choice but to take matters into their own hands. When God feels far off, people feel they have no choice but to play things the world's way; no matter how violent and vile it may be. When God's presence is a matter of debate, people feel they have no choice but to look after themselves in a dog eat dog world and this leads to all kinds of greed. As heavenly angels and Jesus have done in the past, who's going to close the current gap between God and humankind so that things can get better?

Well, I hope it's going to be you and me. We can be angels too. Having wings and halos is not a qualification that angels must possess. To be an angel you've simply got to be a messenger of God; a go-between for God. Today our second reading tells us that those who belonged to the church at Thessalonica were these kinds of angels; these kinds of messengers; so much so that our reading tells us Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy were left with little to do as they took the Good News of Jesus to the people of Greece. And you know what! If those at

Thessalonica can do it, so can we. In, by, and through the Holy Spirit, let's make it happen. In thought, word, and deed let's be angels who announce that God is much more near than many of our neighbors seem to think. Who knows! Maybe those who receive our angelic message will begin to share it with others, just as some shepherds did in and around Bethlehem two thousand years ago. Amen!