

**New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario**

**Sunday, May 6, 2018**

**Rev. Dr. David Thompson**

**“Roots and Wings”**

Look to the rock from which you were hewn!

They shall mount up with wings as eagles.

Kathy was a devoted Christian Sunday school teacher. For anniversary Sunday the church decided to invite the children of Abraham faiths for an Interfaith service. There were Jews and Muslims and Christians together, and they came with their children, who were invited to go downstairs to experience a Christian Sunday school.

Kathy thought that her Sunday school class might offer her the evangelical opportunity of her lifetime and so she said that she would offer a fifty-dollar reward to anyone in her class who could tell her who was the greatest man who ever lived? The name for the prize would be revealed on a special piece of paper in a sealed envelope with fifty dollars in it.

Her best Christian student Jane, thought that it would be Noah, as he saved all the animals. “No” said Kathy looking very disappointed, “I understand why you might say that, but that was not the name written on the prize piece of paper.”

The next person was a young Muslim boy who thought that the greatest person in the world had to be the prophet Mohammed. Kathy said that she understood why he would say that, being a Muslim, but that was not the name written on the prize piece of paper.

Then a young Jewish boy began to wave his hand and Kathy resolutely ignored him and went around the room asking the other children. As she went around the room, Kathy was disappointed with the answers she got. One said, "I think the greatest man who ever lived was Alexander the Great because he conquered the whole world." Another girl who read a lot of books thought that it had to be Albert Einstein because he was the world's smartest man.

Kathy said she understood why she might say that, but that was not the name written on the piece of paper.

Finally, she called on the Jewish boy Reuben, who still had his hand in the air. "I think the greatest man who ever lived was Jesus Christ." said Reuben. Kathy was completely shocked, but very pleased! She opened the envelope and gave him the \$50 reward. As she did so, she said, "Well, Reuben, I know you are Jewish! I'm very surprised that you should be the only one with the right answer. How is it that you think that?"

"Well, to tell you the truth," Reuben replied, as he pocketed the money, "I think it was Moses, but business is business."

Today we celebrate 185 years since the founding of the church we now call New St. James. The congregation was constituted in 1833. It was the year that Timothy Eaton was born.

1833 was the year slavery was abolished in the Canadas. The respected currency was the pound sterling. It was not until 1858 that the first Canadian coins were issued at the new Canadian mint. Until then various coins were used. Imagine counting the Horton cups back then!

In 1789 Dundas street was created between York and London, and Young street was opened as a road. There were often log roads, but these were very rough and often petered out into tracks. The waterways were much better. In the winter they were frozen paths, and, in the summer, they were plied by boats.

In 1833 the first car in Canada was 34 years away. People got around by walking and by horseback.

Proudfoot, often considered the founding minister of the congregation that became New St. James used to walk everywhere. He had no horse.

He was a vigorous man. He would walk for 18 miles to a preaching point and then deliver a sermon longer than Les Files and Andrew Reid and David Thompson all put together. He was good for **6 hours!**  
My how times have changed!

I was listening to someone talking proudly about the fact that their particular institution was 100 years old. New St. James is still thriving at age 185! That is some seven generations who have passed through New St. James.

But we all know that traditional churches like New St. James are challenged today. Church attendance is on the decline in Canada. 42% of Canadians attended church once a month in 1988. Those who attend church every week in Canada is now only 13%.

185 years ago, nearly everyone attended church on a regular basis. The Scots attended Presbyterian churches established by Scotland in the new country. One simply got the Scots together in a court house and began church. So, so different today!

The challenges that lie before us however have opportunities within them. Church has changed from something everybody did to something else today. Instead of feeling obligation to attend church, people want to go to church because it has meaning for them. We are recovering the purpose of church. Today I want to talk about the modern church as a place to find roots and wings.

The Isaiah passage asking the people to look to the rock from which they were hewn was delivered to a people who were discouraged in exile. It was a sermon full of hope. Come back to your roots it said. There is strength there for a time like this. Isaiah was a preacher of hope. He said about the exiles “They shall mount up with wings as eagles, they shall run and not be weary, walk and not faint.

When he wrote this verse, he had no idea how often it would be quoted in the future to give people hope in the midst of their despair. Isaiah was all about roots and wings.

As the modern church we can be too!

The prodigal son had roots. His father was wealthy and respected as a landowner. Oh yes, the prodigal had good roots. He asked for money, his part of the future estate to be given ahead of time to him. The money could have given him wings. No doubt his father hoped it would. It did not. He squandered it all on a life of debauchery.

So, when he bottomed out, the prodigal did something very distasteful to a young Jewish boy. The only way he could earn money was to look after pigs. Below minimum wages, starving and eating what he was serving to the pigs, **one day he came to himself**. He came to the startling conclusion that he had roots!

He did not need to languish in a pigsty. He could go home.

Next comes the amazing behaviour of his roots. The father who stood at the edge of his property everyday, looking for his son, just in case he might come that day, is one day rewarded by the sight of his son. He is overjoyed and runs to meet this bedraggled figure who was probably in rags.

The son feels that he has to say that he does not deserve, but the dad celebrates his return, to the dismay of the elder brother. The fatted calf is roasted, a banquet is prepared and the young man finds himself home again. He has love, purpose, hope once again.

How does this happen?

He goes back to where he is known and loved and cared about. Have you done that? And the father, a symbol for God, puts the ring of authority from his own finger on his son's hand. Instead of a reprimand he empowers him. He gives him wings! That is what God can do for us today when we have wandered away from God and have decided to return.

There's an old song 'There's a way back to God from the dark paths of sin, there's a door that is open and you may go in...A great church always has an open door.

Imagine for a moment if the father had died and the elder brother had been running the show? There would be no welcome home there. We can be sure of that. Fortunately, the father dances to the rhythm of a different drum. Great churches do too. Its called compassion, service being there in a time of trouble, going the extra mile, forgiveness and restoration...New St. James stacks up well in this scale of doing things.

I want to tell you a story about roots and what it took for a man to get his wings back. His road had been a spiritual one which he abandoned. Only when he realized his spiritual needs did his world go back together. Until that happened he just like the prodigal... a wounded bird that fell out of the nest and was unable to fly.

There are a lot of references in Scripture to guardian angels. Jesus himself said: "See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven".

An angel appeared to Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. In the story in the book of Acts when Peter got out of prison, he was released by an angel. Acts also says that the girl who answered the door, since she believed that Peter was still in prison, thought it must be Peter's angel rather than Peter himself, indicating that it was

thought at the time that we had guardian angels. What happened to that teaching in our tradition?

We protestants have not emphasized the guardianship of angels like our Catholic brothers and sisters. But here is a story for the books.

Jack was raised in the church as a devout catholic. At Mass they let the guardian angel into the pew first. They really *believed* in Guardian angels.

They had a beautiful special prayer: “Angel of God my guardian dear, to whom God’s love entrusts me here, ever this day be at my side, to lead and guard, to light and guide. Amen.”

These were Jack’s roots.

But at age 14 Jack’s brother died of leukemia. A slow seething kind of anger began to grow in Jack like a piece of metal glowing first red, orange, yellow and then white hot. He felt like he was going to explode.

His anger did not diminish despite what his father tried. He demolished punching bags, lashed out in a fight against his best friend. He became very intense. He became a perfectionist. He blew off his angry energy in sports and in raw aggression...

Like many a person before him, Jack left the church. “How could a God of love...? was his question like so many questions today and leave churches over...His grandmother once had tried to tell him about angels, but he would have none of it. Once he was supposed to set the table for his guardian angel but he threw the plate against the kitchen window breaking both with a loud crash. He began to think that he had been stupid to ever make a place in his life for a guardian angel or go to church. God didn’t care. He had taken his brother. “How could a God of love...?

No, he was angry and he buried his faith and the church. “Stuff and nonsense” he thought. His roots were gone. And he wouldn’t be back. Church? Guardian angels? Dum, dummer!

He got a summer sales job where he met his wife Marie. He proposed to her immediately. For some reason she accepted.

His anger against God and the church continued. He tried to lose himself in work and became a workaholic working 7 days a week. He had no friends, no social life and no outside interests. He never even noticed that he and his wife Marie were drifting apart.

On Easter weekend when he was working on a totally forgettable proposal, his wife Marie came into the den. “Jack, she said, “I am leaving you. I think I want a divorce.” She explained that the marriage was a disaster with a husband who shut her out of his life totally. “I am taking the kids to mother’s. It is up to you whether we come back,” and with that she left.

Jack was stunned. **It was like his brother dying all over again.** He went into the kitchen and began smashing everything; glasses, plates, utensils all went flying. “How dare she leave me? How could she do this to me?” On and on he raged.

He reached into the last cabinet in the kitchen where the old dishes from his roots were kept. They were the ones he had used when he was a child, when he used to set the place for the guardian angel at the table. He brought out the stack of plates throwing them forcefully at the sink. But when he came to the last plate he could not pick it up. He tried to pry it up with both hands. No luck.

Then he heard a gentle voice that said “Make room for me at the table.” It was a beautiful voice like an operatic soprano singing softly.

“Who are you? Jack asked.

The voice answered, “You know me Jack, make room for me at your table.”

Numb as he was Jack did know the voice. Without thinking he brushed off the table. This time he picked up the plate without any problem and set it at the end where he usually sat. He retrieved a knife, fork and spoon, adding a napkin and an aluminum drinking glass that had survived his anger. Then he brushed off the chair and set it in place.

As he looked at the place setting, for the first time in years he began to feel an incredible peace. Then he bowed his head and prayed the prayer he had learned as a child: ‘Angel of God, my guardian dear.

When he finished the prayer, he began talking to the angel about all the things that had gone wrong with his life and most of all about Marie’s leaving him. He talked for over an hour with the distinct impression that he was being listened to by someone who really cared for him. He felt that the angel was encouraging him not only to change but that he **could** change- the anger was gone...gone...

Suddenly the door opened and Marie entered. She was horrified at what she saw. Then she came across the room and threw her arms around Jack and they both cried together.

“I couldn’t sleep she said. “It was like I heard a voice and it was saying ‘Jack needs you,’ over and over again, and so I came.”

Marie took him into the bathroom where she washed up his cut hands and bandaged the one that was bleeding badly. She put him to bed without another word and he slept like a baby until noon. He got up and went into the kitchen. It was all beautifully clean except for the broken windows and scratches everywhere. “It took me hours to clean it up” said Marie “It filled bags and bags of trash.”

He started to apologize, and she stopped him. “Please tell me one thing,” she said. “Why did you break up everything in the kitchen and then go to the trouble of setting the table? She pointed to the old plate and the aluminum glass and the table setting.

Jack told her everything. He told her about the angel and the voice and the plate and that he wanted to keep a place setting always for his angel. Marie smiled. “I think we can arrange that” she said.

Jack put his marriage back together. He forgot about his compulsive working and went into his own business. All his priorities changed. He was a happy man once more. He was back home and this time he not only had roots but after the peace came and the anger left, he discovered that his home and a good marriage and spirituality, *had given him wings*. And to remind him even after many years later, he still sets a place setting for his angel.

A great church home gives us roots and wings. When we come home God is there to welcome us and starts celebrating with us. We find true community. We can find our souls again in a great church because friends are there for us, are kind to us, pray for us. We discover second and third chances. And gradually we heal and we discover our wings and we begin to soar. We could be a prodigal or someone smashed around by life, but here is home, where the plates are familiar and the mystical experience of God takes place in a plate that just won't lift to be smashed. And we find ourselves, we come to ourselves. We find God.

Let us all at New S. James Look to the rock from which we were hewn 185 years ago, then mount up with wings as eagles and seize the future...Roots and wings!

Let us all pray!

“Angel of God our guardian dear, to whom God's love entrusts us here, ever this day be at our side, to lead and guard, to light and guide for the next 185 years. Amen.”