

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
“*The Angelus*: ‘Acceptable Worship with Reverence and Awe’”
The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper
Hebrew Scripture: Isaiah 58:9b-14
Christian Scripture: Hebrews 12:18-29
Sunday, 25 August 2019



As many of you know, I grew-up a ‘military brat’. I lived on numerous bases. Every day, three tunes were played over loud speakers strategically located around the bases.



In the morning, “Reveille” played to mark the beginning of the day. At 4pm, “Retreat” played. For “Retreat”, everyone on the base had to halt and stand still. All conversations paused. Kids stopped playing, even if they were about to ‘capture the flag’ or even if they were in

the middle of an epic chestnut-throwing ‘war’. Everyone became attentive. Everyone listened. Everyone, as if hypnotized, stood reverently at attention as “Retreat” played. It was a moment of pause. A moment of rest. A moment of reflection. It was a communal ‘time-out’. I dared not to continue my play. If I did not halt at attention, every other parent on the base would speak to my father about it the next morning.



In the evening, at about 9pm, ‘Taps’ would play to mark the start of quiet hours on base. I was raised with this periodic routine.



The last church I ministered to in South Africa was surrounded by mosques, and thus minarets from which five times a day *muezzins* would issue calls to prayer.



While it annoyed some of my parishioners, I loved these calls to prayer. I thought they were hauntingly beautiful. During my later years in South Africa, I commuted back and forth to the United States. Because I came to admire the Islamic faith so much, I would always visit the Middle East in transit.



First Dubai. Then Doha. Then Abu Dhabi.



My family thought I was barking mad, because every morning I would wake-up in my hotel room before dawn, throw open the windows and listen to the Call to Prayer at daybreak.



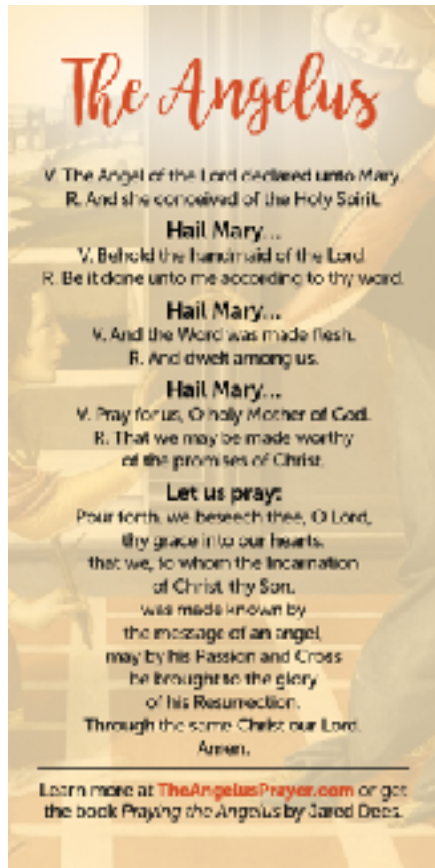
On every trip, we visited the city's 'Great Mosque'. I never left the mosque without hearing a call to prayer.



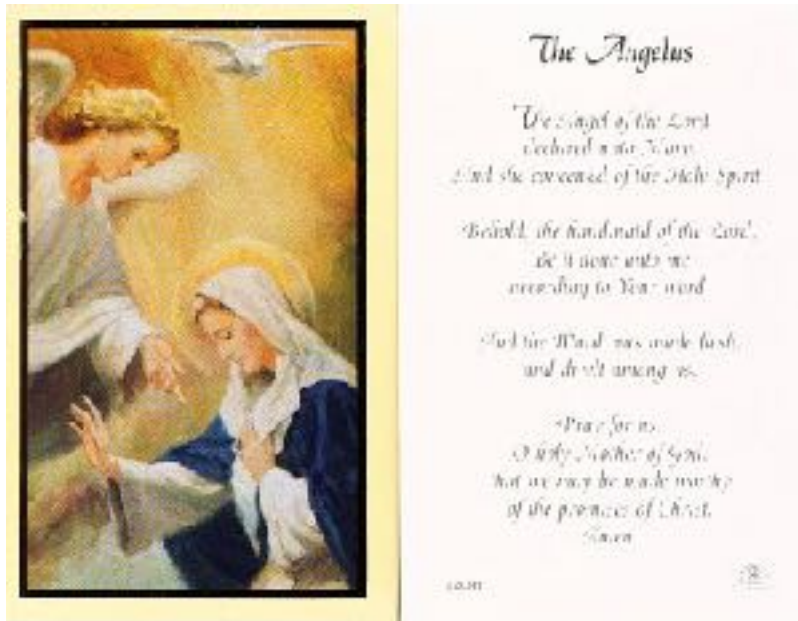
So, I'm existentially drawn to Jean-Francois Millet's oil painting *The Angelus*, the first in our sermon series entitled 'Iconic Devotional Paintings'. I can't stop gazing at it. I never tire of sinking into it, again, and deeper.

All art, as well as scripture, is open to interpretation. The painting depicts two peasants, perhaps husband and wife, bowing in a field over a basket of potatoes. When first commissioned in the late 1850s, the painting's title was *Prayer for the Potato Crop*. So, the prayer was likely one of thanksgiving. However, when the sponsor failed to take possession of the painting, Millet added a steeple to a structure in the background, transforming it into a church. Millet then changed the name of the painting to *The Angelus*. As any good French Catholic would intend, by adding the steeple and changing the name, the viewer can hear the bells from the church that marked the end of a day's work. So, for me the painting became one signifying a ritualistic, routine, and faithful daily devotion. Perhaps that is why I gravitate to the image so much. The painting reminds me of my happy and safe childhood on military bases and the last church I served surrounded by mosques and beautiful calls to prayer. And perhaps I stare at the painting so much because it represents something that I have lost and something that I desperately want again: intentional, purposeful, regular, and daily worship. I believe almost all of us have

almost all but lost it, except for those precious few who have carved out time for intentional peace and meditation.

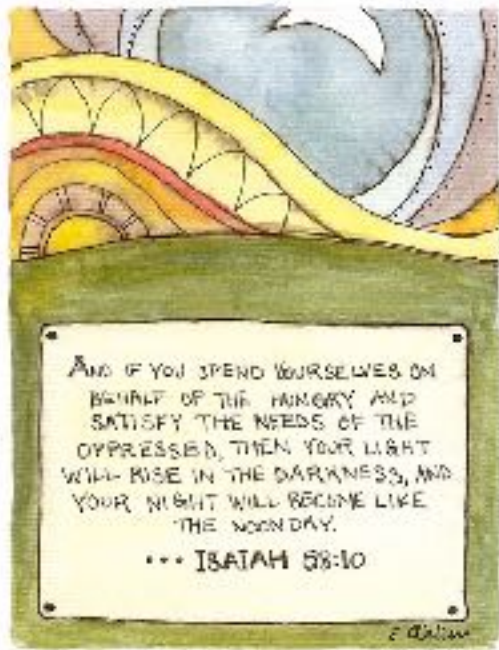


Millet's painting *The Angelus* takes its name from a Catholic devotional prayer. 'The Angelus' means 'The Angel', and the angel refers to the Angel of the Lord, Gabriel, who announced to Mary that she would carry the Messiah (Luke 1:26-38). So, the prayer commemorates The Incarnation.



The prayer dates back over seven hundred years, to the eleventh century when it was prayed, as the painting suggests, in the evening when the Compline bell was rung. Monks and nuns in monasteries and convents traditionally prayed *The Angelus* three times a day: at six, noon and six in the evening. The devotion is even observed by some Anglican and Lutherans (see the gathering meditation in your service bulletin).

What can the painting convey to us today? To answer that, we examine our morning scriptures.



Our reading from Isaiah basically advises us to do away with oppression (Isaiah 58: 9a-10). This is a political statement. And this recommendation for justice is saturated with agrarian images from which Millet was likely inspired. If people’s burdens of oppression are lifted, then the Lord will “satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land” (Isaiah 58:11a); “you will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail” (Isaiah 58:11b).



The advice quickly turns to a recommendation to set aside time to devote oneself to worship, especially during the Sabbath. “If you

keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath [...], if you call it a delight [...], if you honor it [...], then [...] I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land and feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob” (Isaiah 58:13-14). Isaiah is clearly calling for his people and us to take a communal time-out, to intentionally stop, to worship, to periodically pray, and to ‘spiritually reboot’.



In our Christian scriptures from which I took the title for this sermon (Hebrews 12:28), the Apostle Paul encourages his readers and hearers to come before God, now that God through Jesus has made Godself more than approachable. In the past, our and Paul’s ancestors in faith approached God with great anxiety, trembling and fear.



In this scripture, Paul essentially recalls that all who approached God formally needed infant or adult diapers - for the anxiety induced by an

interaction with God would like cause an involuntary evacuation of the bowels. But through the Incarnation, through Christ, through Jesus, God became approachable. Anyone can! Everyone should! No special occasion needed. No minister, no priest needed! No special time needed. Anytime. In fact, all the time: Commune with God. Paul, even invoked the angels when writing his letter (I'm sure, specifically to dovetail with my sermon this morning on *The Angelus*): “You have come to [...] the heavenly Jerusalem [...] you have come to thousands of thousands of angels in joyful assembly [...] to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant (Hebrews 12:22 and 24).



Paul concluded with advice: “Let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe [...]”. And there we have it: Thanksgiving. Jesus, the Incarnation. The Angels. The encouragement to worship and give devotion to God.



May I propose that each Sunday a deacon or other lay leader intentionally ring our church bell at 10:00am, immediately after the Gathering Music, calling us and the entire community to worship? If that goes well, I propose our church ring its bell at noon each day, twelve times, reminding this community that God is worshiped here at Centre Congregational Church in Brattleboro and has been since 1816. In this way, the words of Paul might be honored and the art of Millet inspiring.



This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God and the people of God responded, “Amen”.