

**“On WHOSE Wings?”**

Luke 4:1-13; Psalm 91:9-12

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My love for **music**... both ‘solid gold 70’s rock’ and the ‘streets of gold’ Christian variety built on ‘THE Rock’ ... is ‘pretty much’ common knowledge. As far as the latter is concerned, the reasons are simple. First and foremost, **Christian music**... be it contemporary OR traditional... can help us to **remember** both **Scripture** and the **truths taught** by that Scripture SO much better than any number of sermons or Bible studies. For instance... *“Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.”* A popular praise song by Amy Grant... AND, more importantly, **Psalm 119:105**. I am honest enough to admit that most of you are likely to recall the Sending hymn long after you’ve forgotten whatever ‘gems of wisdom’... or is that ‘GERMS’ of wisdom... that I might have had to offer *during* the service!

And this is not to speak of the JOYFUL SPIRIT of God we can experience in much richer ways when we sing. NOW, that’s not to say that everybody AROUND us shares in that ‘joy’ when we open up in our mouths to sing, but what THEY hear isn’t really what’s important... but rather, what GOD hears. Like I’ve said before, I believe God is ‘tone-deaf’... he doesn’t care if you are ‘on key’... He just LOVES to hear you sing!

Music also can expose us to a depth of musical experiences from different traditions. African-American, Native American, Scotch-Irish, European, Jewish... there are any number of faithful expressions of music that can make our own experience of God SO much richer.

As I read both the Psalms and Gospel reading for today, I was reminded of a **song** (I know... SHOCKER!) that has become a favorite in many different faith traditions: *“On Eagles’ Wings.”* It was written by a Roman Catholic priest named **Jan Michael Joncas** who, besides being a songwriter, currently teaches at 2 institutions of higher learning in MN and one in IN (Notre Dame). (Given the weather in the ‘frozen Nawth’ these days, I’ll bet he’d sure like a little ‘break’ from his teaching gigs about now... ☺) His teaching and musical accomplishments are particularly impressive when you consider that he once suffered from a debilitating muscular disease “Guillain-Barre’ Syndrome,” experiencing severe paralysis in 2003... but since then has seen great healing in recent years.

While Joncas has written over 300 songs, “*On Eagles’ Wings*” is by far his most well-known composition. It was written in **1976** while visiting a friend whose father had suffered a fatal heart attack. Sung for first time publicly at the wake service. Generally recognized as being based on Psalm 91, and subsequently quoted, at least in part, in both the Gospels of Matthew and Luke:

***“For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” (Psalm 91:11-12)***

Now, quick, you Bible trivia buffs, these words were spoken by... the *devil*. Remember that the next time you’re watching “Jeopardy”, and don’t say ‘Jesus.’ I mention this NOT for your ‘game show expertise,’ but to remind us of all that just because one quotes Scripture does NOT automatically make them a trustworthy source. 😊 (Present company *excluded*, of course!) Look how the evil one used some of God’s own words in an attempt to manipulate, to *tempt*, the Son of God. The devil knows the Bible better than most ALL of us. He is believed to be a ‘fallen angel’ ... and to some extent, aren’t we ALL...?

Yet while this whole encounter of Jesus with the devil ends with a reference to **angels** ‘bearing up’ the Lord... as well as the Matthew version ending with ***“and angels came and attended him,” (Matthew 4:4)***... the beloved song associated with the role of ‘angels’ is entitled ***“On Eagles Wings.” On WHOSE wings?***

Well, perhaps there were some other Scriptures at play in the mind of Fr. Joncas as he wrote this song in tribute to his close, bereaved friend. In his desire to offer words of **strength** and encouragement for one who was **hurting**, perhaps those famous words of Isaiah we heard at the beginning of worship were buzzing around in his head: ***“Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.” (Isaiah 40:31)***

OR, perhaps the ‘prolific priest’ was a scholar of the Torah, the first 5 books of the Bible, and recalled some of God’s words to Moses just before he ascended Mount Sinai to receive the 10 Commandments: ***“You have seen... how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.” (Exodus 19:4)*** Like Isaiah, words that are a reminder of God’s help in times of trouble.

So... 'on *angels*' wings?' Or 'on *eagles*' wings?' While there is no direct explanation from the author on his choice of 'winged creatures,' what he DID say about the underlying meaning of this hymn is that, like the 91<sup>st</sup> Psalm from which it substantively comes, it is to **express TRUST in God *in spite of ADVERSITY***... in the 'middle of the war' that followers of God find themselves in daily. Whether 'angels' or 'eagles,' either one is but "a **metaphor** to depict **God's high, lofty, SECURE PLACES**"... that in ALL circumstances, we are to believe in **God's protection** and **providence**.

This season of Lent begins with Ash Wednesday... immediately preceded by Mardi Gras. Lent is to be a time of **repentance**, where we focus on all of the challenges we face in leading a life that God would be proud of. It follows a season in which we **celebrate** so much that is good about our earthly lives here in S. LA: friends... family... joyous, silly, carefree celebrations of life in which we observe what might be considered a biblical principle: "*Eat, drink, and be merry.*" (Found, more or less, in *Isaiah 22:13, Eccles. 8:15, 1 Cor. 15:32, and Luke 12:19*)

What most often gets lost in that quote is a common last phrase: "*For tomorrow we die.*" Remember what I said about the use, and ab-use, of Bible quotes?

Anyway, as we read the opening verse of this passage, it says that "***Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness.***" (Luke 4:1) Jesus had just had that euphoric experience of being baptized by the Holy Spirit in the Jordan River, His Father proclaiming how **pleased** He was with His Son. And how much time did Jesus have in 'basking in the glory' of being 'full of the Spirit' (as opposed to those *other* 'spirits' we might have been 'full of' this carnival season)? How long could He sit around a fire with his buds and reflect on this 'inspiring' event of His baptism? NONE. ZERO. He is **immediately under attack** by the forces of evil in this earthly kingdom.

Which should remind us of when to be most concerned about being attacked by the devil: when things are going GREAT! When we are 'on top of the world' is just when we can hear that voice saying, 'If you're so *GREAT*, just throw yourself down. OF COURSE God's angels... or eagles... will 'bear you up.' I mean, IF you really ARE a 'son' or 'daughter' of God...'

If we are to lay claim to the same **providence** and **protection** that Jesus bears witness to, let us follow His example. In 'answering the call' to defeat the tactics of "the deceiver," let

us 'D.W.J.D.' (Do What Jesus Did). First and foremost in this passage, Jesus used **Scripture**. To EACH AND EVERY ONE of the challenges placed before Him by Satan, He quoted a Bible verse. In fending off the attacks of the evil one, **"God's Word is sharper than any two-edged sword."** (Heb. 4:12)

It is in that first challenge, in which the evil one tried to work on the human weakness of Christ, of how mere food would be enough to satisfy him, that Jesus spoke those famous words: **"Man does not live by bread alone."** (Luke 4:4) I really like the Matthew translation, however, which adds a very important phrase: **"But by every word that comes from the mouth of God."** (Matt. 4:4) If we really want to be 'strong' in facing the challenges of everyday life, it is not simply physical food that will sustain us... but spiritual nourishment. **"Every word that comes from the mouth of God."**

It is perhaps that second quote from 'God's mouth' that might most relate >> to this Lenten season: **"Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only."** (Luke 4:8) Much focus at the beginning of Lent is to consider what we might 'give up' in order to show ourselves a better SERVANT of God. We usually focus on food and drink... from sweet treats to sweet beverages. But in a larger sense, what is it in our lives that REALLY stands in the way of 'worshipping' and 'serving' God ONLY. What is it that we put AHEAD of our service to Christ? Our comfort? Our pleasure? Our work? Our play? Are there ways in which we 'sell our souls' to the devil... and 'sell short' our God? In those 40 days that we share with Jesus in contemplating our relationship with our Heavenly Father, how should we ask ourselves how can we better **"Worship the Lord... and serve him only"?**

So, did the author choose the image of *one eagle* to describe this one Lord God whom alone we are to worship and serve? OR, are we lifted up on *multiple* 'eagles' wings... as in multiple 'angels' that are there to protect us? There has been debate about the song's title: where to place the apostrophe after **"eagle."** Father Joncas initially wrote the title "On Eagle's Wings," which he said "would apply the **single eagle** image"... that as believers, we are united under **"One Lord, one faith, one baptism."** However, "On Eagles' Wings," with the apostrophe after the "s," could be appropriate as well. "Either can work grammatically," the priest said.

“On Eagles’ Wings’ (in the **plural**) would instead speak of the manifold (many different) ways that the one God has drawn people to himself.”

Whether one eagle or multiple eagles... whether an eagle or an angel... I think that the point of this song, and the passages they relate to is this: in whatever trials and temptations we face, we can always TRUST in God’s protection and providence. When we FALL... when we FAIL... we WILL be **raised up**. It may be the ONE True God who picks us up... that singular ‘eagle’ who swoops in to grasp us; who will never let go. Or, our help may come from one of God’s MANY angels... angels who may bear a striking resemblance to YOU and ME. And so, in this season of preparation for the triumph of the Easter Cross and empty tomb, let us be ever mindful that we do not travel this journey alone. That the point is NOT if it’s ‘eagles’ or ‘angels,’ but only that in ALL circumstances, through Christ, we WILL be ‘high and lifted up’... it doesn’t really matter ‘**on WHOSE wings**’...

#### INTRO TO “On Eagle’s Wings”

Our closing hymn, as should come as no surprise, is... “On Eagle’s Wings”! Fr. Joncas once said about his ‘creation,’ “I am Amazed to find cong. singing the entire thing, because I think that the verses are somewhat difficult to sing.” Pretty phenomenal, given the widespread popularity of this hymn, eh? Perhaps indicative of the spiritual truth that what we get the most **benefit** and **joy** from can also be quite **difficult**.

#### CHARGE

In April of 1976 a plaque commemorating the first singing of this song was dedicated in the church in Omaha NE. A local writer named Michael Kelly wrote >> these words about the event: “Sung by hundreds of millions, translated into dozens of languages and played in the presence of popes, presidents and other world leaders, “On Eagle’s Wings” started with a poignant irony: It was first played not for the famous but at services for a man whose name was not widely known ...” In the same way, the promised protection of God ‘lifted up’ in this song is not first given to the ‘famous,’ but for those ‘whose names are not widely known.’ Simple ‘bird brains,’ if you will... just like you and me.

As you and I go out into that world ‘**on a wing and a prayer,**’ we KNOW that we do not go alone. That the Spirit of the living God... ...And all God’s **eagles** said...’