

The Burial of the Dead

Psalm 121

John 10:11-16

The Rev'd Samuel T. Vaught
Donna Gray: 7 June 2025
Saint Paul's Church, Stockbridge

I speak in the name of the living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

In the last few months of her life, Donna Gray would come into this church and pray. In this place where she prayed for decades, this winter, Donna made a new habit of joining me for Evening Prayer once or twice a week, walking through the back door at 5:00, sitting in one of the half pews near the front, and praying the Evening office as the vesper light dimmed.

This is a place Donna loved, a holy place to which she felt drawn, the place where she and Jon were married, a place she would come for quiet even in the years she was attending church elsewhere, a place that when she was coming here on Sundays, she would sneak in and out of, sitting quietly and unassumingly in the back. And so it is good to be gathered here today. It is good to be here together to commend Donna to God. Jon, Abby, and Jon, with your whole family, with all of Donna's dear friends, may you all know how good it is to be here, how welcome you are always through these doors that are never locked, in this place where Donna felt so at home.

As we began offering public Evening Prayer this year, it was usually just Donna and me here at 5 on a given weekday. After our prayers, we would talk a little, and then Donna would make her way to the back door to leave. Eventually, Donna would offer to turn out the lights that illuminate the carved wooden angels that line the ceiling of the church. Knowing they would need to be put to bed for the night, Donna made it her task to flip the small switch in the back while I took care of things up here. "I'll get the angels," she'd say. Her way of saying goodbye. "Good night, I'll take care of the angels." "I'll get the girls," sometimes. It was a ritual as regular as the prayers themselves. And it has heightened my awareness of them in our space. This church is covered with angels, actually. Carved in wood and stone, fixed in glass. Doing for us what they always do in the stories of scripture: announcing God's presence, drawing attention to a reality greater and deeper than we can see or hear. And so here in this place where we celebrate and draw comfort in God's unseen presence with us, where we pray together and break bread together and bring whatever we have on our hearts: our hopes and dreams, our longings and loves, our doubts and our fears—this is a good place for angels.

Angels show up at the birth of Jesus, and sing about what has taken place. There are angels at the empty tomb of Jesus, telling his frightened disciples that he is not there—he is risen. Angels are messengers. They announce things. They help us make sense of God's presence—above all, of God's abiding presence with us in Jesus. In the one who promised never to leave us. The one who called himself the good shepherd, and who laid down his life for us. Who rose from the dead and gave us the gift of life, first announced by an angel.

"I am the good shepherd," Jesus said. "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep...I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep."

In the year and a half I knew her, I got just a glimpse of that self-deprecating sense of humor that I'm sure you all knew so well in Donna. She made the comment just a few weeks ago to please keep her funeral simple because, of course, no one would want to come anyway. Well, here you all are. It was hard, I think, for Donna to watch those she loved grapple with her illness. Her self-effacing nature betrayed a deeper orientation that looked outwards to others, always away from herself—caring more about the effects of her illness on her husband and children than on her own body. Concerned that she would be a burden. An orientation that came, I think, in no small part, from her emulation of Jesus, her good shepherd, who came not to be served but to serve, and who laid down his own life for Donna and for the life of the world.

Donna took her faith in Jesus seriously. She took it far too seriously to ever trivialize it, or to give up on it, even when it was baffling to her, even when she felt the devastation of God's absence. I don't want to bother God with my prayers, she would say. Why don't you pray for me, I don't think God's listening to me. It was a kind of faithfulness that resisted easy answers and cliché. Donna was no Pollyanna. As she was dying, there was no "everything happens for a reason." None of that "God needs another angel" garbage with Donna. Donna could get mad at God. She was not ready to go. It all seemed so unfair. And she could say so. She could say so in the way only someone who was steeped in a deep, prayerful relationship with God could. She would not let God off the hook. Even in her doubt and disappointment there she was, in the third row, duking it out with the creator of the world, and revealing to me the deepest well of faith. Faith in the good shepherd who leaves the 99 behind to go in search of the one lost sheep, the shepherd who walks through the valley of the shadow of death with us, getting down into the ditch with us, not to give us clichés or a genie's magic, but to hold us by the hand, to get onto the cross himself, and save us.

Eventually this spring, it was too hard for Donna to make it to Evening Prayer. Just one loss in the midst of many. The last time she came, after we read the psalms and spoke the Magnificat and prayed together, we talked, and then, as usual, "I'll get the angels." It will be hard to sit in the church every evening at 5 and pray the evening prayers, to look at the illuminated angels and walk back myself to turn out the lights, without thinking of Donna. They are now a reminder of her presence, too.

"I'll take care of the angels," she said. Well, Donna, we'll let the angels take care of you now, my friend, and lead you home to that place where with those who have gone before, you are safe in the keeping of the good shepherd. Into paradise may the angels lead you. At your coming, may the martyrs receive you, and bring you into the holy city Jerusalem. May choirs of angels receive you, and with Lazarus, who once was poor, may you have everlasting rest. Amen.