

GUARDIAN ANGELS

“For I tell you that in heaven their angels always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven.” This is not the part of the passage that normally jumps out at us. In fact, it is possible to read this portion of Scripture many times and not even notice that angels are mentioned. But the statement seems pretty clear, when we stop to look at it. Jesus does seem to be telling us that there are angels assigned to each and every child, and that these angels have direct access to God.

In context, the statement is clearly a warning: See that you do not despise one of these little ones because (if you need a “because”) they have angels watching over them! I had not really thought about it much for years, but it caught my eye a few months back and I have been wondering ever since: Whatever happened to the angels?

“Are not all angels ministering spirits sent forth to serve, for the sake of those who are to obtain salvation?” The book of Hebrews makes it sound like a question, and it sounds to my ears like a very good question. So I think at first, “Oh goody – he’s going to answer this interesting question.” But then the text moves right on, making it clear that it was a rhetorical question. He means the question like, “For pity’s sake, doesn’t everybody know this?” And I think, “Oh whew – glad I didn’t raise my hand.”

We know what happens when a subject like that gets our attention after a period of not noticing. We do not notice angels at all for years, and then suddenly they are everywhere we look. Angels are mentioned 180 times in the New Testament alone, and 114 times in the Old Testament. If our eyes stops deleting them out and the mind stops ignoring them – and if we read the Book very much – we start running into angels every place we look. So I started wondering: Whatever happened to the angels? We do not talk about the angels anymore. We could follow the members of this church around everywhere they went for months and never hear the word mentioned, unless somebody happened to be talking about baseball or it was Christmastime and somebody was working on a pageant.

Is there any such thing as an angel? Has anybody here ever encountered an angel? Does anybody here know of an instance in

the last hundred years or so when an angel did anything important, significant, or even interesting? Does anybody here actually and truly believe that angels exist? Whatever happened to the angels?

To get technical for a minute, there are supposedly many ranks or levels of Celestial Beings – nine actually. Though we lump them all into the category of ANGELS, the lowest and least powerful level is made up of the Angels. Mostly this is the level that humans encounter. The next level up is Archangels. These are beings so powerful and wise that humans cannot really conceive of it. However, on rare occasions, a human might encounter (or rather, be encountered by) an Archangel. In the Bible, it is mentioned only three times: once when the Archangel Gabriel is sent to help the prophet Daniel understand the vision of the end times (Daniel 8:16-26); again when Gabriel is sent to tell Zechariah of the birth of his son, John the Baptist (Luke 1:19-20); and finally when Gabriel appears to Mary to tell her about the birth of Jesus (Luke 1:26-38).

So humans, at our present level of development, do not encounter the angelic beings very often, and Archangels almost never. But the hierarchy goes on up from there: from Archangels to Principalities, Powers, Virtues, Dominions, Thrones – and you see we are completely beyond our element or any hope of understanding; and then the lore continues up, to Cherubim and finally to Seraphim. That can hardly inspire or excite us, who cannot even remember the names of the seven Archangels who govern our solar system and all things that happen on earth (or so it was once believed). Their names are (according to who you ask): Raphael, Gabriel, Michael, Uriel, Simiel, Orifiel, and Zachariel (Zadkiel). All angel names end with “el” because they are all servants of God (el = Lord, or God).

Well, almost all. There is one other story: Adam and Eve encountered a serpent creature. A temptation was delivered, which finally resulted in what is called “The Fall of Man.” That was another encounter between humans and an angel – or rather, an un-angel, or fallen angel. What rank? Oh my! The story goes completely off our comprehension map. It was Seraphim. Lucifer, the light-bearer, is said to have been the top-ranking leader of the highest order of Celestial Beings – the Seraphim. That will go over our heads! For openers, it means no mere Archangel could hope to stand against him for even seconds. The plight of fallen humanity is grave indeed. What kind and nature of creature could possibly help us against such as Lucifer? But I stray, and get carried away ...

Most interesting to humans, I suspect, is the theory of “guardian angels.” If we are going to get help from any of these beings, that might get our attention. Even if the help is only a warning or maybe instructions for service, at least that’s something. But if some of these wondrous beings are actually assigned to us – take a personal interest in us – then that is indeed something else. As you well know, this was in fact the belief – the assumed reality – for most of Christendom until very recent times. Why did so many believe such a thing for so long? Did they have experiences that supported such a notion? Were they simply gullible? Was it just an easy symbolism for concepts too complex to speak of in other ways? Whatever happened to the angels?

Essentially, there are angels who are people and there are angels who are not people. Let’s begin with the easy category. “Angel” means “messenger of God.” Anything or anyone that carries God’s Word is automatically an angel. Most of us still say and believe that God often speaks to us through other people. When that happens, it is perfectly accurate to speak of that person as an “angel.” Indeed, in the passage from Hebrews that we read this morning, if we continued we would discover that the author is speaking of angels to include anyone who has carried the Word of God to people. It is confusing but interesting to find that even the name Gabriel means “man of God.”

At least it is true that in many Bible stories that speak of angels, it’s difficult to tell whether it is a heavenly figure disguised as a man, or a man sent with a special message or task. In either case, the story is always focused on the message, not on the figure that carries it. So we seldom get to follow the “angel” back to wherever it came from – heaven above or earth below. What we can say with certainty is that some angels are humans. God uses people to carry a message, perform a task, intrude suddenly into a situation where needed – and afterward, they often fade back to another life or go on to another need after the crisis is over.

In any case, it caused me to stop and think of the number of people who have stepped into my life in special moments. Some of them are “regulars”; mothers, fathers, some relatives, and certain friends are always shifting in and out of angel mode for us. Some of them rarely shift out of it. We come to expect it and even take it for granted. It’s wonderful, but we no longer think of it as special. We know it’s important, but we do not think of it as unusual or different, because it has become so familiar. You know what I mean. It’s why we have Mother’s Day, birthdays, and most of our special

days – to remind us to refresh our awareness of some of the most important blessings that perhaps lull us to sleepfulness by their very constancy. Anyone who tracks us through our growing-up years has got to be an angel. That’s not to say they were always perfect, but perfect or not, none of us make it without some angels. For us, at least, they are God’s messengers: “Welcome to life. Learn and grow. Trust and receive. Someday learn to give as well.” Such people are legitimate angels.

Much more mysterious, though seldom quite as significant, are the people who suddenly show up at special times for us. When I was about eleven years old, Donald Spitler came to speak at our church. It was one of those special-emphasis events that lasted for three days in a row. I had never seen him before, though most everybody in our church circles knew of him. What he said was over my head, but somehow it moved me. He got wind of it and arranged to have my mother drive me all the way into Whittier, to his office, for a “chat.” I was hugely impressed. I have never seen him since. Somehow, that man left a strong mark on me. Over the years, every time I think of it or hear his name, I feel grateful, though I am not quite sure for what. I do not really mean to tell you about him; I am trying to get you to remember your own angels.

Walter Pray was the speech teacher where I went to high school. Years later, he told me that he had seen a lot of scared kids in his time, but he never knew anybody who suffered the tortures of the damned like I did every time I had to give a speech. On top of that, I had a terrible lisp, a minor stutter, and a problem with what they used to call getting “tongue-tied.” It was not really tied down, but sometimes when it moved, none of the right noises would come out. (I know; that still happens, but not in the way it did then.)

Hour after hour, month after month, Walter Pray worked with me after school. I am sure he hoped that after the one required course, I would disappear. But I had to keep signing up for his courses. I *had* to learn to talk. To this day, I have no idea why he did it. No pay. No recognition. But he had studied to be a speech therapist – and if anybody ever needed one, there I was. Yet how did I get there? Whittier High School was only four miles away from my home; how did I end up going to Fullerton, eight miles away, and stumbling into maybe the only man in the state of California who could and would help me? I do not really mean to be telling you about Walter Pray; I am trying to get you to remember your own angels.

I mean it. I preach this sermon hoping that every one of you will take a pencil and paper sometime soon and write down a list of the names of the special people who have stepped into your life when you needed them, especially the ones who just seemed to drop in “out of nowhere.” It is an astounding thing to simply recall them on paper. And once you put down a few names, a whole string of others begins to come slowly back out of the memory banks. You have all been sent angel after angel, enough to shake the most ardent atheist to the roots. But for you, remembering will be with gratitude and pleasure, and may recall some former life-themes that have grown dimmer than they should.

And finally, what about the angels that are not people? They could be *anything* from beyond the ranks of mortal earth, if there be any. What do you think? What can we say about such a thing? If there are messengers of God that are human (and we might have included animals and other earthly creatures), are there also angels from the spirit realms? In the King James translation, they are called “ghosts.” But you know what is left of that word today: Casper, Halloween, and a few horror movies. What a fate for a word so high!

However, one of the main reasons I decided to go ahead with this sermon is the fact that I keep running into people who have encounters with spirit-beings in some way or another. Sometimes you shyly mention it to me, but you will not tell each other. That perpetuates the feeling that “I must be weird. If I told anybody else, they would think I was crazy.” Doubtless some would. But a lot more would say, “You know, that’s really interesting and important to me. I have been wondering about an experience of my own, if you are willing to hear about it.”

Some have encounters that seem to be with spirits of loved ones who have passed on. That’s fine in stories, but in “real life” it can be both entrancing and frightening. Others encounter spirits that seem forbidding or friendly – evil or clothed in light. Some say the Holy Spirit, who now deals with each one of us personally, has made the concept of guardian angels obsolete. Yet people with a well-developed prayer life and long experience of the presence of the Holy Spirit still have experiences with angels. C.S. Lewis called them “the Eldil.” And have you read *The Screwtape Letters*? If there are angels, are there also devils dogging our steps? Oh my, I really hesitate to say such things out loud, in the open. It does sound so medieval, doesn’t it? Or maybe it sounds a little earlier than that. Do you remember Jesus in Gethsemane? “*Father, if thou art willing, remove this cup from me;*

nevertheless, not my will but thine be done.” It is so impressive, we miss the next verse: “*And there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him.*” (Luke 22:43) Did even Jesus need and have a guardian angel (or angels)?

My plea, however, is not for you to believe one particular way or to disbelieve a particular way. My plea is that you talk to each other about it. You might even start today over coffee. Start asking each other: Have you ever had an encounter that made you wonder about angels?

Some people might think this is not a very practical sermon. But if there *are* angels and we are making it harder for them to get their messages through to us, that has practical implications. It might be a lot more important than some other topics we spend a lot of time on.

So please: Make a list (with paper and pencil when you get home) of all the human angels you have encountered on your journey so far. And from time to time, when you get a chance, ask each other: Have you had any experiences that make you wonder if there are angels?

Wouldn't it be something if you discovered that you really do have a guardian angel ...