



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

3rd Wednesday in Lent: March 27, 2019

Sermon Title: “Angels: the Nearness of God”

Sermon Texts: Psalm 34:7 and Matthew 18:10-14

Today our ongoing pursuit of peace takes us to the angels. Do you believe in angels? If so, what do you think they do? There has long been a fascination with angels in our culture. One of the most beloved movies of all time, “It’s a Wonderful Life,” features a bumbling angel named Clarence who helps George Baily see his importance to his community. Television has also featured angels. In “Highway to Heaven,” Michael Landon was an “apprentice angel” who carried out assignments for “the Boss.” And in “Touched by an Angel,” Roma Downy and Della Reese played angels who brought Godly messages and guidance to people in crisis.

Generally speaking, the movie and TV stereotype of angels is that they are good-hearted helpers who are cute, kind, wise, and maybe even comical. And so not surprisingly, our culture has tended to lump angels together with mythical figures like unicorns, elves, fairies, gnomes, dragons, wizards, and hobbits. The result? Angels have become fictionalized, marginalized, and domesticated by popular culture. And so anyone who articulates a Biblical belief in angels risks being labeled as superstitious, gullible, naïve, or unsophisticated.

Well, I’ll gladly climb out on that limb. *I absolutely, unequivocally, without reservation believe that angels exist.* I can’t show you a photo of one or prove their existence by means of scientific proof and I don’t have an angel in captivity. I can’t even say with specificity that I’ve seen angels with the eyes of my *face*, but the eyes of my *heart* have confirmed time and again that angels have blessed my life.

The Bible is absolutely *full* of angels and speaks of angels in very literal, concrete terms. But what exactly do angels *do*? Well, in the original Biblical Greek, the word “angel” means *messenger* of God, an *envoy* or *ambassador* of God, one *sent by* God as a go-between with humanity. The mission of angels then is the mission of God. Angels don’t function independently of God or without explicit direction from God. Rather, they are created by God and they serve God but are not God. They are to be respected, revered, and obeyed, but not worshipped.

One of the most famous angels in the Bible is Michael. In Hebrew, his name is translated as a question: “Who is like God?” Michael’s name reflects his mission, which is to point to our real, authentic, one-and-only God while also exposing those imposters who try to deceive us into thinking that *they* are gods. Angels then *are the defenders of heaven.*

Another function angels fulfill is to *testify of the nearness of God* so that we can retain hope even in the most hopeless of situations. An example from the Old Testament is the story of

Elijah, recorded in 1 Kings. It was an angel who brought nourishment, direction, renewal and hope to this prophet who was exhausted, despairing, hunted, and on the verge of breaking and giving up. Angels likewise nourish, renew, and give hope to *us* when we are overwhelmed and ready to give up.

The New Testament is also full of angels. Each December we remember how an angel named Gabriel appeared to a young virgin named Mary to announce that she would bear the Son of God. Another angel appeared to lowly shepherds. After assuring them that they need not be afraid, the angel announced the birth of the messiah and invited the shepherds to *come and see*. Angels continue to be heralds of miracles and bearers of God's Good News, and they continue to come to us as God's messengers of hope, courage, possibility, redemption, and transformation.

We could cite even more examples of the work of angels in the New Testament, work that carries on today in our lives. But let me highlight *one particular* function of angels that I especially treasure. Nothing more profoundly demonstrates the *nearness of God* than *guardian angels*. Our understanding of guardian angels has its origins in today's Gospel. Each of us has a guardian angel who *watches over* us, *protects* us, *blesses* us, *guides* our way toward righteousness, and sometimes even *blocks* us from taking a harmful path.

Our guardian angel is always with us, accompanying us through good times and bad times, drying our tears, relieving our terrors, and bringing us the peace only God can provide. During hospital visits I often pray for your guardian angel to watch over you. I don't do it because your guardian angel needs reminding, but because *we* need to know that *we're not alone* and *we're not forgotten*.¹

Let me close with an angel story that was in the news just a few years ago. A woman named Katie Lentz was involved in a horrible car accident in Missouri. Emergency responders spent an hour unsuccessfully trying to remove her from her wrecked car. As hope was fading, a priest suddenly appeared with anointing oil. He prayed with Katie and then inexplicably vanished. Fire chief Raymond Reed said, the priest "came up and approached the patient and offered a prayer. A sense of calmness came over her, and it did us as well. [M]yself and another firefighter, we very plainly heard that we should remain calm, that our tools would now work and that we would get her out of that vehicle." To the shock and relief of Katie and the first responders, their next effort to extract her was successful. Once Katie was safe, the emergency responders looked around, wanting to thank the priest, but he had disappeared.²

For days, speculation swirled concerning the mysterious priest's identity. Many believed he was an angel. Others dug into the history books and discovered that in 1927 a monk had died in a car accident not far from Katie's mishap. Could *he* have been the heavenly intervener who comforted Katie and offered the prayer that enabled the first responders to extract her from the wrecked vehicle?³ For Chief Reed, the priest's identity didn't really matter. He said, "I think it's a miracle. [W]hether it was an angel that was sent to us in the form of a priest or a priest that became our angel, I don't know. Either way, I'm good with it."⁴

Eight days later, the mystery priest emerged. Father Frank Dowling had been driving nearby when he noticed that the highway was blocked off for an accident. But he didn't detour.

Instead, he parked as close as he could to the accident scene and walked the remaining distance to the wrecked car. Father Dowling said, “When the young lady asked that I pray her leg stop hurting, I did so. She asked me to pray aloud, and I did briefly.” He added, “The rescue workers needed space and would not have appreciated distraction. I stepped to one side and said [a silent prayer] until the lady was taken from the car.”⁵

Was Father Frank Dowling an angel? Well, *he fulfilled the mission of an angel*. He was a *messenger* who brought the nearness of God to someone in desperate need of a blessing. Each of us can be that kind of angel too. Jesus calls every one of us to be bearers of his love, mercy, and peace to our neighbors. But even if an earthly angel can’t be there, God’s comfort and peace remain available, because of the heavenly angels God sends to nurture, comfort, and direct us. *Every day* they remind us that God *loves us*... and that God is near. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Citations

1. Background on the functions of angels is derived in part from Anselm Gruen, *Everybody Has an Angel* (Crossroad Publishing, 2000)
2. www.ncregister.com/daily-news/mysterious-priest-showed-up-to-pray-with-missouri-crash-victim#ixzz2g0PA4DSj
3. <http://thepracticingcatholic.com/2013/08/11/could-fr-lukas-etlin-be-the-missouri-mystery-priest/>
4. www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/08/mystery-angel-priest-car-crash-_n_3725992.html
5. www.ncregister.com/daily-news/mystery-priest-in-missouri-rescue-revealed/#ixzz2g0UwnCsQ