

“An Angle on Angels”
Luke 1:5-23

The sermon title is the result of our illustrious proof-reader, Marge Stowe. Every week before it is printed, she pours over the bulletin looking for mistakes. Last week she thought I didn't know the difference between an angle and an angel! Not really. My fingers just type faster than my mind. But this week I did it again. If it wasn't for Marge, we'd be singing *“Angles” We Have Heard on High!*

I don't really have much of an angle on angels because angels are not part of my common vocabulary. Except, of course, as we approach Christmas. The opening chapters of Matthew and Luke abound with angels, as do the Advent and Christmas sections of our hymnal. Even if you seldom give angels a thought, you can't get away from them this time of year. So I thought this was a good time to respond to a request I received through an e-mail:

In looking at the topics mentioned in the bulletin on sermon requests, mine seems neither as philosophical nor as deep as those listed but I would like to hear a sermon on the presence of angels. I have felt that at two times in my life that I was in the presence of angels and found comfort and strength. I would like to know how the Church interprets angels and what role they play in our lives.

On the contrary. With almost 300 references in the Old and New Testaments, the subject of angels is no lite topic! Their description and their tasks are multifaceted. They are spirit beings,ⁱ with emotion,ⁱⁱ intellectⁱⁱⁱ and will.^{iv} They predict Jesus' birth and announce it. They guard and strengthen Jesus during his life on earth and announce his resurrection. Angels care for believers and encourage them in times of danger.^v Only two angels have names, *Michael*, whose name means “Who is like God?” and *Gabriel*, “man of God.”

I chose this story about the annunciation to Zechariah and Elizabeth of the birth of John the Baptist because in it the angel speaks plainly about his primary job description. **“I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.”** Whether you are looking at Greek, the language of the New Testament, or English, *angel* is at the center of *evangelism*. The *evangel* literally means good news. Angels bring good news. That's what they do, though there are times when angels are instruments of God's judgment^{vi} and there are times when angels need to be judged.^{vii}

How does the church interpret angels? Not very clearly, at least not in our tradition and not in recent history. The Book of Confessions is part of the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., and contains ten doctrinal statements that span most of church history, beginning with the Nicene Creed from the early 4th century to the 20th century, with the last one adopted in 1990.

There is no word about angels in the Book of Confessions after the Westminster Confession of Faith which is from the mid 17th century.

Roman Catholic theologians wrote extensively about the nature of angels, but John Calvin, our theological forefather from the 16th century, rejected such teachings as idle speculation. He taught his followers not to concern themselves with details about the creation, nature, and functioning of angels that the Bible has not given us to know. He did, however, insist on the

reality of angels as “celestial spirits whose ministry and service God uses to carry out all things he has decreed.”

Calvin accepted the many Bible references that God uses angels to protect God’s people, but he doubted the existence of individual guardian angels saying, “If the fact that all the heavenly host are keeping watch for his safety will not satisfy a man, I do not see what benefit he could derive from knowing that one angel has been given to him as his especial guardian.”^{viii}

What role do angels play in our lives? The answer lies all over the map, due to the fact that the church in recent times has remained silent about angels, leaving the topic for whomever. I checked out Amazon.com for books on angels and got almost 255,000 hits. I’m sure many of those hits were duplicates, but there’s no doubt about it – there’s a bunch of books about angels, reflecting a great interest on the part of many.

Unfortunately, most of the popular images of angels bear no resemblance to angels in the Bible. Angels in the Bible don’t always resemble “celestial spirits.” In our scripture lesson this morning, we heard that when Zechariah saw an angel of the Lord he was terrified. Not so for another old man at the beginning of our faith story. Abraham was visited by three men came to announce that his wife, Sarah, would bear a child.^{ix} Abraham wasn’t terrified. They weren’t bizarre-looking creatures. They were men and he welcomed them and showed the hospitality to them that was expected in that culture. Tradition, however, often refers to the men as angels, and they were. In the book of Genesis we also hear of a wrestling match between Jacob and a stranger^x but when Hosea alludes to the incident, he says that Jacob **“strove with the angel and prevailed.”**^{xi} Was it a man or an angel. Yes, and even more! When Jacob reflects on his experience he says, **“I have seen God face to face.”**

You just never know when you might be in the presence of an angel or even God. Jesus taught his disciples that whenever they serve people in need they are, in effect, serving him.^{xii} Then on the evening of Easter, some of Jesus’ followers were accompanied by a stranger while walking to the village of Emmaus. Since it was late when they arrived, they invited the stranger to stay with them. While at table, the stranger **“took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.”**^{xiii} Suddenly they knew he was no stranger. He was the Lord! You just never know. That’s why we must always treat everyone with the utmost respect. You just never know.

It was the night of November 4 when 77-year-old Pete Sigmund, a freelance writer who lives in Ambler, had a flat tire while driving down Broad Street in North Philly. Already spooked by news of the shooting and death of Officer Chuck Cassidy a few days before, this break down made him feel more vulnerable than ever.

He pulled off the road but couldn’t change the tire because of a broken arm. Before too long, an African American man stopped his car and offered help. He struggled but couldn’t move the lug nuts on the wheel. Soon, other African American men stopped and tried all sorts of remedies, but they couldn’t move the lug nuts.

A woman appeared on the scene and offered Sigmund the use of her cell phone with which he called a service company. The truck arrived about 10:30 and the service guy demanded \$50 in advance. Sigmund had only \$5. “No problem,” said another woman. She advanced the \$50. The guy tried, but he couldn’t loosen the lug nuts either. He drove off, keeping the money.

Sigmund wrote out a check to the woman, but she promptly tore it up.

At 11:30, Sigmund called another company with an estimated arrival in about one hour. He told the women they should be on their way, but they would not leave. While they all waited in the cold, the women quietly sang hymns and prayed to the Lord. When the truck arrived at 12:55 a.m., two men worked hard and removed three lug nuts, but the fourth was stripped and could not be moved. They had to tow to the car to their garage. That left Sigmund stranded with no wheels!

The women took him to an addiction recovery group called, New Jerusalem, where he worked as a volunteer. He stayed there until morning when someone took him to the Temple University station and he took the R5 back to Ambler. That evening, the two women called him to make sure he had gotten home safely. "Joy cometh in the morning," the one said. "When you begin to see the light, you have hope. You see a new day, new grace, the favor of God."

Were the strangers simply nice people who blasted away all the prejudices we hold about people of a different race, or were they angels? YES!. "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet."^{xiv} So the scriptures teach, **"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."**^{xv} These strangers offered hospitality to someone in need and mediated God's presence in a special way. Sigmund showed hospitality to them in turn by accepting their help, even though he felt vulnerable because he was in a scary place with a killer still on the loose. He writes, "People roll their eyes when I tell them I spent the night in North Philly, but I know better. I experienced love, faith and deliverance there amid the shock of Officer Cassidy's death."^{xvi}

Thomas Merton, a 20th century Trappist monk, wrote:

Life is this simple. We are living a world that is absolutely transparent, and God is shining through it all the time. This is not just a fable or a nice story. It is true. If we abandon ourselves to God and forget ourselves, we see it sometimes, and we see it maybe frequently. God shows Himself everywhere, in everything – in people and in things and in nature and in events. It becomes very obvious that God is everywhere and in everything and we cannot be without Him. It's impossible. The only thing is that we don't see it.^{xvii}

In his book, *The Heart of Christianity*, Marcus Borg speaks of two levels of reality – the visible world of our ordinary experience and God, the sacred, Spirit. He refers to *thin places* as

the places where [those] two levels of reality meet or intersect. They are the places where the boundary between the two levels becomes very soft, porous, permeable. Thin places are places where the veil momentarily lifts, and we behold God, experience the one in whom we live, all around us and within us.^{xviii}

Someone else has written, "Angels ... are a part of the Bible's language of the heart ... If we open our hearts to Love, we may find a legion of angels ready to welcome us home."^{xix}

The Psalmist prayed, **"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me."**^{xx} When God does just that for us, we have come to one of those thin places where you can "hear the brush of angels' wings."^{xxi}

It was an angel that rolled back the stone from the tomb, so it will be an angel that rolls back the scales from our eyes so we can see God more clearly, love God more dearly, follow God more nearly. My friend who wrote the e-mail referred to two times in her life when she was in the presence of angels and found comfort and support. I suspect she has been in the presence of angels more times than she ever realized or could ever count. Let those who have eyes to see, see; and ears to hear, hear!

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- i. Hebrews 1:14
 - ii. Luke 2:13
 - iii. 1 Peter 1:12
 - iv. Jude 6
 - v. Psalm 91:11
 - vi. See 1 Chronicles 21:15-16 for one example
 - vii. 1 Corinthians 6:3
 - viii. See article by Susan R. Garrett, *Messengers of God*, in *Presbyterians Today*, April 2000, also found on line at <http://www.pcusa.org/today/believe/believe.htm> Click on *angels*. Calvin's discussion of angels is found in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.14.4-12.
 - ix. Genesis 18:1-18
 - x. Genesis 32:22-32
 - xi. Hosea 12:4
 - xii. See Matthew 25:31-46
 - xiii. Luke 24:13-35
 - xiv. From Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, 1594
 - xv. Hebrews 13:2
 - xvi. *Love and Grace for a Flat Tire*, an essay published in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 15, 2007.
 - xvii. Quoted by Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, (HarperSanFrancisco, 2003) p. 155
 - xviii. (HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), p155-156
 - xix. Ruth Tiller, *Advent Angels*, Presbyterian Survey Advent Calendar, reading for December

12, 1992

xx. Psalm 51:10

xxi. From the song, *Surely The Presence of the Lord Is In This Place*, Lanny Wolfe, 1977