

God Speaking to You

Luke 1: 5-13, 26-28

Do you believe in angels? The popularity of television shows such as “Touched by an Angel” indicates that a lot of people believe in at least the idea of angels. For many, the idea of angels represents more of a symbolic truth than literal heavenly beings. The “Ask Jack” question for today, and therefore this sermon, is “What about angels?” The title reflects one of the traditional functions of angels: to bring messages from God to people.

People believe in what angels represent even if they do not necessarily believe in them as literal truth. Belief in angels and demons is based traditionally on the ancient world view of a three-level universe. Angels occupy the heavenly realm. Demons are in the underworld. Humans live on the earth.

What do angels do? They convey mandates of God to people. They also harbingers special events. In addition, they protect the faithful and execute punishment on their adversaries. Angels were also seen as instruments of divine displeasure against sinners within Israel.

What does the Bible say about angels? The Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament, says a lot about angels. The Hebrew word actually means “messenger.” This concept has roots in the pagan religions of Israel’s near eastern neighbors. Every major god had a subordinate messenger god. This idea got translated into a monotheistic framework. In the Hebrew Bible, actions of angels have parallels in polytheistic religious traditions. The story of Abraham entertaining three angels unawares and being rewarded with a son (Gen. 18: 1-10) parallels the classical tale of Hyrieus of Tanagra who was promised a son Orion (*Ovid*). In other tales, these lesser gods were known to “commute” by means of a ladder. The parallel is found in the Genesis story of Jacob’s ladder.

Cherubim are a particular kind of angel found in the Hebrew Bible. They guarded the tree of life in Eden and flanked the throne of God. Their images were carved on the Ark of the Covenant. Seraphim are also present, though mentioned only in Isaiah 6. These angelic beings have six wings and stand beside the throne of Yahweh singing praises. Both cherubim and seraphim have counterparts in near eastern religions.

The end of Babylonian exile (6th – 5th centuries BCE), brought big changes in terms of interest in angels. Some biblical evidence for this is found in the book of Daniel. Much more information about angels is found in the Apocrypha and also the Dead Sea scrolls.

Angels are now not only messengers, but are also controlling spirits of natural phenomena (winds and celestial bodies, the four seasons, peace, and healing). They are sometimes called spirits of knowledge. As a result, they are now serving as intercessors as well as just messengers, taking messages back to God from people as well as from God to people.

By this time, some clear and consistent attributes of angels have become clearer. They are often clothed in light and/or in white garments. After the Old Testament,

angels are all are winged. Many believe they have their own special pathways in heaven.

The New Testament really brings nothing new in terms of the understanding of angels. They continue to be messengers from God by announcing special births. Gabriel announces the birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1) and also the coming birth of Jesus to Mary (Luke 2).

Angels intervene with help in times of trouble. For instance, an angel in a dream warned Joseph to take Mary and the child Jesus and flee to Egypt. An angel comforted and encouraged Jesus on the Mt. of Olives. It was an angel who rolled away Jesus' tombstone and who appeared to the women at the tomb.

In the New Testament apocalyptic writing Revelation, there are a special order of seven spirits - perhaps archangels. There are four holy creatures waiting upon throne of God, four angels presiding over the four corners of the earth, and angels of the seven churches in Asia Minor. Regarding this last group of angels, opinion varies as to who or what they are. Some scholars consider that they are the human messengers sent to John by those churches. Some insist they are the churches' bishops. Still other consider them to be the guardian angels of the churches or even the heavenly replicas of those church (similar to Plato's concept of idealized form). A few scholars consider them the ethically mature persons of the seven churches.

The fascination with angels continued after biblical times. It may well have reached its height in late Medieval Europe. Interest all but disappeared with the coming of the Enlightenment around 1600. During that period of great interest, a great amount of material was gathered on the nature and order of angels.

There is a hierarchy of angels. They exist in three triads of three choirs each based on their proximity to the throne of God. The highest triad (closest to the throne of God) are, in order, the seraphim, the cherubim, and the thrones (Orphanim - the great wheels based on their appearance!).

The middle triad consists of Dominions, Virtues, and Powers. The powers were apparently the first angels created by God. Their task is to patrol the borders of heaven for demons.

The lowest triad of the angelic hierarch are those who are closest to earth. They tend to have greater interaction with humans than the others. These include the Principalities, the Archangels, and the regular angels (the messengers). There are as many as seven Archangels (depending on the source consulted). The most important Archangel is Michael. He is usually depicted with a drawn sword. Gabriel is the only female angel. The others are either male or androgynous. Gabriel is the angel of the annunciation to Zacharias foretelling the birth of John the Baptist, and also to Mary foretelling the birth of Jesus.

The Archangel Raphael has powers of healing. Sariel is the likely candidate to be the fabled angel of death. Uriel presides over Hell and wielded the fiery sword at the gate of Eden. Raguel is the Archangel who transported Enoch to heaven as recorded in the book of Genesis. Remiel leads human souls to the place of judgment. An

interesting footnote is that Uriel and Remiel were both excluded from the lists of Archangels in a sort of angel witch angel conducted by Pope Zachary in the 8th century.

There are, of course, the regular angels. Some of these are guardian angels – not guardians of individuals, but given charge over nations, states, or cities. Michael is in charge of these. Many guardian angels have been corrupted by their “charges” and have fallen from grace. One such group of these were called Watchers. Their job was to watch over people, but they evidently did more than watch. Many of these “co-habitated” with human women and produced a race of monsters on earth. These angels were banished from heaven and became Hell’s angels.

You may wonder of what substance angels are made? One legend has it that they are substantial and material beings created every morning like the dew “through every breath that the Almighty takes”. These angels, once created, sing a hymn of praise to God, expire, then are reborn the next day. The official teaching of the church today is that angels are pure spirit and non-substantial.

What is meaning for us as we consider the issue of angels? Where do you find your angels? Most of us say that we find our angels in people around us. We encounter them in the circumstances of our lives.

Why do people believe in angels? Perhaps it is the desire to see the divine present in the lives of people. Perhaps there is a sense of comfort in feeling that I have help when I need it.

I believe in angels – maybe not as literal beings, but as symbols of spiritual power and presence around us. They are messengers from God and bringers of help and comfort. Look at current situation in New Orleans and along the Gulf coast. Remember 9/11? Think about all the angels who came, and who come, to rescue and to bring comfort.

A real danger in relying on the help of angelic beings is that we fail to accept the responsibility that comes to us to make this world a more justice and loving place. We do need to rely on each other. We need to see God in others and God in ourselves rather than depending on supernatural beings for help and comfort.

Be grateful for the angels in your life. They are usually only there for a season. Be an angel in someone else’s life. The opportunities don’t come along that often. This prayer from the Ojibway people of Canada reflects a desire to be angels to each other and to accept that angelic calling ourselves:

Grandfather
Look at our brokenness.
We know that in all creation
Only the human family
Has strayed from the Sacred Way.
We know that we are the ones
Who are divided
And we are the ones
Who must come back together
To walk in the Sacred Way.

Sacred One,
Teach us love, compassion, and honor
That we may heal the earth
And heal each other. (found in *Invitations* by Francis Dewar)

Thank you, God, for the angels in our lives. We join our lives with the angels' song and give thanks to the Lord forever. Amen.

Luke 1: 5-13a; 26-28

⁵During the rule of Herod, King of Judea, there was a priest assigned service in the regiment of Abijah. His name was Zachariah. His wife was descended from the daughters of Aaron. Her name was Elizabeth. ⁶Together they lived honorably before God, careful in keeping to the ways of the commandments and enjoying a clear conscience before God. ⁷But they were childless because Elizabeth could never conceive, and now they were quite old.

⁸It so happened that as Zachariah was carrying out his priestly duties before God, working the shift assigned to his regiment, ⁹it came his one turn in life to enter the sanctuary of God and burn incense. ¹⁰The congregation was gathered and praying outside the Temple at the hour of the incense offering. ¹¹Unannounced, an angel of God appeared just to the right of the altar of incense. ¹²Zachariah was paralyzed in fear.

¹³But the angel reassured him, "Don't fear, Zachariah. Your prayer has been heard.

²⁶In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to the Galilean village of Nazareth ²⁷to a virgin engaged to be married to a man descended from David. His name was Joseph, and the virgin's name, Mary. ²⁸Upon entering, Gabriel greeted her:

Good morning!

You're beautiful with God's beauty,

Beautiful inside and out!

God be with you.