

Thanksgiving Sunday - November 20, 2016

The Strength of Angels - Rev Seth D Jones ©

In the coming week, many of you will gather with your families and will have a large meal to celebrate Thanksgiving. For some of you, this will be a time of great joy and peace of mind. For others, it will be a trial in manners and self-control. We live in conflicted times, and for many families there are members who will bring that conflict to the table.

I keep coming back to our present national conflict because I think it is important for us to learn how to communicate well with one another. As your pastor, and as your friend, you must first believe me when I tell you, *I really, really do not care who you voted for*. It is my personal deep belief that no government, no president, no administration is more important than the relationships and friendships I have. I believed that before I came back into the faith, and when I came back into the faith, I rediscovered that my deep belief in relationship and friendship is a deep Christian attitude. Jesus' only commandment to the disciples is the call to friendship:

John 15:12-17

'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.'

Conflict and times of trial demand much from us, and few things can be more demanding than families and friends in conflict with one another. It can be hard to catch our breath, to speak words of kindness in the face of hateful language, to listen with compassion when we believe our position is the right one.

So today, I wanted to look at something that might help us in such conflicted times. We have talked of angels before, and when I have spoken about them, I have brought up all the times angels in Scripture have announced radical, fundamental, and even terrifying changes to people and the world. The examples of that are many. Today, though, I wanted to look at where angels show up as creatures of supernatural comfort.

Angels are strange creations. They are part of the created order and are present at creation itself as the 'cabinet' of God. When God says "*we shall create...*" in Genesis, God is referring to this angelic council. When we think of the creation of the world, we often don't think outside of our own tradition. We often teach the creation story as 'for us', and when we say 'for us', we mean Christians, and maybe we include the Jewish people in that. But God created the world for everyone, regardless of belief or unbelief. And so it is very interesting to me, and very

strange, that the only constant between all the world's great religion is one thing: Angels. All kinds of things may be said in the holy writings of the world religions, but they all include angels.

So angels are very strange. Before we talk about how angels provide comfort, let's take a moment and remember what an angel actually is and is not. Angels are a completely separate creation from human beings. They are made from different 'stuff'. They are almost always eternal beings.

Also, Angels have no will of their own, in the sense of human 'free will'. Instead, they are instruments of communication, vessels of action, completely at the mercy of God's will. Angels do have a freedom of interpretation. While they are instruments of God's will, they do have freedom to interpret that Will.

Angels are best thought of as 'thought creatures'. They are supernatural beings that act out the thoughts of God. This is why, when we often see them, as in Isaiah 6 last week, or in Revelation, they surround the throne of God in worship. They know nothing other than the worship and expression of God.

And, angels are separate from us in the sense that *they come to us*. When we, as humans beings come to know God of our own free will, we are actually the envy of angels. We can choose. But angels come to us; they are external to our experience. So while I may have ideas and thoughts that align with God's will, these are not angels speaking to me. And while I may do things that are inspired by God, it is probably not angels guiding me. I am not denying the presence of guardian angels, but I am saying that the work of angels is primarily communication that is completely outside of us. They are, in the truest sense of the word, *super* - as in above, beyond, over - *natural* - as in our lived physical experience.

So what do angels have to do with your Thanksgiving dinner? There are many places angels show up in the Bible, but I want to look at three.

First, let's look at Abraham in ***Genesis 18, on page 14.***

The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, 'My lord, if I find favour with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.' So they said, 'Do as you have said.'

Here, angels aren't called angels, which by the way show up all over the place in Abraham's life. Rather, they are called messengers. The passage begins, *The LORD appeared to Abraham*. But notice that the Lord shows up as *three men*. Look how Abraham responds. He bows to them and serves them. He shows gracious hospitality and concern.

If there is anything angels do, it is inspire hospitality. In fact, we could think of the entire story of Jesus as possible because of Mary's hospitality to the angel of God coming to her. Thinking of pregnancy and birth as hospitality is a powerful image. Of course, as a man, I realize that I have the privilege of romanticizing the entire process. I speak generally, of course.

Second, let's look at Jesus during the temptation. If you turn to **Mark 1, on page 35**, and go to verse 12, it reads:

12 And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. 13 He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Matthew 4, on page 3, puts it almost the same way:

11 Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

The angels wait on Jesus. They tend to him, nurse him, if you will. Another way to think of this is that an agent of the will of God will tend to and care for God's will in the world.

This is a statement of faith of the first order. Against wild beasts and even Satan, we take it as a story of truth that angels attended to Jesus in his time of trial. The Bible doesn't tell us anything about Jesus' needs, or the state of his mind and soul, after being tempted for 40 days in the desert. But the experience had to be extreme enough to require angels to tend to him. And so we believe it to be true that angels cared for him.

The funny thing about how we read Scripture is that we read things as true for the people whom we read about. So the promises of Abraham are for Abraham, the promises to David are for David, angels tending to Jesus are for Jesus. Unlike reading a novel, or a history book, though, Scripture asks us to become **like** who we read about. In other words, the things that are true for the people we are reading about are also true for us. Scripture wants us to see ourselves as Abraham, Sarah, Deborah, Moses, David; to identify with Jonah, Bathsheba, Job; to become like Isaiah, Micah, Zechariah, Jesus. And so, if angels tend to Jesus in a time of trial, shouldn't the same be true for us?

And so, thirdly, we go to Jesus' time of trial in the Garden. If you turn to **Luke 22, verse 39, on page 87**:

He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. When he reached the place, he said to them, 'Pray that you may not come into the time of trial.' Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed, 'Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.' [Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength.]

In Jesus' time of prayer, distress, despair, fear, and turmoil surrounds him and the disciples. Jesus is praying here for the same reason we pray: *O Lord, please let the arguments stop between me and my sister; O Lord, please make the disease that is killing my spouse be healed; O Lord, make this pain, suffering, despair, trouble stop; O Lord, please take this cup from me.* The situation facing Jesus is distressing enough that he sweats blood:

In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.

Pain, suffering, fear, and despair, are exhausting, innervating, and destabilizing on a deep, fundamental level of our being. From where does strength come? I know many of you know the place where you have nothing left; there is nothing inside that will lift you up and that will sustain you. Any help must come from the outside. Even for Jesus, help and strength had to come from the outside.

So there are three things I see us able to take to our Thanksgiving table this year.

First, we can take our prayers with us. For it is in prayer that the angels come to Jesus to strengthen him. In prayer, angels wait for us as well. Prayer means we make ourselves open to communication with, to, and from God. Not only in that moment, but throughout our day. And so we sit down to our tables in prayer and open ourselves to the strength that comes from outside ourselves, for Jesus' sake and for ours.

Second, we bring our faith to the table. Do we really believe that what is good for Jesus is also good for us? If angels tending to Jesus during a difficult time is available to him, the angels are also available to us. Like many of you, I love deep theological thoughts. I like to explore them, learn their shapes, understand their language, and go even deeper with them. But sometimes, it is very simple, very humble, and very personal. This is how the angels are with Jesus, and it is how they are with us. Our faith is finally all about God's love and how we receive and express the love of God. What is in our way of doing that, and what helps us to do it better? Trust in the angels of God.

Third, we began with hospitality and this is what we, and angels, bring to the table. I would say more than anything else, angels are received, understood, and seen by acts of hospitality - by invitation only, if you will. **Hebrews 13, verse 2, on page 227**, puts it this way:

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

The writer of Hebrews was referring to our story from Abraham, but the importance of angels and hospitality also shows up in other places as well. Who is invited to your table this year? How will we treat the strangers in our house, in our community, in our nation, in our church?

Hebrews 1, back on page 218, also says this of angels:

¹⁴Are not all angels spirits in the divine service, sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?

Angels are sent to serve. Angels, and humans, are unable to serve when we do not make ourselves available to be served. And we are unable to be served if we ourselves are not in an attitude of serving as well. This requires humility, listening, patience, kindness, gentleness, love for and with one another.

And so if you are going to a harmonious table this year, recognize that angels may be present for the strengthening of all of you during a difficult year outside the walls of your home.

But if you are going to a conflicted and troubled table this year, know that, like Abraham, hospitality is the response we welcome angels with, and so it should be for family, friend, neighbor and stranger alike.

If there is conflict at your table, take your place at the table with faith and trust that the gifts of Abraham, Jacob, David, the Prophets, and Jesus are also your gifts. In faith, angels came to minister to Jesus, and in faith, they come also to you.

And if you are exhausted by the thought of the potential conflict this Thursday, or you are exhausted and divested of strength because your crazy aunt can't shut up about how great President-Elect Trump will be, or your crazy brother is convinced the apocalypse is nigh because Hillary Clinton lost the election, or your crazy cousin is on a tear about Bernie Sanders, know that one of the greatest things angels do is strengthen us in times of trial.

As my mentor, Rev. Jeff Lindsay used to say, *"If it is good enough for Jesus, it is good enough for you."*

Welcome the angels with hospitality.

Trust and believe them.

And let them give you strength.

Amen.