

“Almost Angels”

Rev. Dr. Dale Skinner

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Hebrews 2:10-18

A reading from Hebrews chapter 2, verses 10-18:

¹⁰ It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. ¹¹For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, ¹²saying, ‘I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.’

¹³And again, ‘I will put my trust in him.’

And again, ‘Here am I and the children whom God has given me.’

¹⁴ Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, ¹⁵and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. ¹⁶For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. ¹⁷Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. ¹⁸Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

When I say the word angel or angels what comes to mind for you? Do you think of a favourite decoration that you take out at Christmas? Maybe you think of Christmas pageants and young children adorned with halos of sparkling garland? Maybe you think of the junior choir adorned in their golden gowns? Or maybe you think of artistic renditions like Raphael’s famous angels?. Perhaps these are some of the things that come to mind. Or maybe when I mention angel, you think about yourself standing in front of a mirror...then again...maybe not!

Angels have occupied a unique place in the history of human belief and cultures through the ages. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, angels are mentioned from near the beginning in the book of Genesis, thousands of years ago when Abraham and Sarah are visited by three “messengers” of God. The Hebrew term for angel is Malakh Elohim...meaning “messengers of God.” In the Greek New Testament the word for messenger is “angelos” which is where we get our word for angel. As God’s messengers, angels are beings believed to act as intermediaries between the divine and the earthly realm. In other words, angels are there to protect and guide human beings with God’s wisdom and purpose. Back in chapter one of the book of Hebrews the author writes, “are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?”

I believe that many of us can think of moments in our lives when we may have been visited by an angel...“a ministering spirit.” Where we had contact with a special spirit who gave us a glimpse of a reality beyond the place where we found ourselves. There are times in our lives when we need to be carried by a spirit greater than our own, when we know we are in need of something else. I liked the words that Col. Joe Kittinger, the mentor for Felix Baumgartner the guy who made that record setting skydive two-weeks ago. Kittinger said to Baumgartner just before he stepped out of the capsule, “Start the cameras and our guardian angel will take care of you.” I know I’d be looking for all the help I could get if I was about to begin a free fall from 125 000 feet...or any altitude for that matter!

But it’s not always easy to believe in angels. I remember one day when I was working at a drop-in centre at a church in downtown Toronto, the clients were having a conversation about the existence of angels. Most people present were acknowledging their disbelief. Then, all of a sudden, in the midst of the heated discussion in this room full of homeless and destitute men a fellow named Joe piped up and said, “I believe in angels!” At that point the room fell silent because Joe never said anything. But at that moment, Joe, from behind his big bushy beard, told everyone the story about how one winter’s night he had been attacked and left in an alley way off a nearby street. He had no money, so his attackers took his shoes and his coat. While he lay there freezing a man came out of nowhere and pulled out of his knapsack a warm sweater and socks; took Joe to a nearby restaurant where he got him something to eat and made sure he was okay, then they went to a shop and the stranger bought him a pair of boots and a new coat then they parted ways. Joe said, “I can’t tell you his name but I know he was an angel. That day I saw something I don’t always see, and because of him I know it’s real.”

You seem angels are there to help us behold another reality.

In ancient times there was a belief that angels lived in another realm or dimension. It is the dimension of the immortal, the unchanging and the eternal. Eternal things like the love of God, the power of grace, self-sacrifice and forgiveness. This is where angels were said to dwell, except in those moments when they entered the human realm in order that we might catch a glimpse of this different dimension of life.

This is not to say that we humans are to discount the importance or the value of the life we live and the earthly dimension in which we find ourselves. As the words Psalm 8 proclaim, “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, or mortals, that you care for them? You have made them a little lower than angels;” According to the Psalmist we’re “almost angels.” Yet for us as humans it can be hard for us to behold the possibility that we can be more or that we are more. As Josh Billings once said, “Humans were created a little lower than angels, and have been getting lower ever since.” Sometimes in life our reality sinks so low and our lives become so base that we move further and further away from that which is divine. We find ourselves so caught up in the aches and pains of our living that we lose touch with the strength that comes from belief in those things that give way to an eternal promise. Times when we find ourselves sinking deeper. We sink deeper into anger, deeper into loneliness, deeper into addiction, deeper into debt, deeper into despair, deeper into ourselves. As G.K. Chesterton once said, “the reason angels can fly is because they take themselves lightly.” Yet for us in the human realm, the state of our lives and ourselves is something that becomes all too serious and a heavy burden. There are times when life is less than holy.

The author of this text from the book of Hebrews knew that life was sometimes something less than it could be...but he also knew that through Christ Jesus that it could also be something more. The author of Hebrews spends a lot of time in the first couple of chapters in this book talking about angels, considering the place of Jesus in relation to angels and humans. Where did Jesus fit? If Jesus was of the realm of angels, then it would be impossible for him to relate to us humans and our sufferings and our aches and pains. Jesus would be irrelevant because he would be out of touch with the reality of human suffering. It would be like a millionaire giving advice to a homeless person.

The author of Hebrews wants the reader to know that Jesus “had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect.” When the Apostle’s Creed declares that Jesus was: “Born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, crucified, dead and buried,” it is in order that we might understand that he was one who was like us in every respect and was fully a part of the human realm. God knows that it is only through the shape of one like us that we are able to

behold a faith that would have any meaning or purpose for our lives. It is the human Jesus who allows us to take the possibility of faith in the human realm seriously.

When the author of Hebrews says, "For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father," there is a unification of our identity. There is a unification of our humanity with that of Christ and there is a unification of our suffering and our sanctification with his. Sanctification meaning the process of becoming holy. Sanctification is the possibility of becoming something more than we are, something greater. This is what God's aspiration is for our lives, that even in our human realm, we might participate in that which is eternal. This is what the author of Hebrews alludes to when she says, "he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham." The descendants of Abraham, refers to humanity and more specifically people of faith. The reality is that angels don't need God's help, but we do.

We're not angels. You're not and I'm definitely not. I'm mindful of the words of the 18th century preacher George Whitefield who once said many years ago, "To preach for more than half an hour, a man should be an angel himself, or have angels for listeners!" Yet even though, Whitefield knew that he was no angel and the people to whom he was preaching weren't either, he still declared a hope for them and for himself that was found in Jesus. -The one who is like us and meets us in and elevates us out of our suffering. Because ultimately we cannot just look within ourselves for sanctification, we also have to look beyond ourselves. We have not the ability to save ourselves from ourselves because when we attempt to do this we end up becoming more obsessed with ourselves and life can get heavy.

Paul Young, the author of The Shack knows what it means when life gets heavy. Might seem hard to believe for a guy that has sold 18 million books. The Shack is actually now one of the top 100 selling books of all time. So it's likely that you may have either read or heard of The Shack. It is a story about one man's experience of suffering and his extended conversation with God as he sought to work through that suffering. When Paul Young first wrote the book he went down to Kinko's and made copies for his wife and six children. That's who the book was originally meant for, just his family. You see, like most parents, Young knew his children weren't angels, but he wanted them to be better. He wanted his kids to be better than him –sure he wanted them to be good at what they did. Be good at athletics, or music, or their studies, but

ultimately he wanted them to be better human beings. When he looked in the mirror Young knew that he was no angel. He hadn't been the greatest role model. He was a man who had to deal with the shame of being sexually abused as a child, he had lived in different places and had no real roots of place or a homeland he could pass along. In his late thirties he had been unfaithful in his marriage and let down his wife and children. Paul Young knew he couldn't point to himself and say "look at me" so instead he wrote the story and more or less said, "Here you go. In life when you face your challenges and your suffering and your brokenness, here is God...here is Jesus." Young knew there was a hope and a faith that was beyond him. He pointed his children to the one who came into this human existence of ours in order that we might be better humans.

You see my friends, like Paul Young knows, like the author of Hebrews knew, we're not angels. In fact there are times in our lives when we don't feel anywhere that's even close. Yet these are the times when it's what God has given us in Christ that we turn to. We turn to the one who has come to visit us and embodies for us a message of faith that promises to sanctify, to make us not only better humans...and remind us that we're almost angels. Thanks be to God.