

ANGELS UNAWARES

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Hebrews 1:1-14, 13:2

We were lost, Sharon and I, completely lost in Northern Virginia horse country. We had gone to visit the Sipols, dear friends from LaGrave who had moved there years ago to run a lovely Christian retreat center. Now it was time to go home. So, we got on Lime Kiln Road, then Snickersville Pike, Sam Fred, and finally US 50 in Middleburg. That's where we got lost. Google Maps said we needed to get on State Road 713. But there was no State Road 713; in fact, no roads were numbered.

So, we stopped at this ramshackle gas station to ask directions, but the cashier and the mechanic were no help. "What's da name of the road you looking for? We don't know any numbers!" Then I heard a loud voice behind me saying, "What's ya'll lookin' for?" I turned to see a black man with a raggedy beard, blood shot eyes, and dirty clothes. I said, "State Road 713." And he said, "What's da name of the road?" When I said, I had no idea, he shouted, "Where ya'll trying to go?" I replied "Interstate 66." "Oh, then you go down there four blocks to The Plains Road, go south, and ya'll will find I 66."

So, we did. But The Plains Road wasn't St Rd 713. It was St Rd 626. But we kept going for 20 desperate miles until the road stopped dead in a little town. Now where do we go; we were utterly lost. But there was another junky gas station on the corner, so I got out to ask. As I opened the door, a horn blared behind me. And then a familiar voice rang out. "I told ya'll that this was the way." It was that black man, who had followed us those 20 lonely miles in his beat up VW. He shouted, "Go right here and down to the stop sign a block away, then turn left and go one mile and ya'll will find I 66." He was right and we made our way home.

When we entered I 66, I said to Sharon, "That black man was an angel in disguise, sent by God to help us home." And instantly, an old version of Hebrews 13:2 popped into my mind. "Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels unawares." And as soon as I thought of that text, I recalled the story of Abraham in Genesis 18, where he entertained those three strangers who gave him the good news that he and his barren wife, Sarah, were going to have a son. That son would be the first in a long line of children who would become the nation of Israel from which would finally come the Savior of the world, Jesus Christ. I think the Holy Spirit was working that day in the horse country of Virginia.

As I pondered my black angel, I wondered how many of us have entertained angels unawares as we did kind things for some stranger. But then I wondered how many strangers I have turned away from because they didn't look like me. But I'm not going to dwell there this morning, because the Spirit led me in a very different direction as I pondered the black angel who helped me get home. I recalled that this letter to the Hebrews begins with a description of angels as "ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation."

Do you remember all the times the Bible mentions angels and their role in God's plan of salvation? There was, of course, that story of Abraham to which I've already referred. And there was that story in Genesis 28 about Abraham's grandson, Jacob, who was fleeing for his life when he saw a ladder on which angels were ascending and descending. Do you recall what Jacob gasped in response? "Surely, the presence of the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it. How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven." Have you ever felt that way because an angel ministered to you?

Do you recall the story of Elisha trapped by the vast army of the Arameans in the town of Dothan in II Kings 6? When Elisha's servant got up and went outside one morning, the whole town was surrounded by the horses and chariots of Aram, and he freaked out. "Oh, my lord," he cried to Elisha, "what shall we do?" "Don't be afraid," said Elisha. "Those who are with us are more than those who are with them." And Elisha prayed, "O Lord, open his eyes, so he may see." "And the Lord opened the servant's eyes and he saw the hills filled with horses and chariots of fire," the angel forces of Almighty God. They were there all the time, but that servant couldn't see them, any more than we can. "Those who are with us are more than those who are with them."

I'll limit myself to one more Old Testament story, the story of Isaiah in Isaiah 6. He had been called by God to speak to wayward Israel but he was feeling so inadequate, until he saw the Lord in the temple, attended by six winged angels called seraphs. As they shouted, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty, the whole earth is full of his glory," Isaiah fell apart, shouting, "Woe is me, for I am undone. I am a man of unclean lips...." Then

one of the seraphs took a fiery coal and put it to Isaiah's lips. And he immediately volunteered to be the messenger who would tell of God's salvation in the coming Christ. "Here am I. Send me!"

After 800 years of prophecy, God sent the angel Gabriel to a virgin named Mary, who was terrified like Isaiah. But the angel said, "Do not be afraid, you have found favor with God. You will give birth to a son and you are to give him the name Jesus." Nine months later, she did give birth in a stable while the heavenly hosts sang in the skies over the Judean fields. "Angels from the realms of glory, wing your flight o'er the earth. You who sang creation's story, now proclaim Messiah's birth. Come and worship, come and worship, worship Christ the new born king."

We don't hear about angels for another 30 years, until Jesus decided to begin his public ministry. He did that by going out into the wilderness and doing battle with Satan for 40 days and fasting and fighting off temptation. When it was done, Jesus was tired and hungry, and says Matthew 4:11, angels came and attended to him. We're not told how many times that happened in the coming years. But we do know what Jesus said when he was arrested by the forces of religion and government in the Garden of Gethsemane. When Peter tried to defend Jesus with his sword, Jesus said something that sounded like Elisha. "Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than 12 legions of angels?" They were there all the time, angels unawares, but Jesus didn't call them because he had to go and die.

And when he rose, it was angels that announced the miracle to his disciples. And it will be angels who attend his return. And it is angels by the millions who surround the throne, singing his praises along with all the saints of history. Because it's all about him; not the angels, but Jesus.

That's the point of the whole letter to the Hebrews with its little footnotes about angels in chapters one and thirteen. In fact, this whole first chapter sings the greatness of Jesus by contrasting him with angels. Hebrews 1:1-3 opens with a hymn of praise to Jesus, using unimaginably magnificent phrases like he "is the heir of all things," "through whom he made the universe," "the radiance of God's glory," "the exact representation of God's being," "sustaining all things by his word of power," "providing purification for sins," "and sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in Heaven." We can hardly take all that in.

Maybe that's why the writer then turns to angels, whom we find so fascinating. In fact, Christians have always been so overwhelmed by the idea of guardian angels, that the Apostle Paul had to warn against worshiping angels in Col. 2:18. "Do not let anyone who delights... in the worship of angels disqualify you from the prize." Remember, said Paul, Christ is the head, all the fullness of God lives in him and you have been given fullness of life in Christ.

Yes, angels are cool, and helpful, and awesome. Thank God for them. But, says Hebrews 1:4, Christ is so superior to angels that there is no comparison. Because Jesus is God's only Son; they are mere servants to all of you. Yes, angels are like winds and flames of fire, says verse 7. But Jesus is God whose throne will last forever, who will reign over all things with righteousness. Jesus created all things: "you laid the foundations of the earth, which will perish one day, while Jesus will be forever having conquered the enemies of God and having saved his people by his death and resurrection." So, yes, angels are ministering spirits who show up now and then. Thank God for them. But Jesus is God who is with us always as our Lord and Savior.

Back in Virginia last summer, I was so struck by God's provision of direction through that black angel. But I should be struck all the time by the presence of Jesus, who said, "I am with you always to the end of the age, to the end of your road." This sermon is entitled "Angels Unawares," but it is really about "Jesus Unawares." He's always there, even when we are unaware.

When we are lost, he says, "I am the way." When we are confused, he says, "I am the truth." When we are despairing of life, he says, "I am the life." When we are hungry and thirsty, Jesus says "I am the Bread of Life and the Living Water." When we walk in darkness, he says, "I am the Light of the World." When we feel on the outside, Jesus says, "I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved." When life feels frustrating and fruitless, Jesus says, "I am the true vine... if you remain in me, you will bear much fruit." And when we face death, Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me shall live, even though they die and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die." Do you believe this? Do you believe this as much as little Theo did when he was five years old?

I opened this sermon with my experience of meeting an angel in a black man in Virginia. Or so I thought. But maybe that was Jesus in disguise. Remember what Jesus said in Matthew 25 when he cautioned his followers to take care of "the least of these." At the end of that passage, he says a shocking thing. "For

inasmuch as you did it to the least of these, you did it to me.” Was that Jesus dressed in dirty clothes with a raggedy beard driving a beat up old VW?

Theo probably would say yes. Theo is the youngest son of the Sipols family that we visited in Virginia. Years ago, when they were living here in GR and attending LaGrave, there was a terrible accident. Jessica was driving into the intersection of Cascade Road and Spaulding with her daughter Grace in the car. Tim and their sons, Ransom and Theo, were following in their other car. Suddenly, another car, driving by a woman who was drunk, ran the stop light and T-boned Jessica’s car. They weren’t killed but they sustained serious injuries that have affected them to this day. After the accident, five-year-old Theo said to his Dad and his Mom and anyone who would listen, “I saw Jesus in the car with mommy and Grace. That’s why they didn’t die.” Sometimes it takes the faith of a five-year-old to see Jesus who is always there. We just aren’t aware.

We are entering a new year. We don’t know what lies ahead. There may be winding roads that will make us feel lost. We might be navigating busy streets where accidents are waiting to happen. We might sail unimpeded down a smooth interstate. We don’t know where we are going, even if we carefully plan our journey. Maybe we’ll meet angels in disguise. But surely, Jesus will be there always with all the power and love in the universe, even if we aren’t aware. Maybe you’ll see him, like Theo. Maybe you’ll just have to walk by faith.

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