

October 11, 2020

"A View From Up High"

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Mark 9:2-8

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I'm going to start with a question today. How many of you believe in angels? Well, the Bible plainly mentions angels many, many times. They've been here since the beginning. God told Job that when he created the earth, "the angels began shouting in applause." That's pretty cool, don't you think?

According to St. Peter, angels are beings who have greater power and ability than humans. And, people have actually seen angels. St. John in Revelation had a vision of hundreds of millions of them - they're called cherubim and seraphim and heavenly hosts. And, remember, they were there en masse at Jesus' birth. The Bible also mentions archangels. There's Gabriel, the messenger angel, who appeared to Mary. And there's Michael, the powerful defender angel. He appears in the Book of Daniel, Jude and Revelation. And, did you know that Satan, or Lucifer, is a fallen angel? Here's another thing. In Psalms, the Bible clearly tells us that God sends angels to protect his chosen ones: "He will give his angels charge of you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone." (Psalm 91) And Jesus makes a reference to our guardian angels when he says, "See that you do not despise any of these little children. For I tell you that their angels in heaven see the face of my Father in heaven." So what exactly do angels do?

Well, let's look at this. Given the fact all of us here are believers, my guess is that many of you have had an encounter with an angel, even if you weren't quite sure what it was. You know – something good, something special, something protective, happened to you and you just can't explain how or why it occurred. A God-incident. Maybe it was a stranger who appeared at just the right time and helped you, and then just disappeared. Do a quick search on the internet and you'll find literally thousands of such instances. And it's really not so far-fetched to believe in angels, is it? I mean consider the vast array of what we know to be true and exist in this, our visible universe. The millions of species of animals, the billions of galaxies, the myriad variety of shells that we see washed up on the beach, the incalculable number of atoms in each human body. It's more than our mind can grasp. Isn't it likely then, that between this physical dimension in which we live and exist, and that heavenly dimension where God exists – where no eye has seen or mind can imagine, that there may exist even another dimension, another realm? Where God's messengers and helpers, his angels, exist for the purpose of helping us and caring for us? Yes, the fact is, God is real and his angels are real. And they are sent to intervene for us in times of our need. Sometimes God acts for us directly through the power of his Holy Spirit. But at other times, he has his spiritual agents, his righteous angels, acting for him. St. Thomas

Aquinas says, “Each of us, due to our changeable and fallible nature, have been assigned a heavenly guide. And once we’re in heaven, we won’t need that guide anymore, because our angel will become our friend.” What a beautiful, divine picture of things to come. How wonderful, how amazing, it will be on that day when we will at last know of all the divine help we have received in this earthly life!

So why am I talking about cherubim and seraphim and heavenly hosts and guardian angels? Well, given the hard facts of life down here on earth, the truth is, all of us need a glimpse from time to time of the divine, a glimpse of heaven, so to speak. It’s sorely needed in these times, don’t you think? And that’s what today’s scripture is really all about. Jesus takes his three closest disciples up to the top of a mountain where they see their friend and teacher transfigured into the likeness of God. On top of that, Moses and Elijah appear, and then God speaks, saying “This is my Son, whom I love; Listen to him!” And the disciples, fearful and afraid, yet awestricken just the same, are ready to make camp on the mountaintop. Yes, for those disciples having come up from the valley, the view from up high, and that experience on the mountaintop was just too good to let go. One that they just didn’t want to surrender.

And isn’t that what we yearn for as well? A mountaintop experience with the divine, with God, one that we can hold on to? Yet, in some ways, haven’t we all been there? Maybe it was that encounter with an angel, that God-incident. Maybe it was a book, a prayer, a sermon that moved you and warmed your heart. Maybe it was a musical event or song that touched your soul. Maybe it was a time where you and creation and the Creator all came together in wonder and awe. Or maybe it was an overwhelming sense of peace, or clarity - the feeling that all is well. And in those moments, you were lifted up, and like those disciples you experienced for a few moments a glimpse of the divine.

Think back on those times. (Pause) Remember the feeling of wonder and awe? Well, I’m sorry, but now I have to bring you back down to the valley. Why? Because we are put here for a purpose. And that is to do God’s will and share his love with others here in the valley. Because who else is going to do it? You see, we are given those mountaintop experiences in order to inspire us and motivate us. Yes, they happen in order to touch us and teach us something, but they really are meant to make us do something. To do the work God has asked us to do.

So let’s think about our life here in the valley for a moment. I think we can all agree it has its share of sufferings and failures and setbacks and disappointments and injustices. This year 2020, in particular, has certainly become a hard year for living in the valley. And because of the challenges and

uncertainties that lie ahead, we can be easily distracted from what God is calling us to do right now, today, in the present. As theologian Henri Nouwen says, “It's hard living in the present. The past and the future keep harassing us. So many things have happened in our lives about which we feel uneasy, regretful, angry, confused, guilty. And worse than these are our worries. Worries fill our lives with ‘what ifs’: what if I lose my job, what if my (spouse) dies, what if there's not enough money, what if a war breaks out. And, if I might add, “What if I get COVID?” These many worries and ‘what ifs’ so fill our minds that we become blind to the flowers in the garden, and the smiling children, and the dear voice of a friend.”

And when these feelings take over, how can we ever fulfill that purpose God has for our lives? How can we ever “Listen to him,” and follow Jesus' command, “To love one another as I have loved you,” if we are all wrapped up in ourselves? Jesus' words call us to be living witnesses of God's love. We, the believers, the community called ‘church.’ Again quoting Nouwen, “Loving one another is not clinging to one another so as to be safe in a hostile world. It means living together in such a way that everyone will recognize us as people who make God's love visible to the world.” Just as Jesus sent the disciples back down from the mountaintop, the same holds true for us as well. He sends us out into the mission fields of our homes, our workplaces and our communities. He sends us out to deal with the hurting and lonely and broken, into a world that’s difficult and indifferent and so needs to know and feel the love of God. So many things may be said in this regard as to how we can purposely build God's kingdom here on earth, but these words of John Wesley's that many of you know, may be best. “Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as you ever can.” Let me say those again: do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as you ever can.

Let’s go back to our scripture. The image of what happened on that mountaintop with Jesus and his disciples should fascinate us as well as assault our senses: God's very presence, Jesus being glorified, and the fear and awe felt by the disciples being so close to the heavenly realm. These things assure us of the joy and splendor that awaits us. Yes, although we live and exist in this earthly dimension now, we are ultimately promised a life on high with God. And this should give us the courage and the strength and the purpose to want to do His will and work here and now. And who knows, maybe... no, probably ... no, most certainly, we're going to get help from some of our angelic friends along the way. Amen.

Prayer

Lord, we thank you for those times when we are given a glimpse of the divine. When you act in our lives in ways which we cannot explain, ways in which we could never do on our own. And we know that you are indeed a God who loves us, and wants to help us, guide us, protect us. Lord, there is so much we do not know, the realms beyond what we can now imagine, where you and your multitude of angels are ever and always at work for us. And we are thankful for your assurance that someday we will enter that realm forever with you.

But until then, we know we have work to do in the mission fields of our lives. And so may those divine glimpses, those divine experiences be signposts for us to keep us on the right path, doing your will, sharing your love, being the disciples you call us to be. Especially in these times of unrest, tension, fear, confusion. May we be people who make your love visible to the world, through the ways we are gentle, compassionate, kind, wise, and peace loving. This we ask in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, amen.