

“RECOVERING OUR ANGELS”
First Presbyterian Church
Spartanburg, South Carolina
Christmas Eve 2011

As we come to this Christmas Eve 2011, there are two verses from the New Testament that I would like for you to consider. The first is from the Gospel of Luke: “And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of heavenly hosts, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.’” (Luke 2: 14)

The second verse is taken from the Book of Acts, Chapter 23: “The Sadducees say that there is not resurrection, or angel, or spirit.” (Acts 23: 8)

That is to say, the Sadducees did not believe in angels or for that matter any of the things that angels represent. They were for the most part worldly wise people who believed only in what their eyes could see and what their hands could touch. They were hardheaded skeptics with no confidence in the spiritual world.

I suspect that there is a good deal of Sadducee in most of us. So far as angels are concerned, there are not many who take them literally. To be sure, they are a part of the Christmas season, but how often do you hear anyone speak of angels anymore. Most of us, if pressed, would probably say that the world in which we live doesn’t really have much use for angels. In a scientific world today, we might talk about the miracle of modern medicine, or stem cell research, or healing drugs. But most of us, when we are ill, don’t really talk about angels. In that sense, we may be more like the Sadducees than we imagine.

Only no one would ever want to be a Sadducee after he or she had ever been acquainted with them. They are some of the unloveliest people in the New Testament. They represented the official priesthood of the nation, and they used their position for selfish purpose in a shameless way. When the Greeks were on the rise, they were Hellenists. When Rome came to power, they cozied up to the Romans. They were always political compromisers, doing business with anyone who was in power. “Beware,” said Jesus, “of the Sadducees.”

But, if you really want to know what was wrong with them, the answer is that they had no angels. In fact, they had nothing remotely connected to angels – no sense of the reality and nearness of the spiritual world, no consciousness of divine guidance, no awareness of spiritual forces at work in our world. They had lost their angels, and if we are going to keep Christmas, we need to recover our angels.

I.

For one thing, angels remind us that the forces of light are far greater than the forces of darkness. Hardly a Christmas Eve passes that I do not remember that famous Christmas in 1776 when General George Washington led a brave group of soldiers across

the Delaware River to Princeton New Jersey. On that Christmas Eve, many people in this country felt that the War of Independence was over and that it was only a matter of time before the British would crush the colonies. But on that Christmas Eve George Washington and his men braved the most horrible elements imaginable to defeat Lord Cornwallis and to turn the tide of the war against the British.

You see, George Washington was not a Sadducee. He believed in something – the freedom of a people to determine their own destiny. He believed in something greater than brute force and oppression and he was willing to sacrifice for that.

That is what we celebrate tonight. Jesus had his angels. That heavenly host that sang of goodwill above the plains of Bethlehem are symbols of his real angels – friendliness, unselfish love, mercy that knows no boundaries, forgiveness that melts peoples' heart. He had his angles and for that reason two thousand years after his birth we celebrate that birth.

II.

But there is something else as well. If we are to recover our angels, we need to remember the power of God to be with us even through life's most difficult moments.

Paul Tillich once observed that Matthias Grunewald's painting "The Crucifixion" was the greatest portrayal of the incarnation in Christian art. At the front of the painting is the figure of John the Baptist pointing to the body of Christ being taken off the cross. The basis of Tillich's judgment was the sheer horror of a dead body and the anguish of those who stood at the foot of the cross.

The message of Christmas is that no one ever won a greater victory over spiritual difficulty than Jesus. No one! To be sure, it is beautiful to hear those angels singing over Bethlehem, but as the years roll on, there is another scene that means even more to us. Long after that first jubilation was silenced, a man left eight disciples at a garden gate and going in, left three more underneath the olive trees, and then went on alone to cast himself in solitude before the face of God and fight the hardest battle of his life.

There in Gethsemane Jesus gave up his last hope of escaping the cross, and having prayed that the cup might pass, he prepared his spirit to drink the whole of it. Then we read that there appeared to him beneath the olive tree an angel from heaven, strengthening him, so that he went out confident, calm, and strong (Luke 22:43).

He had kept his angels. They did not simply sing at his birth; they were there in his darkest hour. He never knew the greatest meanings of angels until he needed them the most.

One of the most remarkable movies of this past year was "The King's Speech" which starred Colin Firth as King George VI of England, who ascended the throne in the dark hours before World War II. King George VI was a miserably shy man with a terrible stammering voice that was thrust unwillingly onto the world stage.

One of the subtle contrasts in the movie is that it depicts the coming of the war as a confrontation involving public speaking. On the one hand is Adolph Hitler's powerful histrionic elocution speaking to the hundreds of thousands who gathered at Nuremburg over against the stammering "Bertie" with his high pitched, quavering voice.

But the real hero in the movie is a man by the name of Lionel Logue, who was hired by the King's wife, Elizabeth – an oddball, self-trained Australian speech therapist who says to the king, "My job is to help you find your voice."

And so with humor and wisdom Logue goads, cajoles, threatens and berates the king, gradually finding a way into the King's personal life, enticing him to relive the pain of growing up with a blowhard father and a taunting brother. The portrayal of Logue is one of Hollywood's greatest depictions of a master teacher, and George represents all of us who must somehow overcome our deficiencies.

In a real sense, Lionel Logue was King George's angel.

So, you see, angels come in many forms. They come sometimes on a starry night in Bethlehem with shepherds and wise men and the birth of a child.

At other times they come in the form of a human touch, a word of encouragement, a saving word of grace, the opportunity of a second chance.

But they do come. And when they do, our prayer is that we may have the eyes to see them and the ears to hear them.

And may we vow this Christmas to keep our angels.