

Hebrews 13: 1-3 "Entertaining Angels" Rev. Janet Chapman 11/25/2018

I enjoyed visiting with my family in Eugene and commiserating with my sisters about the ups and downs of raising our daughters. While mine are 22 and 24, hers are 15 and 23. One of my pet peeves is my daughters not putting away their clothes, even when company is coming over, so I always dread opening their bedroom doors because I never know what will lurk behind. We enjoyed some painful laughter after hearing a story about another mom whose son Dirk was being babysat by Grandma at Grandma's house. Dirk was following Grandma around the house as she was putting some things away in closets. He followed her to the 2nd closet and said, "Grandma, what room is this?" "This is a closet," she explained. "We don't have a room like this in our house," he said. "Of course you do," she insisted, "You have lots of closets in your home, maybe not just like this, but they are closets just the same." When he again denied having anything similar to closets in his home, she tried another tack. "Well, where do you keep all your clothes?" He quickly responded, "In the dryer!" Welcome to my world.

Getting clothes from the dryer to the closets is a definite chore in our household, especially before guests come to visit. My girls will tell you I take on a whole new persona when company is arriving, something akin to Godzilla meets Mary Poppins. I become anal about every little thing. I guess it dates back to my upbringing when one was expected to offer the very best to your guest, the best seat, the best cut of meat, the best bed, all with the understanding that hospitality, even more than cleanliness, is a virtue next to godliness. As some of you may know, cleanliness is not considered a biblical mandate but hospitality is a whole different story. The writer of our text is singing a refrain that echoes countless biblical passages, beginning with Abraham and Sarah's showing hospitality to strangers by the oaks of

Mamre. These are strangers who turn out to be messengers of God with news so unbelievably good, that in their old age, they will soon be parents, which leads Sarah to burst out laughing. These are strangers who remind Abraham and Sarah that welcoming love is not just to be extended to family and friends already in the community, but it is meant for all. “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so, some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

Despite this recurring biblical theme, most of us are hesitant or outright resistant to living this out. We not only fear the stranger, but we teach “stranger danger” to our children. This is a sad testimony to the reality of child predators but that fear and suspicion often carries over unnecessarily into adulthood. By allowing such fear to control us, our author insinuates we inadvertently miss opportunities to encounter the Divine. My favorite seminary professor at TCU, Dr. Joey Jeter, used to tell us to be wary towards judging who is carrying the Word of God within them and who isn’t. He spoke of one Sunday morning when he was invited to preach at a rural Texas church and in the middle of the sermon, an old man dressed in torn and dirty clothes shuffled in and sat in the back row. Wary eyes turned and glared at him, those dressed in their Sunday finest shook their heads in disgust, and people sitting around him tried to subtly move away. He hung his head and began rocking back and forth. Two ushers stood at either end of his aisle, ready to escort him out at the drop of a hat. Joey continued to preach on without missing a beat about the unconditional love of God. Then suddenly the man stood up and said, “I have something to say. Can I share please?” The ushers rushed in but Joey stopped them saying, “Wait, I would like to hear what the gentleman wants to share.” The ushers stepped back in shock. The disheveled man nodded in appreciation and began to share

how God had saved his life, how he had been ready to die, and somehow God had known he needed an angel. That angel came to him in the form of a mongrel dog who had started barking as he stood on top of a 50 foot bridge. The dog barked with such urgency and whimpered with such insistence that he had to crawl down to find out what all the fuss was about. When he reached the dog, he found she was blood-streaked and injured with two puppies hiding in the bush. One was still alive, the other was dead. It appeared they had been attacked by something bigger and fiercer than this mongrel mutt. As the man continued to speak, judgmental stares softened and even the ushers sat down in respect and listened attentively. He went on to tell how he took all 3 animals to the local vet who happened to still be in the office, even though it was after hours. The vet compassionately examined them explaining it was probably a bear attack. There may have been more puppies that didn't make it, but this mother had done everything she could to protect her remaining 2. The man was heartbroken but the vet said, "Don't look at it that way – you need to realize you helped save this dog's life and the life of her puppy." The man shook his head saying, "No, she saved mine. She is my guardian angel. Sometimes you just need an angel." And with that, the old man sat down. You could have heard a pin drop. With the wisdom of the Divine resting firmly on Joey's shoulders, this nationally known preacher turned to the congregation and said, "Sometimes you and I just need an angel, a messenger of God's. Today, the gospel has been preached. Thanks be to God," and sat down. Joey concluded his story to those of us know-it-all wannabe preachers sitting in his classroom with these words: "Beware dear friends, do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so, some have entertained angels unawares."

Hebrews is telling us these messengers of God come unexpectedly and we might not recognize them, let alone be able to define them. Biblically speaking, they enter our lives at pivotal personal and historical moments. When we speak of them, we do so carefully, knowing that they come from a realm that neither eye has seen nor ear has heard. Our friend Bruce Epperly notes in his book Angels, Demons and Mysteries that angels appear often as persons like ourselves, sharing our language and ethnicity. Recognizing angels in our midst will be this year's focus for Advent starting next week as we ponder what it means to be hospitable to the Divine who greets us unawares. We will reflect upon different angelic visitations connected to the birth of Christ as well as acknowledge with gratitude the workings of God in our first responders during the past 5 months as they help light our Advent wreath.

Recognizing that the popularity of angels in society has made them somewhat superficial, and that what can be said of Elvis Presley can also be said of them, "you see them everywhere," we will attempt to reclaim their spiritual meaning in our lives. In this swiftly-changing, precarious, and uncertain world, there is a desperate need for a deeper wisdom and strength that will turn us from darkness to light and help us find our way. If the truth be told, many of us, are just like the famous music group Train, with their top hit "Calling all Angels."

(Play video with lyrics on screen)

"I need a sign to let me know you're here.
All these signs are being crossed over the atmosphere.
I need to know that things are gonna look up
Cuz I feel us drowning from a sea spilled from a cup

When there is no place safe and no safe place to put my head
When you feel the world shake from the words that are said
I need a sign to let me know you're here
'Cause my TV set just keeps it all from being clear

I want a reason for the way things have to be
I need a hand to help build up some kind of hope inside of me
When children have to play inside so they don't disappear
And private eyes solve marriage lies cause we don't talk for years
And football teams are kissing Queens
And losing sight of having dreams
In a world that what we want is only what we want until it's ours
I'm calling all angels
I'm calling all you angels." (copyright Sony/ATV Music Publishing)
<https://youtu.be/77vFeRAQNcg>

Angels provide comfort, protection, guidance, and revelation. We can turn away from their guidance but for those who say "yes" to angelic messages, life becomes an adventure in companionship with God, the mundane becomes miraculous, and we discover our divinely inspired calling. So join with me this Advent in entertaining and calling all you angels.