



“Wrestling with Angels”

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Genesis 32:22-31

It was nine in the morning on Missouri 19 outside the town of Center. The nineteen-year-old Katie Lentz had just gotten into a car accident and was pinned between the steering wheel and the seat. Rescue crews quickly arrived at the scene and struggled for forty-five minutes to get Lentz loose from the mangled car. But, they were unable to do so. As time passed, Lentz began to get scared and she asked if someone could pray out loud. Then, as if out of nowhere, a gray-haired priest, dressed in all black with a clerical collar and carrying anointing oil, appeared at the scene and prayed over the girl. Amazingly, the rescue workers were then able to free Lentz, get her into an ambulance and headed to the hospital. When the crews turned to thank the priest, he was gone. He wasn't in any of the dozens of photos taken from the accident and no one was able to identify him. Lentz's mom believed that the man may have been, in her words, “an angel dressed in priest's attire because the Bible tells us there are angels among us.”

When this story happened four years ago, there was a lot of Internet buzz surrounding this “Miracle on the Highway.” In fact, humanity's fascination and excitement around angels has been part of practically every culture, every religion, and every generation. This summer we have studied the family of Abraham and have explored the lives of many Hebrew people: Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Hagar, Ishmael, Rebekah, Esau, Jacob, Laban, Rachel, and Leah. As I looked at the text for today, I was weary of focusing on Jacob and his tired trek toward transformation. Like last week when we lifted up the silent voice of Leah, I realized that some other characters have woven themselves into the fabric of the first family of faith. We have welcomed messengers at the oaks of Mamre, dreamed about angels descending and ascending, and heard a heavenly voice calling for Abraham to spare Isaac. Angels. We need to wrestle with who they are and what they mean for our lives. Today, we need to wrestle with angels.

We have so many different ideas about what angels look like and what they are supposed to do. Are they supposed to look like beautiful women with Irish accents like Roma Downey in *Touched by an Angel*? Not according to the Bible. There are no female angels mentioned in the Bible. Are they supposed to be common looking men who travel around helping people like Michael Landon in *Highway to Heaven*? Possibly. The types and portrayals of angels we have dreamed up in literature and on television goes on and on.

So, what does the Bible say about angels? The Bible has two words for angel—*malak* and *angelos*. *Malak* is the Hebrew word for angel and is found in the Hebrew Scriptures. *Malak* means, “One sent” or “messenger.” And we see that the term *malak* was used not only for angels but also for prophets, priests, and even the nation of Israel. Anyone who brought a message from God was a *malak*. And then in Greek, in the New Testament, we have the term *angelos*, which

also means “messenger.” But these messengers can be human messengers like an envoy, supernatural beings like angels, or even evil spirits like demons.

These two terms, *malak* and *angelos*, reveal the most crucial thing about understanding angels in the Bible—an angel is a messenger. So, an angel is defined not by his nature, but by his office—not by what an angel is but what he does. In fact, an angel’s message was usually the focus of a biblical passage while the outward appearance of the angel was rarely described in detail. Thus, if we are to understand anything about angels today it is that their main purpose in the Bible was to point our attention to the one who sent the messenger, God.

Who were these messengers of God? Angels are mentioned in thirty-four different books of the Bible and the word “angel” appears over three hundred times. The archangel Michael, the only archangel listed in the Bible, is mentioned five times and was understood as God’s warrior. He was the one who fought against the dragon in Revelation. Michael’s name means “one who is like God.” Gabriel was mentioned four times in the Bible and appeared to Daniel when he prayed. Gabriel also pronounced the births of John the Baptist and Jesus. His name means “the strength of God” and he was more of a prophet whereas Michael was a warrior. Seraphim were listed in Isaiah as having six wings with four of the wings used to worship God while two were used for flying. Seraphim means “burning ones” because they were flying beside God and burned with a fiery zeal and passion. That made them the perfect angels to bring the message of repentance and purity to Isaiah as enacted by the burning coal on Isaiah’s lips. Cherubim were also angels. They were not cherubs or cupids in diapers with bows and arrows. Cherubim means “to till or plow” or “to get ready.” These angels were on top of the Ark of the Covenant and one was sent by God to protect the Garden of Eden with a fiery sword.

Angels were also called Sons of God, morning stars, watchers, thrones, powers, principalities, rulers, and authorities. The Apocrypha lists several other angels, Uriel, Raphael, and Metatron. Metatron always makes me laugh because it sounds like there were Transformers in the Bible. And let’s remember that although not explicitly said, Lucifer was thought to have been an angel and was cast out of heaven with a third of the angelic host who had also sinned against God. Apparently, their sin was of pride and desiring more power than God. Revelation and the Gospel of Luke report that Satan was cast out of heaven like a shooting star and like lightning.

But what kind of message did these angels bring? They brought announcements of blessing and help, pronouncements of judgment and death, and proclamations of the worship God. They brought announcements of blessing to Zechariah telling of John the Baptist’s birth and to Mary proclaiming the birth of Jesus. They also attended to Jesus in the wilderness after he battled with the devil and comforted him in the Garden of Gethsemane as he prayed for his life. They also brought God’s message of judgment as made clear with the ability of one angel to destroy a 185,000 strong Assyrian army; by plaguing all of the first-born sons of Egypt; or destroying cities who disobeyed God’s law. And we find they also brought vocal messages of worship through the burning bush of Moses, the ram left for Isaac instead of sacrificing his son, and the voice of God in the temple with the flying seraphim.

But, how does the visitation of an angel and a message from God directly affect a character in the Bible? Well, in our lectionary readings for the summer we have seen that Jacob had been

wrestling with many areas of his life and had ignored the messages of God. Family conflicts characterized Jacob's entire existence. Because Isaac and his wife, Rebekah, played favorites, Jacob and his twin Esau grew up hating each other. Do you remember that is where Jacob got his name? He was the one who grabbed on to the heel of his brother at birth and was a trickster throughout his life. Jacob hustled Esau out of his family birthright with a bowl of soup and then, with the help of his mother, tricked his blind and dying father. When Esau threatened to murder him, Jacob fled to his uncle Laban in Haran. Jacob married his cousins Rachel and Leah, and eventually fathered thirteen children with them and their slaves, Zilpah and Bilhah.

Sick of his father-in-law's manipulations, Jacob fled Laban, only to encounter his long lost and embittered brother Esau. Physically exhausted and deeply anxious about Esau, alone in the desert wilderness, shorn of all his worldly possessions, powerless to control his fate, Jacob collapsed into a deep sleep on the banks of the Jabbok River. With Laban behind him and Esau before him, he was too spent to struggle any longer.

But on the banks of the Jabbok, on the border of brokenness and blessing, was where his real battle began. A messenger of God came to him—an angelic visitor. They wrestled throughout the night until daybreak, at which point the stranger crippled Jacob with a blow to his hip that disabled him with a limp for the rest of his life. At that moment, he understood that he had been wrestling with an angel and that God had a message for him. The message was a new name... a name symbolizing his struggle with God. His name was no longer "one who grabs or deceives." His name was Israel, "one who strives with God" or "the one who prevailed against God." Jacob had been overcome by the demons in his life; he had struggled so long with his brother, father, and family; he was at the end of his existence and he prayed for a blessing, he fought for a blessing. He wrestled with an angel, maybe an angel of death, maybe one of life; and although wounded, he ended up seeing God face-to-face. Jacob saw God through the angelic fighter and the divine message changed his life.

Eli Wiesel said of this text, "Jacob has just understood a fundamental truth; God is in man, even in suffering, even in misfortune, even in evil. God is everywhere. In every Being, God does not wait for man at the end of the road. He is the exile. God holds both ends of the rope. He is present in every extremity. He is every limit. He is part of Jacob as He is part of Esau." Wiesel was right. God is all around us and we need to be the messengers of God in the world. The messengers might be Jacob, Esau, death, life, demons, our pasts, or our futures. The angels of God in our lives are many and we need to make sure we hear their divine messages.

A Time Magazine study revealed that one-third of Americans have had an experience with an angel. And I think many of us in this room have had experiences with angels because what if the real angels in our lives are not the mysterious ones of supernatural power but those of flesh and blood whom we see every day? What if understanding what the Bible says about angels is realizing that we should receive the divine messages of strangers, of friends, of our church? What if we give angelic help to those on the margins, those battling with brokenness and barrenness in their lives? What if angels are no longer transcendent, invisible figures but instead a real and powerful presence through you and through me?

That angel at the car wreck who saved Katie Lentz? He was actually flesh and blood priest, Father Patrick Dowling. Father Dowling was the humble and helpful clergyman who wouldn't even take credit for inspiring and encouraging the rescue workers to save the young girl's life. The New London Fire Chief, one of the rescuers at the scene, said it best, "I do think it's a miracle. I would say, whether it was an angel that was sent to us in the form of a priest or a priest that became an angel, I don't know. Either way, I'm good with it." Maybe we should be good with it too. The miracle of angels is that regardless of how awesome the divine messengers in the Bible are, you and I can do angelic things every day to help weary wrestlers see God face-to-face.

Amen.