

“Recovering Our Angels”

a sermon by

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As we come to this Christmas Eve 2004 there are two verses from the New Testament that I would like 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: “The Sadducees say that there is no 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 the most worldly-wise people in the New Testament. They believed only in what they 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 the Sadducee in most of us. So far as angels are concerned, there are not many of us 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 miracles of modern medicine, of stem cell research, of 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," Jesus said, "of the Sadduces."

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 an angel--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 are a reminder to 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 group of brave men 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 people to determine their own destiny. He believed that there was something more important 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' hearts. He had his angels and for that reason two thousand years after his birth we celebrate that birth.

That is something we need to remember on this evening, as American soldiers fight in Iraq. Thomas Friedman wrote a piece in the New York Times in which he said something that we would do well to ponder. "However badly this war started, however badly it has been managed, however badly you wish we were not there, be sure of one thing. This war that is being fought today is between those who want to have a part in their future and a virulent, nihilistic minority, who want to control Iraq for themselves. Tony Blair put it like this: "Whatever you thought about the removal of Saddam Hussein and the wisdom of that action there is only one side to be on today in what is clearly a battle between Democracy and terrorism. On the one side you have people who want democracy to work and want to have the same democratic freedoms that other people in the world have. And on the other side, you have people who are killing and intimidating and trying to destroy a better future for Iraq."

II.

Then too, if we are to recover our angels, we need to remember that there is the power of God to be present with us even through life's roughest moments. There is an old medieval painting that shows the child Jesus running with outstretched arms from his father's carpentry shop to his mother's waiting embrace. As you view the painting, you see that the sun from behind the child casts at the feet of Jesus the shadow of the cross. The painting reminds us that Jesus is not only the child who goes from the sunshine of a happy babyhood, where angels sing, but also into great tragedy.

The message of Christmas Day is that no one ever won a greater victory over spiritual trouble than did Jesus. It is indeed beautiful to hear the angels over Bethlehem, but as the years roll on, there is another scene that means even more to us. Long years after that first jubilation was silenced, a man left eight disciples at a garden gate and going in, left three more underneath the 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 he 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. It is written that there appeared to him beneath the olive tree an angel from heaven, strengthening him, so that he went out confident, calm, and strong. He had kept his angels. They did not simply sing above his childhood; they were his sustenance and strength in maturity. He never knew the nearness and reality of his spiritual life so well as when he most needed it.

In our own hearts, we will each know the great way that we are tempted to be Sadducees. It can be skeptical thinking. It can be the roughness of life's struggle. It can be the disillusionment of trouble. Whatever it is, may Christmas this year bring to each of us the recovery of our angels.
Amen!