

## Rumors of Angels

Somewhere I read that more people believe in angels than believe in a personal God. At first I found that incredible, but then I began to reflect on just how fascinated people are with angels these days. Movies, books, art and music have angels as their subjects. Even if people can't believe in God, they seem to want to believe that there is someone out there who cares about us.

Mortimer Adler, the University of Chicago philosopher and the editor of the Great Books series, shared how he once gave a lecture under the auspices of the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies. His topic was angels. "The announcement," he wrote, "drew an audience larger than any I have ever enjoyed in the last thirty years." The experience so moved him that he wrote a book on the philosophical significance of angels.

But our fascination with angels is not academic. It is deeply experiential. More than half of us claim to have had a religious experience, many with angels.

I have known a father who, watching his daughter die in a hospital bed after a tragic accident claimed that he saw angels hovering over his daughter's bed and lifting her to heaven just as she died.

I have known an uncle who fell into severe depression after the death of his dear wife. One night he awoke to find his room blazing with light, emanating from an angel who conveyed to him a message of personal peace. After that experience he was able to move on with his life, confident that things were all right.

Several years ago I read a story about a man who went through gruesome treatments for acute lymphocyte leukemia. Months passed and it was apparent that the treatments could not save him. He became restless, anxious, and afraid of leaving his loved ones. Then one night, he claimed to be visited by his "guardian angel" who told him not to fret about leaving his family. The next day in the hospital he was a totally different person. He was calm and relaxed. He didn't have the air of a terminally ill man anymore. He said to his wife, "My prayers have been answered."

No, he wasn't cured of his cancer. It wasn't the cure; it was the blessing the angel brought with him. It was the peace of mind. It was the quiet assurance that he could let go because his loved ones were in God's hands. Two days later the man died peacefully. His life was not saved but the fear and pain were taken away from him. Reflecting on what happened to her husband, his wife said, "Never, never, never will anyone be able to convince me that angels don't exist."

What do you think? "Are there really forces" as Sally Burnham put it, "that dive, invisible, into our petty affairs?" Do angels grace our daily lives?

The Bible stands on the side of those who believe that angels – intermediaries between heaven and earth – move among us. Angels are referred to over 300 times in the Bible. These references are found in at least 34 books, from Genesis to Revelation. The writer of Hebrews believed in angels. And he said something interesting: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."

Now there are a couple of ways of interpreting these words. It could be that he was advocating simple hospitality to strangers. "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers..."

Hospitality to strangers is a cherished tradition in Middle Eastern countries. In the Book of Genesis Abraham once offered hospitality to three strangers and discovered that they were angels. They blessed him, and gave him the assurance that his wife Sarah would indeed conceive and bear a son even in her old age. Maybe that is the story the writer of Hebrews had in mind. As Bishop Tom Wright put it, “In opening your front door you never know when an angel is going to walk in.” (1)

Hospitality to strangers – it’s something in short supply these days. To be honest, all of us are somewhat wary of strangers, perhaps even afraid. But let me ask you: Have you ever felt like a stranger? You walk into a crowded room and don’t know anyone – why it’s one of the most unpleasant feelings imaginable. If you have ever been a newcomer visiting a church for the first time, for example – then you know how discomfoting it feels to be utterly ignored at the coffee hour or not even greeted in the worship service.

My wife Heather and I once attended a prominent Episcopal Church in New York City. The liturgy was magnificent. The singing by the men and boys’ choir was heavenly. Coffee hour was served in a stately room with portraits of eminent clergy hanging on the wood paneled walls. There was fine china and silver and linen table cloths to enhance the ambience. Everything was impeccable, except for one thing. No one in the room spoke to us. Not one person even looked at us. We were the invisible couple. When I tried to get the attention of one of the assistant priests, the man looked at me and then turned his head. The message we got was unmistakable: we don’t want you here. You’re not welcome. You’re not one of us. You don’t matter.

By the way, a bishop friend of mine visited that same church with his family a few years later over the American Thanksgiving weekend. He got exactly the same treatment. When he told me his story, I was relieved. I said to him, “Well Bishop, at least that church is an equal opportunity discriminator.”

Every church ought to be more intentional in their hospitality to strangers. How can we show the love of Jesus to the world, if we regard strangers with fear and distrust – or even worse, ignore them as if they don’t even exist?

On the surface the writer of Hebrews is telling us simply to be hospitable to strangers. But the text seems to be saying more than that. The text is saying that some of these strangers may be angels. What does that mean?

Often when God has wanted to bless me, God has brought someone new – a stranger – into my life. Perhaps that has been true with you. They may have been unlikely people, but through their lives our lives are changed profoundly. They bless us when we feel burdened. They lift us up when we feel down. They speak just the right words of encouragement when we find ourselves so utterly discouraged. They lighten our load. They brighten our day. And they show us the better side of ourselves as well as the better side of life.

In his book, *The Immigrant Years: From Europe to Canada 1945-1967*, Barry Broadfoot recounts the tale of a Greek immigrant who suffered terrible loneliness. One day he decided to enter a church and talk to a priest. As his experience with the church in Greece had not been positive, he was understandably hesitant. However, he found the priest to be understanding, friendly and caring. The priest told him, “Come here Saturday night and come to church Sunday and you will meet a lot of other people like yourself, tired of being lonely, and we’ll go together to a party and drink some wine and have a good time and eat a lot of good food and maybe you’ll meet a nice girl who you will marry some day and you’ll have babies.” Well, those were exactly

the words that man needed to hear. The priest's words gave that man strength to face life in a new and strange country.

Now I ask: Was the priest an angel to that man? Was that man, a stranger in a new country, an angel to the priest? I think the answer is "yes" to both questions. You see: sometimes we can even be angels to each other and not realize it. The point is: we are to show hospitality to the strangers among us, because "they bring the presence of God with them." (2)

They may not have wings or wear long white robes. But these flesh and blood angels can bring blessing into our lives if we will give them the opportunity. Kindness to strangers is how we open ourselves to that opportunity. "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."

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Text – Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Proper 17 (22), C

- 1) Tom Wright, *Hebrews for Everyone* (SPCK, 2003) 169
- 2) Thomas G. Long, *Hebrews* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997) 143