



Angels Are Everywhere

SCRIPTURE:
2 Timothy 4:6-18

January 31, 2021 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

I have always loved this passage, but in recent years I find myself drawn to it again and again like waves to the shore. Paul is in prison and as he says, he believes that the time of his departure has come. He is in the middle of the storm—that’s for sure. Not only prison, but Alexander, whoever he is, has done Paul harm. Many folks Paul thought he could depend on have deserted him. You hear the loneliness in his voice: “At my first defense no one came to my support.” This courageous apostle who faced beatings and hatred, shipwreck and storm—you can hear in his words that he is struggling to hold on. This is Paul’s year 2020. But there is also more in these few words. Paul sees his situation with 20/20 vision as well, and like picking photos off the wall of his mind, he focuses on friends who are a source of strength, a source of inspiration.

Luke is here and you know how kind he is. Get Mark, he says. There’s a sweetness in this, as Mark and Paul were once estranged. We don’t know the details, but they have obviously reconciled. I’d love to see Mark again; he’s good for my soul. The ministry continues. Did you know our friend Tychicus is in Ephesus as we speak? I suppose it goes without saying, more than anything, before I go, I would love to see you one more time, Timothy. Do your best to come before winter.

If I understand the text, what Paul is doing in this midst of this difficult time is looking for the angels. I’ve told you this before: angelos is the Greek word for angel and it literally translates, “messenger.” An angel is a holy messenger, one who brings a word of grace. Paul names the angels all around him. Luke is here. Get Mark. Pray for Tychicus and his ministry. And Timothy, come see me.

Did you see it? I know you did. In the midst of this tragic and exhausting year, there were angels all around us. They were everywhere. I remember back in the spring when it seemed that everyone was walking, and ironically, out of kindness, passing by one another on the other side. People started putting little stuffed Teddy bears in their windows for children to spot as they walked. Like a stuffed-animal Easter egg hunt. And children started chalking words of encouragement on sidewalks. I even saw chalked out, in probably 3rd-grade writing, “Trust in the Lord and do not be afraid.” Angels were everywhere.

In those early days, when I would wipe down the milk and the can of black beans when I got home from the grocery store, I’d remember Dorothy who checked me out. Only her eyes were visible over her mask, but they betrayed her anxiety. “Thank you for being here,” I said. “Of course, I know you need to eat,” she said. She is an angel.

The doctors and nurses who have lived in a state of exhaustion, fighting against increasing odds to keep themselves safe while they heal us. But not just them, but also the folks in the cafeteria who are preparing meals for the sick, and the folks in the environmental services department who are keeping the hospital rooms clean and sterile... they are angels.

But not just them... all those scientists who raced the clock to create a vaccine... and the thousands of volunteers like my friend, Kay, a member of this church, who rolled up her sleeve to participate in a vaccine trial. Angels—all of them.

And teachers who learned to teach geometry and music class on Zoom. And parents who learned to teach geometry and music class and began to recognize that quarantine could sometimes feel like a gift

and sometimes feel like a prison sentence... angels all of them.

I read of Sean, an African American young adult, who said after the murders of Ahmad Arbury and George Floyd, he was afraid to walk his dog in his own neighborhood. He was afraid to step off his porch. His neighbors found out about it, and en masse—black, brown, white—they all showed up with their dogs, those who had them. We will walk with you, Sean. All will be well.

I heard an angel speak with a Black voice as a 22-year-old inaugural poet named Amanda asked us, “where can we find the light in this never-ending shade? When what just is, isn’t always justice, and yet there is always light if we’re brave enough to be it.”¹ A holy messenger.

You have been angels, too. You have passed the peace, you have made phone calls to check in on the lonely. You have volunteered at our pantries and taught our littlest ones and sewed masks for our neighbors... all signs of God’s grace alive in the world. I could go on, as my list is long, and I know you would have a list, too. I think what Paul is modeling for us is what Rev. Fred Rodgers exhorted us: look for the helpers... they are the angels.

But once you see them, something else happens. Paul says, “At my first defense no one came to my support, but all deserted me. But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength... so I was rescued from the lion’s mouth.”

In this moment, we hear his loneliness but we also hear his strength. If I understand the text, what we see here is, as Paul focuses on the angels around him, he finds he has a strength. He musters the courage to face even the ultimate threats of this world.

It has taken tremendous courage to walk through this lonely, demanding, frightening year. And I imagine you discovered that you are stronger than you thought. I imagine you discovered that the grace of God is more reliable, the Spirit of God is closer than you thought. There may have been times when your heart was so heavy, your spirit so weighted down that you thought: forget it, I can’t make it.

But you did make it.

You know, the thing about courage like this is, it never comes ahead of schedule. We don’t store up courage ahead of time and draw on a reservoir when we need it. No. It shows up at the precise moment we are tested.

I want to tell you a story from my life, not that my life matters, but I know if I have this story, you have a story like this in your own life and I want you to reflect on whatever that story in your life might be.

It was 1989, I was newly married and in school in Connecticut. In the middle of the night, our phone rang. It was a surgeon from South Carolina saying he needed me to give him permission to do brain surgery on my mother who had suffered a stroke. She was 54 years old.

That night changed her. That afternoon, she was a talented musician, a pastor with a compassionate heart and gift for teaching, a woman who laughed quickly... and was only an adequate cook, who did so only when required. All of that was taken from her that night and left her with a fragile body and a vocabulary that would be forever elusive.

And what took me awhile to realize, is that the one who raised me, now depended on me for everything. I wasn’t 30 years old yet, and already taking care of my mother. For the next 24 years, she would live sometimes in our house, but always in our zip code, until these past seven years when she has had the same arrangement with my sister. And there is a discomfort—some of you have walked this road and know—there is an illegitimate feeling when the child becomes the caregiver. And it was hard. But I discovered that being afraid and overwhelmed is not a sign that God has gone away.

Oh, there were times when I thought I did not have whatever was required to be the father of toddlers while also caring for a parent. But I was wrong. I just had never been strong enough before then, but I didn’t need to be beforehand.

When I thought I couldn’t make it, there were angels. Many were from Fourth Presbyterian Church in Greenville, SC where my mother served for just

¹ excerpted from “The Hill We Climb” by Amanda Gorman, read at the Presidential Inauguration on Jan. 20, 2021

15 months. But they wouldn't go away. They didn't stop caring. They were holy messengers, emissaries from God, and they gave us courage.

I tell you that because I know you have similar stories. We all have the stories of how life has tested us, broken our hearts, pushed us into outer darkness when light seemed dead and hope unborn had died. And God seemed to have misplaced you. But there in that barren place, the angels of ordinary kindness

and holy words become instruments of strength.

I imagine this year has shown you that you are stronger than you thought. By the grace of God, you are stronger than you thought.

2020 has been, and 2021 continues to be, a hard walk. But we have walked it. That is no small thing. You are stronger than you thought, and there are angels everywhere. Just look.

This sermon was delivered by Rev. Tom Are, Jr., at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, Kansas, 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard, or watched on the church's website: www.villagepres.org/online.
