

Entertaining Angels

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Scripture: Genesis 28:10–22; Daniel 3:8–30; Matthew 1:18–25; Luke 1:5–17, 1:26–38, 2:8–14; Hebrews 1:3–14; 13:1–2

“Some have entertained angels unawares,” say the King James and Revised Standard Version Bibles—the wording of Hebrews 13:2 that many of us know by heart. The phrase is piquant in its brevity, but risks misunderstanding, since the adjective “unawares” could be applied, grammatically speaking, to the “angels” instead of to the “some,” and what are unaware angels? Most contemporary translations clarify the meaning of the phrase with the more prosaic “entertained angels without knowing it.”

Which raises the question, which guest is not an angel?

In terms of grace and gratitude, of course, there are some unangelic guests. If, by angel, we mean someone who is well-behaved, well yes, we do entertain angels and devils and a lot of in-betweens. There was the overnight guest who never mentioned that he couldn’t seem to get a hot shower downstairs. That was too good—we could have fixed that. But then there was the guest of one of our children who nearly burned the house down by not quite stubbing out a cigarette during a teenage get-together in the attic. I don’t believe he was welcomed by anyone after that.

But, in ancient cosmological imaginings, angels were not understood as extra nice people who picked up their towels and never complained about accommodations. They weren’t even, in the first instance, the emergency intervention forces that many people regard angels to be today, halting oncoming trucks and falling objects. Nor are they fairies, though you

can’t tell that from what some websites profiting from the angel craze might say.

Rather, in the Bible’s ancient world, they were understood fundamentally as bringers of divine messages. They were messengers from God, intermediaries to mortals—sometimes to those who weren’t getting the point, sometimes to those too distressed to hear, sometimes to those in danger of acting rashly, sometimes to those whose lives were about to be redirected.

Lesson Four points out the correspondence in Hebrew between the words *angel* and *messenger*. The Hebrew word *mal’akh* can mean either or both. The messenger can be human—a prophet (Haggai 1:13) or a priest (Malachi 2:7) or even a courier conveying information from one person to another (Genesis 32:3; 2 Samuel 11:19). The Greek word *angelos* can be similarly ambiguous, though its references to a human messenger are more rare.

People sometimes express frustration with perceived discontinuity between the world as it appeared in Bible stories and as it appears today. Why did they get miracles and angels and we don’t? Wouldn’t life be easier with such direct signs of God’s presence and will?

A couple of things are worth bearing in mind. First, events or perceptions take shape as they are reduced to words. Even when something happens to us ourselves, it is an act of interpretation and clarification to retell it, and thus to transform it from incident to meaningful sequence. The stories told in Scripture underwent shaping that participants, in the moments themselves, or in moments that inspired the stories, might not have seen as as well-defined as hearers see them now.

Second, the laws of science are built into creation and do not change. But human storytelling conventions and worldviews do change. Today, if modern images are to be believed, we have fairly fixed notions of what angels must look like: white clothes, halos, big feathery wings. But descriptions of angels in scripture are sparse and fluid. In scripture, angels often merge with God's presence or are mistaken for humans. For us, angels and miracles defy science. In ancient times, angels and miracles had nothing to do with defying science—since, as an organized discipline, science didn't yet exist. Angels and miracles were signs of divine action and presence, signs that must be interpreted to be perceived. The wonder was not in the event's scientific impossibility but in its signal of God's grace.

I am probably not the only person who feels chronically short of time, but I am certainly an expert at guarding it. My office is in our home, and with six children, four children-in-law, three grandchildren, a few "adoptees," and tenants, neighbors, and church members, not to mention phone and email messages pouring in, I am grateful for days when I can think in a straight line for half an hour. It doesn't happen without some self-protection. So hospitality is almost never the first impulse, and efficiency in dispatching the interruption is often uppermost.

My spouse is similarly in a hurry most of the time. And yet he is a good pastor. Watching him welcome intrusions has helped me relax and open myself to what God can show me through angels arriving unannounced. A daughter comes in, purportedly to check her mail, but then sighs and sits down, and I know it's time to close my laptop. An out-of-town friend needs a place to stay on a very busy weekend. A church member won't exactly say what is lurking behind her eyes, but needs a hug. It's a matter of reading cues, slowing down, doing triage, letting the unexpected happen, realizing that in those moments I can benefit less by plowing on with my to-do list than by receiving the person in front of me. And almost inevitably what comes when I entertain "angels unawares" is a new insight about the daughter, the friend, the world or myself—new information, new understanding, new encouragement, a gift from above.

Maybe, as the angel people claim, life is indeed a series of near misses from which angels are protecting us, cartoon montages of pianos and anvils not quite falling on our heads. But much more frequently, life is a series of nearly missed messages brought by angels all around, messages that will indeed be missed when we fail in hospitality, if we refuse to open our lives to strangers and friends alike.

Questions

1. Have you ever thought—or heard others say—that life is a lot murkier now than in biblical times, when it seemed as if angels showed up at all the right moments to explain things? What do you make of that?
2. Recall a time when an unexpected encounter resulted in a message you needed to hear just when you needed to hear it. What allowed you to be open to it? How can you develop a habit of being open to others?

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