

Pastor's Message – 10/29/23
1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

Two weeks ago now, we celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Wesley Center and, in preparation for the event, we invited some of the former pastors of the Church to attend and celebrate with us. The Church has had a lot of pastors over its 179-year history, and they have all been different. I was talking to a Church member who was recalling a pastor who had a different preaching style than mine. "Repent! Be saved! The end is at hand!" That might have been his basic message. "Get right with God, or you're gonna get left!" That would be a contrast to Paul's message in his Letter to the Thessalonians today. Paul writes "we speak as messengers approved by God to be entrusted with the Good News (vs. 4)."

As we near the Christmas season, we also come closer to the season of angels. Angels begin to appear on Christmas decorations and banners, in Christmas plays and in Christmas carols. They speak to shepherds and make an announcement to Mary, and usually are portrayed as wonderful and beautiful. But have you ever noticed that the first words out of their mouths are usually, "Don't be afraid." Biblical angels seem to be fearsome creatures. But biblical angels are always messengers.

Angels seem, however, to have morphed into creatures who are protectors and guides. Believing in angels or at least hoping for an angel, has become acceptable. Instead of trusting only in our own inner powers and self-guided insights, we seem to be opening up to the possibility that help just might be available from "another," from sources outside ourselves and higher than ourselves.

Angels as distinct creatures have been a part of all Western monotheistic religions since their beginning. There is a universal recognition among Judaism, Christianity and Islam that the one supreme God-over-all needs some form of "helpers" to act as mediators between the exalted God and the created earth. Good angels, fallen angels, avenging angels, helping angels filled the air for centuries and are believed to be working among us even now. There are still some who relegate seemingly angelic work to the powers of gravity, the laws of thermodynamics or the movements of atoms.

Whether or not winged or wingless beings from some nebulous place between earth and heaven are in short supply, angels are the bearers of good news, "Peace on earth; good will to men." I bring you good tidings of great joy. Today is born in the city of Judah, one who is Christ the Lord."

Paul writes he is a messenger of good news and as believers, we too must take up the angelic role – to be messengers of good news. For an angel is a being who doesn't just know how to make a difference. An angel actually does something to make a difference, to make life count. The world needs more Earth Angels. The church needs more Angel Food Churches.

The text from Thessalonians today both defines why all Christians may be considered Earth Angels and describes what is expected from an angelic witness. In 1 Thessalonians 2:4 Paul specifically declares that he -- and by inference all believers -- has been "approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel ... to please God" Here is the Christian Earth Angel -- the bearer of the greatest Good News God ever had to deliver to humanity!

But there are more than mere words associated with being an Earth Angel or an Angel Food Church. Angels are exceedingly busy beings. In the church's angelology, the study of angels, these heavenly creatures were always intervening, interfering, interjecting and generally just mucking about in the events of men's and women's lives. Paul goes on to describe his "angelic" activities among the Thessalonians as similar to "a mother feeding and caring for her own children." (v.7). The angelic spirit of doing and giving for the sake of others is summed up by Paul in verse 8: "So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves.

True angels, giving angelic witness, come ready to give, ready to help, ready to work. Angels come bearing "angel food" -- a life-sustaining and enriching energy source they share with complete abandon, with no thought for their own needs. It is a happy discovery that the soft, sweet, spongy cake we have for so long called "angel food" is actually one of the few yummy morsels that isn't bad for us. Fat-free angel food cake is a dieter's sin-free dessert. (Unlike "devil's food" which, of course, is filled with egg yolks and oil and butter, all just waiting to leap into your arteries and stick them shut!)

Beware the path angels trod, however, as well as the paths angels fear to tread. When we as angels offer the angel food of the gospel and ourselves as nourishment to others, we aren't always left as unscathed as those dining on angel food cake. Paul's letter to the Thessalonians states he has "already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi" (v.2). Doing for others isn't always appreciated. And some people would rather shovel in the thin, tasteless gruel of a self-oriented life than to dare to reach

out to try the sumptuous feast being offered them by the gospel.

There is a downside to being an Earth Angel instead of one of those fluttery, celestial beings our dreams envisioned in the Middle Ages. Real angels, real messengers of the gospel, can be fearfully wounded by those who reject or resent the angel food offered them. Angels may be assured of God's continued love and abiding presence, but they are not guaranteed "safe passage" between earth and heaven. Ironically, it is from those angels whose own lives have been the most scarred, often even sacrificed, for the sake of the gospel, that the sweetest and most enduring angel food has ever been offered.

Do you believe there are angels among us? Are you an angel? During this week, try recognizing and identifying by name some members of the angelic host that populate this Church and make this Church into an Angel Food Church.

Who are the "guardian angels" of your church whose wisdom guards and guides your path?

Who are the "teen angels" of your church?

Who are the "herald angels" who are always ready with an affirming and embracing word, those in the church who keep you going with encouragement and "go-for-it" courage?

Who are the "choir angels" that feed others the sustaining music of God's love with their everyday witness and harmonious living?

I read a story as I was preparing for this sermon today. Her name is long forgotten but not her actions. Betty was dying. Her family, who lived several hours away, decided that they would come on the weekend to be with her. Despite several phone calls indicating that she might not last until the weekend, her family stayed away. Only Betty's pastor sat at her bedside until one of the nurses came. This nurse, the head nurse of the floor, sat down on Betty's bed, gently held her hand, swabbed Betty's parched lips with bits of ice, moistened her tongue, and waited. She quietly listened as the pastor prayed with Betty and whispered an "amen" at the conclusion of the prayer.

The four-bed ward was quiet in the late hours of the night. And still the nurse sat. Betty awoke for a brief moment, turned to her pastor and said, "There is an angel sitting on my bed." A few minutes later Betty died.

Later, the pastor thanked the nurse for her gentle and loving care for Betty in her last hours. "Do you sit with the dying often?" he asked.

"No," was her reply. "But Betty was alone except for you, and she was such a dear. Tonight was unusually quiet, so I decided to sit with Betty."

"You really were an angel," the pastor said as he left.

Paul tells us that he came, not with a message of condemnation, criticism, gloom and doom, but came representing the God who loves us. He came teaching the people a life of love. So he related himself to the people and to the church in Thessalonica in love. They knew that he loved them. He said, "So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God, but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us" (v. 8).

Why did Paul feel that way about the church? It was because of what he believed about the church.

Paul had no illusions about the church. He knew well the humanity of the church. As we read all of the letters of Paul, we find he had to deal with all of the shortcomings and failures and temptations that churches have to reckon with today. Yes, Paul knew about the humanity of the church. Many people today have given up on organized religion and churches, but I believe that connections in churches can be our salvation and a way to bring the Kingdom of God closer.

The church is strengthened by regular participation to have our own spiritual needs met. Yes, that can sometimes set us up for disappointment. Not every sermon, not every worship service, not every hymn or song, not every interaction will satisfy our longing. But what would happen if you would speak up someday and say, "I have come here hoping to be saved. I have come here hoping to get hold of some hope, hoping to learn to be able to trust, and hoping to learn to live in love"? The expectation just might bring about some real spiritual renewal and new life and a fire in the hearts of the people in your church.

An old legend tells of the four angels present at creation. The first angel said to God, "My Lord, what a wonderful, beautiful world! How did you do it?" That angel went on to become history's first scientist. The second angel said to God, "My Lord, what a wonderful, beautiful world. Why did you do it?" That angel went on to become history's first theologian and philosopher. The third angel said to God, "My Lord, what a wonderful, beautiful world. Can I have it?" That angel went on to write the script for consumerism. The fourth angel said to God, "My Lord, what a wonderful, beautiful world. Can I help?"

Do you believe that there are angels among us? Have you seen them? Are you an angel among us?