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Things We Don't Talk Much About In Church
I. Angels

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Isaiah 6:1-8
Psalm 103:1-5, 20-22
Hebrews 1:1-9

According to recent surveys of religious beliefs in America, 73% of us believe in angels. Many people also think that when we die, we go to heaven and turn into angels ourselves. TV shows and movies galore are based on this premise, and so was one of the ghastliest rock-'n-roll songs ever written, entitled "Teen Angel" ["That fateful night, the car was stalled upon the railroad tracks..."] But according to the Bible, it just isn't so. Human beings and angels are and always will be two distinct species. As one theologian quipped, you and I will never be angels. The good news is that we won't ever be cockroaches either.

It's very sweet that every Christmas since 1946 Jimmy Stewart has discovered anew that it's a wonderful life as he is saved from despair by Clarence, an angel trainee trying to earn his wings. But it turns out that Clarence is wasting his efforts. Angels do not earn their wings. With the famous exception of the seraphim who have six

pairs, most angels in the Bible don't even have wings.

Angels in scripture also have more important things to do than fish despondent Savings and Loan managers out of the drink. According to the Bible, it is not a major angelic function to pluck human beings' personal chestnuts out of the fire.

Neither do angels lurk about disguised as nice people who punctuate our anxious days with kindly coincidences. You are more likely to be slammed to the ground by an angel than mysteriously touched by one. Just ask the biblical patriarch who once wrestled with one—Jacob, the guy with the limp.

Angels in the Bible tend to be fierce. The angel who left Jacob in need of a hip replacement could eat the cute cast of "Angels in the Outfield" for lunch. It's not for nothing that in many instances the first thing angels say to people is, "Fear not!"

In the first reading today, the prophet Isaiah sees God surrounded by six-winged seraphs. Their booming voices shake up the temple. Plaster is falling, smoke is rising, and Isaiah is terrified. He immediately accepts two basic facts: God is holy, and he is not. He's preparing to drop dead when one of the seraphim zooms toward him wielding tongs. The angel drops a red-hot coal on his mouth. Thus it is that Isaiah is distracted from

his own unworthiness and freed up to hear God's call.

Angels are intelligent, spiritual entities who exist to do God's bidding. Because that bidding often entails delivering messages to mortals, occasionally angels take human form, as three of them did when Abraham "welcomed angels without knowing it" under the oaks of Mamre [Genesis 18:1, Hebrews 13:2]. But angels are normally invisible, part of that world beyond the thin veil that we refer to when we say, "I believe in God...maker of heaven and earth, and of all things seen *and unseen*."

Although people pray to angels in some parts of the Christian family, the biblical record is weighted against that practice. Angels do not intercede for us with God, or otherwise facilitate our salvation. They are creatures, not demi-gods, mini-gods, or intermediaries between us and God.

This is the point that the author of the Letter to the Hebrews is trying to make in our second reading today. He is addressing first-century Christians who seem to have been infected with angelmania, much like people in America at the end of the 20th century when Raphael's two pudgy-armed cherubs were merchandised to death. The author of Hebrews is trying to persuade his community that angels cannot hold a candle to Christ, and that it

is in Jesus' name alone that they can confidently expect grace and favor from God. "To which angel," he asks with a dismissive air, "did God ever say, 'You are my Son?'"

Like humans, angels have free will, and that means that they can choose, and that means that they will sometimes choose wrong. Angels are not always good. Some angels are said to have revolted against God in heaven and been bounced out of paradise because of it. We call these bad angels 'devils'. So, the next time you bend over a baby carriage and coo, "What an angel!", remember to specify what kind you mean. You wouldn't want to imply that the cute little kid in the carriage is the spawn of Satan.

God's angels are a lot like us—busy, busy, busy. They commute long distances to work. They multi-task. They ascend and descend Jacob's ladder (which is one reason why we know they don't all have wings. Why climb if you can fly?). They travel at the head of the Israelite column across the wilderness. They announce a lot of unplanned pregnancies to a lot of startled women. They guard the ark of the covenant and they stand with flaming swords at the locked gates of Paradise. They rejoice over the repentance of a single sinner. They minister to Jesus in the desert and in the Garden, and they announce his resurrection

to the women at the tomb. And that's just the short list of what angels get up to in the Bible.

There are also countless ranks of stay-at-home angels who surround God's throne night and day, behold God's face, and incessantly cry out, "Holy!" and "Glory!" Apparently they do not get tired of doing this sort of thing. Angels are primarily worshippers. It is who they are—praise for God's glory. Contrary to our assumptions about this angelic worship, however, the Bible never actually says that they sing. It does say that they play musical instruments—just as we see them doing in our Four Elements window, a splendid portrait of a veritable heavenly orchestra.

Too numerous to count, angels are a *sabaoth*, a heavenly host, and when push comes to shove—and the Bible says it surely will—they are an army. In the lurid Book of Revelation we are presented with the angels' general, Michael, the great Prince of Heaven. It is he, we are told, who will lead the hosts in the final apocalyptic struggle between God's forces and the Dragon. It will not surprise you to learn, therefore, that Michael is the patron saint of paratroopers. [He is also, inexplicably, the patron saint of grocers.]

So, do you believe in angels?

Jews seem to have a happy tolerance for differences of opinion about just about everything, and so naturally they also disagree about whether belief in angels is a necessary element of Judaism. Observant Muslims, on the other hand, hold to a strict belief in angels as a basic pillar of their faith. They especially honor Gabriel, who taught the 114 surahs of the Qur'an to Muhammed—the same Gabriel who told Mary to expect the baby Jesus and gave Daniel the gift of pre-Jungian dream interpretation.

Concerning belief in angels, Christians divide into the same camps we divide into about belief in a lot of other things. Christians to the 'right' tend to think that because angels are part of the biblical worldview, they absolutely must be part of ours too. Christians to the 'left' are more likely to think of belief in angels on a par with Elvis sightings and UFOs. Christians in the 'middle' usually can take 'em or leave 'em. They don't think much about angels, except maybe at Christmas, or if they have some sort of odd experience that defies rational explanation, and the metaphor of 'angel encounter' seems as good a metaphor for what happened as any.

As for me, I know that belief in angels will not put me right with God or save my soul. But just because something isn't necessary for salvation, or even for faithful discipleship, doesn't mean it

can't do me some good. And one good thing that the Christian tradition about angels does for me is enliven my imagination. Imagination is hardly indifferent in a believer's spiritual and moral life. When the imagination is in drive, God and neighbor are usually better-served than when it is idling in neutral or stuck in reverse.

Imagine with me, then.

Picture psychedelic seraphim, eyes plastered all over their strange forms, wings flapping madly.

Imagine disruptive intrusions into a person's life or a nation's destiny.

Imagine bizarre and even painful angelic ministrations.

All this the angels do as God's servants. It is disruptive, amazing, strange, and yet (in the end) it accomplishes God's purposes, a will that is for us and for our salvation. We are glimpsing of God's character as we watch the angels execute God's purposes.

Imagine, and the biblical truth materializes—God is more than we want and nothing we expect. God is for us, but not like us. Much of what we think we know for sure about the divine turns out to be as elusive as Isaiah's smoky vision in the wee hours.

This is not comfortable news, but it is good news. It saves us from pride and certainty, and from the violence that is often the fruit of pride and certainty.

Angels conform to God's purposes. They are created and exist solely to do God's will. Imagine, then.

Imagine their brilliance, their strength, their ferocity. Imagine, and a vista opens up to you. Here is what it might feel and look like to love and serve the Lord with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength as scripture commands. Here is service that is free and complete and confident, service with authority.

Are we meant to serve like this? It would seem so. After all, Jesus taught us to pray, 'thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.' Who does God's will in heaven? The angels do. Their responsiveness is a model for our own.

Angels are God's messengers. The Greek word *angelos* means 'messenger.' It's the same Greek word from which the word for 'gospel', or good news, derives—*evangelion*. Angels are announcers, word-bringers, heralds of glad tidings, and therefore life-changers by proxy. Imagine.

What it is that we have been baptized into if not a herald's role? Perhaps we are called to make

people jump, to surprise them in their sleep or on the road with the announcement of God's merciful purposes, God's pleasure and God's peace.

The vocation of the angel army to defend God's realm against evil confronts us with a question of great seriousness. Imagining that apocalyptic struggle, I imagine as well the earthly, human project of moral and spiritual growth. Do I expect it to unfold serenely? Will I not encounter enemies—the shallow world, the narrow mind, the fear-filled heart? Will they let me pass on towards my hopes for maturity and wisdom in peace, or will there be a fight?

And what about the moral and spiritual well-being of others? Imagine the struggle in heaven over the salvation of God's holy ones. Imagine if we did not abandon that field of struggle here on earth, giving it over to other Christians who see discipleship solely in terms of 'soul-winning'? Could we be prompted by the angels to risk our images as progressive, non-judgmental people in order to help someone in big personal trouble actually change the sad or self-destructive direction of his or her moral life? Does Christ give us only the charge of battling for societal and institutional justice, or should we be actively engaged in bringing sanity and strength to each other's inner lives as well?

It is the nature of angels to worship night and day, singing "Glory," and "Holy." Call me crazy or credulous, but every time we gather to worship I imagine that we are not doing it alone. I imagine that this very room, when we are gathered here as God's people, is a thin place where earth and heaven meet. Right now, this sanctuary is filling with the smoke of the angelic presence and the energy of their adoration. Imagine yourselves joined to their praise, engaged in the captivating duty of adoration.

If you can imagine it, you may also feel a certain fright. Your hearts may sink at the realization that you are so small, and a sinner. The One we worship is holy. But perhaps you can also imagine a fierce and determined seraph burning off your protestations of unworthiness, and jolting you into a new freedom by which you will have courage to answer 'yes' when you are called.

And God is calling you, calling all of us all the time, to be God's own, precious in God's sight. And we are always longing to be able to say, "Here I am." In the presence of the angels, perhaps we will say it, and mean it, this very day.

We sing about angels in our hymns all the time, but we don't talk much about them in church. This is the first sermon I've ever preached on angels,

and it's the only one I've ever heard. Maybe after I sit down I'll think it's just as well, and maybe you will too! It is an odd subject. But who knows what the Holy Spirit will decide to do in our hearts with the stuff of these 15 minutes? Will we profit by it somehow?

I hope so, but if not, there's always next week's sermon: Violence in the Bible. And two weeks after that: Sex. Sheesh, and if you think angels are weird, just wait ...