**Be on the Lookout for Angels**

**Text: Hebrews 13:2**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some have entertained angels unawares.”

Have you ever seen an angel? I’m guessing that you have. Perhaps angels are far more common than our modern scientific minds realize. But we’ll never know for sure – at least not on this side of the mirror into which we now see but dimly – because, as our text suggests, they have a habit of sneaking-up on us and interacting with us without us even knowing it. We have this image of an angel as a beautiful, winged, female-type creature surrounded by light, and – yes – if such a creature appeared to us I believe that we would all sit-up and take notice! But that’s not the way that angels tend to appear in scripture. More often than not, they appear as human beings who look a lot like you and me.

In the Bible, an angel is simply a messenger. The Hebrew word is *malak* and the Greek word is *aggelos* and they both mean *messenger*. An angel is a messenger from God. And we know from the angel who appeared to the shepherds on the night of Jesus’ birth that they frequently bring good news. “Behold. I bring you good news of a great joy that shall be to all the people,” said the messenger of God on that sacred night (see Luke 2:10).

In the Letter to the Hebrews we learn more about angels. In Hebrews 1:14 we’re told that angels are “spirits in the divine service, sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation.” That is to say, sent to serve for your sake, and for mine, and for all who are in the process of being saved. So angels are messengers and servants of God, sent to bring good news to those who are being saved.

 That’s the first thing that we need to know about angels. And the second thing is this: they tend to appear as strangers. The tend to appear as people whom we don’t know, people whom we don’t recognize, people whom we might turn away. We’re taught as children to be leery of strangers. “Don’t talk to strangers!” If you remember being told that as a child, raise your hand. “Don’t talk to strangers.” And, yes, that’s good advice to give to children or to anyone who is especially vulnerable.

But as adults we can sometimes afford to be more adventurous. We have a few more tools with which to get ourselves out of a dicey situation if we have to. Hence the advice in Hebrews and in so many places in the Bible to offer *hospitality* to strangers; whether or not you suspect them of being angels. Angels appeared as strangers to Abraham and brought him the good news that Sarah would have a child (see Genesis 18). An angel appeared as a stranger to Zorah’s wife and told her that she would give birth to an amazing son named Samson (see Judges 13). These texts especially stand behind the advice in Hebrews that by welcoming strangers you might be welcoming angels. Which suggests that as adults, at least, we shouldn’t be as leery of strangers as we tend to be, whether the stranger is a visitor in church or a poor family at the southern border. It is especially among *strangers* that we are to be on the lookout for angels.

Which brings us to the third thing that we need to know about angels, and about strangers: we should offer them hospitality. To do so is about the most biblical thing that we can do. We’re told in Deuteronomy, “You shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Dt. 10:19). Indeed, we’re told that *God* loves the stranger, which is why God executes justice for the stranger, along with the widow and orphan, and provides them food and clothing (Dt. 10:18). This tradition of hospitality has been the norm in the harsh desert environment of the Middle East for millennia. Job, when he’s pleading his case before God, says, “The stranger has not lodged in the streets; I have opened my door to him” (Job 31:32). Job is trying to prove to God that he really is a good guy, he really is a righteous man, so he uses his practice of offering hospitality to the poor and the stranger as a test case. That’s how much the Bible teaches us to offer hospitality to strangers; angels and otherwise. It’s part of our duty as the people of God. It is part of our biblical mandate as followers of Jesus Christ.

 Which means that when the federal government arrests Christians for providing food and water to strangers in the desert of the Rio Grande valley – and immigration officials have indeed begun to do this – it is arguably a violation of their freedom of religion, and those Christians ought to be making that 1st amendment case in court.

So, angels are messengers in the divine service, who often come to us as strangers, and we are *strongly* encouraged to offer them hospitality.

Be on the lookout for angels.

Let me tell you some stories about angels. Or at least stories about hospitality and strangers, and *maybe* they’re about angels as well.

Years ago my sister-in-law, Margaret, was invited to help crew an old yacht that one of her friends had purchased down in the Caribbean. Their mission was to reposition this old sailing vessels to a port on Chesapeake Bay. This was a big old boat, so they needed to hire a few men to complete the crew. They’d hired almost everyone that they needed, when this really rough looking guy came along: scruffy beard, dirty clothes, and he smelled a bit of alcohol.

“I need some work,” he said.

“Well, what can you do?”, the boat owner replied. Turned out that he’d worked in a restaurant, so they hired him as the cook. They *hired* him, so *technically* this wasn’t an act of hospitality. But also, they were offering food and shelter to someone who was close to being on the streets; so the job offer was certainly in the *spirit* of hospitality.

With the crew complete, they set sail. And they ate not *too* badly; when the cook wasn’t drunk. But, the boat leaked a bit. And the sails had a few tears. And there wasn’t much wind. Making little headway on their journey north, they decided to fire-up the engine. The motor didn’t work. Neither did the radio. And then the wind died completely. Now they were adrift in the Atlantic, in a leaky boat, with no way of calling for help.

When the cook had sobered-up he said, “Let me take a look at that engine.” Turned out that this 3rd rate cook was a pretty good mechanic. Who knew? He got the engine going, and the ship was making good progress up the East Coast…until the Coast Guard came alongside and escorted them into a port in the Carolinas. The vessel looked so decrepit that the Coast Guard thought they were running drugs.

The stranger saved the day. “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing you might entertain angels unawares.” Be on the lookout for angels.

The first church that I served in Toronto was just down the street from a halfway house for recovering psychiatric patients. Occasionally some of the men living in the house would worship with us on Sunday mornings. Now, it’s interesting how church folks respond to strangers who come through their doors. If the visitors are clean and relatively well-dressed, they *might* receive a warm welcome. But, if they’re kind of scruffy and don’t smell too good – like the cook on that drifting yacht – they’re often told to leave. “Come back after church when the pastor *might* have time to see you,” they’re told.

Folks who have a history of mental illness are sometimes scruffy and don’t smell too good. So I kept telling the good people of Hillcrest Christian Church, “Please welcome folks on Sunday mornings. Invite them to stay for church, even if they haven’t had a bath. We’re called to offer hospitality to strangers.”

Sometimes our neighbors down the street successfully ran the gauntlet of greeters who misunderstood their mission to be guards, and they made their way to a pew. And sometimes they even stayed for the whole hour.

Well, this one Sunday I really wasn’t prepared. I didn’t like my sermon and I dreaded the thought of forcing my parishoners to listen to pure rubbish for 20 minutes. The moment came to mount the pulpit steps. I stood there, took a deep breath…and one of our visitors from the halfway house stood-up and said, “Mr. Minister, can I give my testimony now?!”

My first thought was, “Oh goody; someone else is going to preach the sermon today!” I paused for a moment, trying to figure out what to do. And then I heard these words coming out of my mouth, “Well, okay David; come on up and share a few words with us.” And David proceeded to deliver an amazing 5 minute homily on how hard it is to struggle with mental illness, and how good God had been to him, and how thankful he was that Jesus had saved him.

I picked-up where David left off, and eventually found ways to work some of the material that I’d prepared into what was mostly an extemporaneous sermon, and it worked out so well that I began to wonder if people would accuse me of setting-up the whole thing.

After church, the one person whom I *knew* would get on my case if anyone did, approached me. And I thought, “Oh boy, now I’m in trouble.”

And she said with a smile, “You know, Bruce, you should only get half your pay today, because you delivered only half the sermon!”

Offer hospitality to strangers. Be on the lookout for angels.

Fast forward about 20 years. We’ve moved from Hillcrest Christian Church to Knox United Church, located in a neighborhood with a large Asian population. Now, if you’re in a mostly White congregation in a largely Asian neighborhood, and you’re a stranger who hopes to receive a warm welcome, it helps if you’re not only clean and well-dressed, but also the same skin color. Needless to say, the Sunday visitors at Knox United Church we often not of the same skin color as the folks who’d been members for many years. Nevertheless, they kept coming. Mostly immigrants from mainland China; very *recent* immigrants. They’d come to the door and almost everyone would say something like, “I just moved to Toronto and I was told that I should go to a church because churches are places where people help each other, and I’m here to help.” This happened so often that I almost thought that maybe, when flights from
Bejing were on final approach to Pearson International Airport, someone would get on the intercom and say, “When we land in Toronto, find a church and tell them that churches are places where people help each other and I’m here to help.”

The fact of the matter is that these new Canadians *were* there to help. And they were also there to learn about Jesus. They’d heard a little bit about Jesus in China, were Christianity was no longer banned so long as churches didn’t speak out against the government. So we started a Bible study to help them both learn about Jesus and practice their English. And these newcomers – most of whom were not yet Christians – they took the authority of Jesus and the power of Jesus to heal and the Bible’s invitation to use your gifts for the common good; they took all this good biblical stuff *seriously*; much more seriously than the people who’d been attending church all their lives. Some of strangers made the Good Confession, and we baptized them and they joined the church and they proved to be an incredible blessing for a congregation that was in need of renewal. And here’s the thing: most of the members of Knox weren’t looking upon these strangers as prospective members. They really weren’t trying to evangelize them and grow the church. All they were doing – somewhat reluctantly – was welcoming them; welcoming strangers. They came to see that as their mission. Which is one more piece of evidence that if you get excited about a mission, church growth will follow. But you have to focus on the mission, not on the growth. If you want to grow the church, then receive the mission that God is placing upon you and run with it.

These immigrants also proved to be hard working, conscientious, family people; which is evidence for the notion that having reasonable immigration laws – not wide open borders but *reasonable* laws that offer a *degree* of hospitality – is good for both the economy and society. Not to mention the fact that hospitality is our duty as Christians.

“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers. For by so doing some have entertained angels unawares.” Be on the lookout for angels.

Angels are messengers in the divine service. They bring good news to those who are being saved. That alone gives us good reason to offer hospitality to strangers. You don’t want to miss out on the good news. You don’t want to miss a chance to be touched by an angel. Amen.