

Angels Watching
Matthew 4:1-11
February 26, 2023
First Presbyterian, Luling

I've been preaching regularly since the year 2000, which works out to 23 years. That's seven times through the three year lectionary cycle. There's some lectionary readings I've never preached on, and some I've preached on a lot. For the ones that I've preached on several times, it continues to amaze me how there something different and new to say each time. Mostly, all I can do is chalk that up to the work of the Holy Spirit. But this time, with this passage of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness, I know exactly why I saw something different, or saw the same thing with new eyes this time.

Focusing on angels in the Christmas story during Advent made the mention of angels in this passage pop out at me. I suppose I'd noticed it before, but I've usually focused on the temptations, how Jesus quotes scripture to withstand the tests, and connected the 40 days in the wilderness with the 40 days of Lent. All of that is worthy of exploring, but the angels have intrigued me this time.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke each tell about the temptations in the wilderness. In each gospel, it immediately follows Jesus' baptism. Luke doesn't mention any angels in the temptation. Mark's temptation story is only two verses long. It goes like this: "And the Spirit immediately drove hi out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waiting on him." (Mark 1:12-13). So even in a pared down version of the story, just the bare minimum, as is Mark's typical style, the angels make an appearance.

Back to our reading for today in Matthew, the first time angels are mentioned is in one of the three temptations that are described, the middle one, where the devil tempts Jesus to throw himself off the tippity top of the Temple. The devil quotes Psalm 91, "He will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against the stone." (v. 11-12). The devil was asking Jesus jump off the temple and call on the angels to catch him mid-air. Jesus refuses, and responds not with a "that's not in my skill set" or a "that's not within my power to do," but with a Deuteronomy quote: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." (Deut 6:16).

In a similar way, at the end of Matthew's gospel, when Jesus is arrested,

he's appealing to his disciples not to be violent, and says "All who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than 12 legions of angels? But then how would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?" (Matt 26:52-54). So twice in Matthew, Jesus refuses the temptation to call upon angels—plural, and it seems like a good crew of them—in order to save himself. Angels could be at his disposal, but he chooses not to call on them. I don't quite know what to make of that, but it's something to ponder.

After the devil has tempted Jesus three times, and after Jesus has refused the temptation three times with a quote from Scripture, Matthew wraps up the episode with this: "Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him." Much the same as Mark's description. The word for angels there is the same as in the Christmas story. The word for "waited on him" is the word that would be used for a servant bringing food to the table, for example.

We have Jesus in the wilderness for forty days, a tempter/tester/accuser, and ministering angels. For people who have internalized the scriptures of Israel, this would be ringing some bells. In 1 Kings, the prophet Elijah has had a bad run-in with Queen Jezebel, and he flees to the wilderness for his own safety. He's tired and hungry and discouraged. He decides to just sit down under a tree and die. An angel appears and tells him to get up and eat. The angel has provided some food and water. Elijah eats and takes a nap, and the angel wakes him up again. And says get up and eat again. And Elijah does and then, only after the angel has ministered to him, he goes out into the wilderness for forty days and forty nights. After those days, he meets God on a mountain.

Striking similarities, right? A ministering angel, wilderness, hunger, thirst, temptations to despair. Jesus's experience brings Elijah's experience to mind, even though they aren't exactly identical.

One of the things we talked about, over and over, during our Advent study, was that the angels of Christmas don't exactly match our cultural expectations of what angels are supposed to be and do. They're scary and share scary news with people. They aren't exactly guardian angels; in fact, they even get some people into trouble. But these angels, ministering to Jesus in the wilderness, in the mode of Elijah's ministering angel, seem way closer to what we like to think about angels. When Jesus has been worn out by being tempted by the devil, when his strength is low, the angels take care of him. Same for Elijah, maybe even more so. If I could get an angel to follow me around and fix me snacks and tell me to take naps, well, I think I would be much better off!

Jesus won't summon angels to save him, though he apparently could, but when he needs angels to tend to him and take care of him, there they are.

As we enter Lent, forty days of wilderness preparation for the crucifixion and resurrection, rather than demanding God's unmistakable presence with us, maybe we take on whatever comes our way, trusting that when we need them, the angels will appear to take care of us. Instead of requiring God to show up when and where and in the ways that we think we prefer, we look for signs of God's presence and ministering angels all around, in ways we didn't expect. Sure, naps and snacks are always a good idea, Lent wilderness or no Lent wilderness. We, too, can act in the role of angels for others. Serving and ministering to other people in concrete ways makes God's presence visible to them, too.

God's angels are watching over us, all night and all day. Thanks be to God. Amen.