

Angels and Rest Stops

1 Kings 19:1-8

August 5, 2018

So, welcome to Angel Sunday.

In case you're wondering how it is you've never heard of Angel Sunday before, that's because -- we just made it up.

We being me and Lia Carter, who just sang that beautiful song.

You know that one of the things we like to do in the summer

is to feature special art up here at the front of the church,

and *[as you heard me tell the kids earlier]*

today's art is these two beautiful and very old Italian angels gracing our chancel, brought to us by Lia.

Earlier this summer, Lia said "on the Sunday I bring the angels,

I can also sing about angels!"

and I said, "well then I'll preach about angels!"

So, Lia and I, we declare it to be Angel Sunday.

Which means my task this past week was to pick a bible story about angels for me to preach on.

And the story that Kim just read is one of my favorites.

The angel in this story doesn't get as many Biblical headlines as, say, the Angel Gabriel —

but what I love about this story is that it's actually the story of all of us at some point in our lives,

and it's a reminder of what God does for us then.

The story she read is known as the story of Elijah and the Angel in the wilderness.

But you have to know the back story first to understand this story.

Elijah was a great and mighty prophet of God,

pretty much the gold standard of Old Testament prophets —

he was a mighty preacher

and a compassionate healer
and he was an impressive worker of miracles, too.

I say impressive, but the one person who was not the least bit impressed by Elijah was, unfortunately, the very powerful Queen of Israel, a not-very-pleasant woman named Jezebel.

Jezebel didn't believe in Elijah's God; she was quite committed to the gods she'd grown up with in another country.

The **King** of Israel, however – Jezebel's husband - was a fan of Elijah's.

So, in one of the more bizarre plot twists in the Old Testament, the King and the Queen decide to have a battle of the priests.

Survivor/Hunger Games/ Last one standing kind of thing.

It's Elijah versus the priests of Baal, Jezebel's religion.

And the deal was that whoever could get **their** God to start a fire on the altar, they'd be the big winners. We

And the other guys would be, well, toast.

Well, Elijah and his God get the fire going first, so Elijah is the winning priest, and therefore his God is declared to be the real God,

and in theory this should be the pinnacle of success for Elijah.

He should be on top of the world.

But things fall apart really quickly,

Queen Jezebel does not **like** losing,

and Elijah ends up having to high-tail it out of town,

running for his life from one infuriated royal.

Think Queen Elizabeth siccing the corgis on you, but **way** worse.

So out in the wilderness, running for his life,

Elijah runs out of everything.

Food and water, yes, but also energy. Also hope. Also faith.

He's done everything right, he thought,

but now nothing's going right.

And he's just done. Exhausted. At the lowest of low ebbs.
And the story says, as you heard from Kim,
the story says he collapses under a tree and says to God "I'm done."
And falls asleep.

This is where the angel comes in.
And this is where this story becomes not just a great angel story but,
to me, one of the most important stories in the Bible.
God sends an angel to Elijah.
There's a little tap on Elijah's shoulder while he's sleeping,
and he opens his eyes and looks,
and there's an angel there with bread and water.
And the angel says "Get up and eat, Elijah, or this journey will be too much for
you."
And he does.
And it's just what he needed.

Last weekend, last Saturday morning,
was the Connecticut Challenge —
an amazing bike ride involving hundreds of cyclists,
many from this church,
and many more hundreds of volunteers,
again from this church.
It was started by our own Jeff Keith years ago,
to raise not just **awareness** of what people go through when they are treated for
cancer,
but also the funds to support them.
And if you drove by this church that morning,
you saw tents out here and heard a band and saw tons of people,
because this church was a rest stop for the bicyclists,
a place where they could hop off their bikes
and rest their aching legs and behinds for a bit,
and get some refreshment.

I hung out here for a long while
and watched as so many friends rode in,
some pretty tuckered out,
and saw them thankfully accept a cup of water, a banana, a shady place to rest.
And when the soreness had left their legs, at least a bit,
and the bananas had hit the spot,
and the hydration had kicked in,
they'd say "all right, Alida, I'm heading out —
I'm **ready** for those last ten miles now."
And off they'd go.

That's pretty much exactly what God's angel provides to Elijah in this story.
A rest stop.
Minus the porta-potties.
When Elijah is at his lowest,
when he really doesn't think he wants to go any further,
can't go any further,
that's when God provides a rest stop.
That's when God's angel shows up in the wilderness and says
"hey! here's water. Here's bread. I know you need it.
Let's get you going again."
And he does.
Elijah does get going again,
heads out for those next ten miles and beyond,
renewed and ready to be God's voice again.

Here's why I think this little angel story is so important.
Because everyone, all of us, at some point,
find ourselves worn out, tuckered out.
Everyone has wildernesses.
Some of them are pretty big wildernesses.
A relationship ends, a job is lost, grief brings you to your knees.
What should have been won't be after all.

And there are smaller wildernesses, too,
times when you just seem to lose your oomph,
or when the headlines reeeeeeeally get to you.

And that's when God shows up.
A God who knows when we need a rest stop,
a God who sends an angel in to say
“here's bread for the journey. I'm going to get you through this.”

This past spring,
at one of our high school youth group meetings, SPF,
we had a visitor stop by unexpectedly.
His name was Matthew, and fifteen years ago he was one of our most faithful SPF
attenders.

And fifteen years ago his life was a bit of a mess.
And Matt came by this spring to talk to the kids about that,
to give them a little window into what he'd been then,
and how he is now — and how he is now, by the way, is awesome:
happy, working, fulfilled, in love.

And Matt wanted to let the high school kids of today know
what SPF had been for him,
what this church had been for him.

He told them that it had been his respite,
the place where **he** had found bread for the journey,
refreshment in the wilderness.

You might not realize it now, he told them,
but just to have a place where you're always welcome
and where you can just kind of drop the act and be yourself,
that's incredible, and you need it more than you know.

Coming here every week, he said,
was one of the things that helped me keep going
when life was really rough.

For Matt,
the angel **he** met came in the form of the smiling faces here who made him feel loved.

Just like it was for all those bicyclists, his rest stop was on the top of this hill — but the rest and renewal he needed was something different.

Bread for the journey, a cup of cold water when the way ahead was hard.

God's presence, in other words.

God's presence as real to him as it was to Elijah on that day long ago.

So it can be for us, for any of us.

Whatever hard place we find ourselves in, whenever that may come, we are not there alone, and we are not left there for long.

There is the touch of an angel on our shoulder,
and a voice that whispers “get up and eat,”
there is bread for the journey.

But Matt's story also reminds us, reminds me,
that we ourselves are sometimes the angel in the wilderness for someone else,
we ourselves may be the presence of God to another.

After all, the angel that Matt met here, the *angels*, that was you, this church.

And who knows when **you** may spot someone in a wilderness,
who knows when you might be the one who is able to offer bread for the journey,
and a cup of cold water for the soul.

Five years ago this weekend,
there was a story all over the national papers,
a story about an **angel**-sighting.

The story was this:

on a highway in Missouri, there had been a horrific car accident,
and a 19-year-old girl named Katie had been trapped behind the steering wheel of
her car, critically injured.

Emergency workers struggled for an hour to extricate her from the twisted metal,

and while they were doing that, Katie's vital signs were beginning to fail.
And from what seemed like nowhere,
a man stepped forward, wearing a priest's collar,
And he went to Katie, gently anointed her with oil,
and began to pray, out loud, with her and for her.

Katie's vital signs began to improve,
the emergency workers finally managed to get her out,
the ambulance rushed her off to the hospital.
And then everyone turned around to thank the priest.
And he was gone.

The next day, wanting to find guy and **thank** him,
the fire chief who'd overseen the accident went through all 69 photos taken at the
scene.

There was no priest in any of them.

They checked the local churches; but none of those clergy had been at the
accident.

And someone said: it must have been an angel.

The headlines in USA Today were these:

Angel Priest visits accident scene.

Mystery priest who suddenly appeared is being called an angel.

Five days later,

a priest who worked 100 miles away as a prison chaplain
told one of his fellow chaplains about a car accident
he'd come across in another part of the state.

Wait! you're the mystery angel! his friend said.

Do you know how hard they've been looking for you?

And what was interesting to me,

after Rev. Patrick Dowling had stepped forward,
what was fascinating was how *disappointed* people were to find out he was
human.

He wasn't an angel after all, the papers reported,
and all across the country people sighed.

But — wasn't he?

Wasn't he an angel?

He **was** the very presence of God to a terrified teenager;
he brought love and healing and prayer to a girl desperate for comfort.

Last week Katie Lentz was interviewed on a Christian radio station about the
moment that her mystery angel turned out to be a human.

Well, I wasn't disappointed, she said, I was just so glad to see him again.

And then she said this:

Psalm 37 says that the steps of a good person are guided by the Lord,
she said,

and isn't that what Father Dowling was doing?

He was guided to me by the Lord.

Who knows where the Lord might yet guide each one of us,

who knows what place we'll be called into

to offer bread for someone's journey,

a cup of cold water to renew someone's spirit.

All we can know for sure is that sometime,

we will be called to be someone's angel,

to meet someone in that same place where we ourselves have been met.

In that place where there is a touch on our shoulder,

and a voice that whispers "get up and eat."

In that place where our spirits are refreshed

and One there is to show us the way.

The One who is Love.

The One who is rest for all our souls.

Amen.