

Streetsville United Church

Sunday, June 23, 2019

Rev. John Tapscott

“GOD’S STRENGTHENING ANGELS”

1 Kings 19:1-15;18

If you travel into the Canadian wilderness for any distance you must go prepared. You need bear spray, bug spray, hiking boots, proper clothes, a good tent and many supplies. For if you travel into the wilderness unprepared, you could perish there. We read today of how Elijah travelled into the Judean wilderness, unprepared for the journey. Thankfully God sent an angel to strengthen him for the journey. Yes, God sends angels to strengthen us for the journey.

The prophet Elijah lived during the reign of King Ahab. Ahab, a Hebrew, worshipped the Lord God of Israel. But Ahab married Jezebel, a Canaanite. Jezebel was a strong character, who had much influence over Ahab and Israel’s spiritual life. She encouraged the people to worship the Canaanite fertility God Baal, along with the Lord God of Israel. Ahab and the people seemed happy to go along. But Elijah stood firm, saying “Absolutely not.” Israel had but one God, the Lord God Almighty. And Elijah declared that the severe drought in the land was caused because the people were calling upon Baal to provide rain, which he couldn’t do.

Elijah set up a great contest on Mount Carmel. The Baal prophets called on Baal to send fire upon the sacrifice, but nothing happened. But when Elijah called upon the Lord, a great fire came down and burnt the sacrifice, and soon after a great rainfall drenched the dry earth. The Baal prophets were routed and Baal worship was severely discredited. Baal was no god at all. The Lord alone was God in Israel.

But Jezebel sent a message to Elijah saying that she would have him killed. Elijah, who had just won a great spiritual victory, was suddenly afraid. He fled for his life, going a day’s journey into the wilderness. He was depressed, discouraged, and weary of the battle. He felt all alone. Out in the wilderness he sat under a solitary broom tree and cried out “O Lord, it is enough now, take away my life...” He lay down under the tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, “Get up and eat.” He looked and there at his head was a baked cake and water. The angel said, “Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.” “He got up and ate and drank and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.” (1 Kings 19:4-8) God had sent an angel to strengthen Elijah for the journey.

We are on a journey through this world. The Bible tells us that Jesus knew that he had come from God and that he was going to God. So it is for us who believe. We know that we came from God. In fact, you and I were conceived in the mind of God before we were conceived in our mother’s womb. Then God sent us forth on a journey through this fair but fallen world. And because of Jesus’ journey from heaven to Bethlehem to cross to resurrection to the Father’s right hand, God opened the way for us to go back to God. We are on a journey from God to God.

Now along our earthy journey there are joys and achievements, accomplishments and pleasures, along with human love and companionship. But on this journey we also know fear, disappointment, discouragement, doubt and loneliness. We all spend time in the wilderness. The question is - will these things overwhelm us? Will they throw us off course, and even cause us to perish? Or will we have strength to complete the journey? May I tell you that our own strength may well be inadequate. On our own, we could perish in the wilderness. But we are not left to our own resources. Thankfully, there is a source of strength that comes from beyond ourselves. God sends angels to strengthen us for the journey. It happened to our Lord Jesus himself. The Gospels tell us that after and even during his wilderness temptations, "angels came and ministered to him." In the Garden of Gethsemane as Jesus prayed, Luke tells us that "an angel from heaven appeared to him, strengthening him."

Now we shouldn't think of angels as just winged creatures, clothed in flowing white robes, floating along. Angels can be much more solid creatures. The word "angelos" in the Bible means a messenger sent by God, an ambassador who brings divine help.

We don't know what form Elijah's strengthening angel took. But we can ask - what form do strengthening angels take for us? Many of us here have been touched by one of God's strengthening angels. What or who are these angels God sends to strengthen us for the journey?

First, the strengthening angel may be a fellow human being.

Hasn't that been your experience? In your time of need someone phones or visits you at just the right time. Their presence and their words strengthen you, comfort you, correct you, lift you up, gird you for the battle. It may be a friend, a fellow human being, an acquaintance. They may not even realize that they have been sent to you by God. But they may have felt an irresistible inner impulse which said to them, "Go to see your friend, or give them a phone call, right now." And after their visit or call you may think or even say, "You've been just like an angel to me, sent from above." Don't think that such visitations are just coincidental. The Heavenly Father who knows all our needs also knows how to meet those needs. And one way is to send you a strengthening angel in the form of a fellow human being,

I recall a time early in my ministry I was struggling with an issue. It was a real headache. And in the midst of it, a fellow minister, very experienced, called me about another matter altogether. I didn't even know him well, but I shared my issue with him and he suggested a way forward. I still remember the wonderful sense of relief I felt after we hung up. It was like that call had been sent from heaven. That day he was God's strengthening angel for me.

Out in the wilderness Elijah complained that he was all alone, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant. I alone am left." But God told him, "you are not alone Elijah. I have left seven thousand faithful people in Israel, who have not bowed the knee to Baal...So get up and be among these people. They will encourage you on your way."

In the Creation story, God said, "It is not good for man to be alone." That's not just about male and female being made for each other in marriage. It also means that God does not want us to be isolated individuals who walk life's journey alone. It means that we were designed for the

company of others along the way. And doesn't the church do that for us? The church's worship and fellowship can be very strengthening. It lifts us up and gives us confidence. Here as we are strengthened by the presence of the living Christ, and as he feeds us at his table, we become strengthening angels to one another. The person beside you may well be your strengthening angel today. Or you may be the strengthening angel for that person.

Yes, God sends angels to strengthen us for the journey. You can probably put a name and face to some of the angels who have strengthened you along the way. And you can be a strengthening angel for others, too. Don't ignore those promptings you receive to draw near to another person on their journey. You might just be for them God's angel of strength and hope and encouragement.

A second strengthening angel God sends is a word from Scripture.

In the strength of the food Elijah travelled forty days and nights to Horeb the mount of God. He spent the night in a cave. There the word of the LORD came to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Elijah told the Lord what had been happening and added, "they are seeking my life, to take it away." God told Elijah, "Go and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." "There was a great wind, followed by an earthquake, and a fire, but the Lord was not in any of these; and then after the fire came a gentle whisper." God spoke to Elijah again and gave him work to do and sent him back into action.

Don't listen to the noise of the world around you. That is not the strengthening word you need. God's strengthening word comes to you simply, gently, quietly. It comes through Scripture, for that is how God speaks to us. By God's grace the words of Scripture become God's strengthening angel in your time of need. How much comfort and hope and courage we receive from these ancient, inspired words of God. When you are faced with a challenge that seems humanly impossible you hear, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." When a sense of failure overwhelms you and you feel ashamed to be called a Christian, this word reaches you, "The blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin." When a sense of your own mortality breaks upon you, this word becomes God's angel of hope, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever." Or when life's burdens seem too great for you to bear, you hear our Lord's invitation, "Come unto me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest."

One day, some years ago, I was feeling down and discouraged for some reason, perhaps for no good reason. But that morning I read from Paul's 2nd letter to the Corinthians chapter 4, "Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we have this ministry, we do not lose heart." That verse really encouraged me and lifted my spirits. It really was God's strengthening angel for me.

Don't miss God's word. It's right here for you every Sunday. Take up and read a portion, even a short portion of Scripture every day. Start with the Psalms if it's a new practice for you. But don't neglect God's word. You just never know when a word of Scripture will become God's strengthening angel for you. God's word strengthened Jesus in the wilderness and it does the same for us, too. God sends angels to strengthen us for the journey.

Finally, this. *Sometimes the strengthening angel God sends is Christ himself.*

In fact, the strengthening angel is always Christ. Whether it's a friend who comes to encourage you or a word from Scripture that sheds light on your path, it really is Christ who comes. God sent Christ to the fearful disciples on the stormy sea. At first they thought it was a ghost, but as he drew near they shouted, "It is the Lord." His presence brought peace and courage to their souls. God sent Christ to Saul on the Damascus road as he wandered in the wilderness of hatred and persecution. And the Risen Christ shone upon Saul and set him on a new path.

One night years ago when I was very ill I drove to the hospital. I couldn't wait for the ambulance. But in the car there was another with me – I knew it - an unseen presence who enabled me to make the journey. At the hospital, the first person I met was a nurse I knew through the church. She let me in immediately and called for the doctor. As I waited for him to arrive and administer medication that same unseen presence was very near. I knew then and I know now that it was the Lord Jesus himself. And I knew that whatever happened I would be safe in the eternal love of God. Christ himself was the strengthening angel God sent to me that night.

This same Lord Jesus is with us now, right here today, to strengthen us for the journey. And at the end he will receive us unto himself as he has promised, and bring us home to glory. You and I can really trust him.