



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker
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A Prayer for the Confirmands: May You Find Angles in the Wilderness

Scripture Lessons: Deuteronomy 34:1-8, Luke 2:25-32, Genesis 21:8-20; Mark 1:12-13

Great faith is required to give the child up, trusting God to honor the parents' love for him by assuring that there will indeed be angels in that wilderness. —The Reverend John Ames in a letter addressed to his son, in *Gilead*, a novel by Marilynne Robinson.

Without the angels, God would not be revealed and perceptible. In the beauty, work, and witness of angels there lies the basis of the fact that the mystery of God can have a place in the earthly realm. To deny the angels is to deny God.

—Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*

. . . for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.

—Hebrews 13:2, King James Version

Preface to the First Scripture Lesson:

You have to feel for Abraham, not to mention Hagar and Ishmael.

Yes, after so, so many years, Isaac, the long-awaited child of the promise, the child through whom Abraham and Sarah would be parents of a great nation, with descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sands by the sea—after so many years, Isaac has at long last been born. That's great joy. But now, at the insistence of Sarah and the command of God, Abraham must cast his other son, Ishmael, and his mother Hagar, into the wilderness.

Abraham is, to put it mildly, distressed, extremely distressed. He must once again trust a promise of God, a promise that is not easy for him, as the father of Ishmael to trust.

And as for Ishmael and Hagar, their situation is dire. In fact, Hagar seems to have given up all hope in the wilderness . . . until God sends an angel. Listen now for God's Word . . .

Preface to the Second Scripture Lesson:

On the church calendar, we're now in the season of Lent: the forty-day period of prayer, penitence, and preparation for Easter. And one of the reasons that Lent lasts for forty days is that Jesus, before he began his earthly ministry—before he began to preach and teach and heal—was in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by Satan.

In his Gospel, Matthew gives us the back-and-forth of that temptation, the dialogue between Satan and Jesus, in which Jesus answers Satan's temptations by quoting Scripture.

Mark, however, in his Gospel, gets right to the point: Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days; he was tempted by Satan, but the angels waited on him. Listen now for God's word . . .

Sermon:

Confirmands, Emma, Jackson, Andrew, and Mawuena, I want you to know that, if you *were* praying last Tuesday night, you weren't alone. (Let me catch *them* up, and then I'll come back to *you*.)

Last Tuesday night, our confirmands appeared before our session, that is the governing body of this church, to profess their faith in Jesus Christ, as well as their readiness to become members of this church. (Mentors and parents were also there.). Each confirmand had to present a statement of faith, saying what he/she believed about God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, and also what it means to be a Christian and a member of Christ's church.

"Why do we put them through *that*?" you ask? Well, for one thing, it's in our Book of Order, which is part of the constitution of the Presbyterian Church USA. Here's what the Book of Order says:

Persons enter into active church membership by a public profession of faith, made after *careful examination* by the session in the meaning and responsibilities of membership.

An *examination*, a **careful examination** . . . It's a little like the oral defense of a doctoral thesis. You face this panel of eminent personages, and *any* one of them can ask you about *anything*.

"Please God, just let this be over." I don't know if that was the prayer you were praying, Emma, Jackson, Andrew, and Mawuena, but it would have been mind, had I been in your shoes.

But the prayer I was actually praying was, "Please God, let them find their angels in the wilderness." And I'm sure I wasn't the only one there that night praying that prayer for you.

I'm not trying to be overly dramatic or dire here. I'm not saying that you are in—or are about to go into—the wilderness. I don't know that. And really, I believe that there are great things in store for you, that each of you has a world of potential, and that you will make a difference in the world—all those things that graduation speakers will soon enough tell you, I believe them, too. But I also need to tell you that you will have wilderness times—you may have already had them—because we all do.

Now by "wilderness times," you know, I don't necessarily mean time away in nature, outdoors, away from human civilization, with a backpack on your back and a GPS in your hand. Wilderness times can be in nature, but they don't have to be; in fact, often, time in nature can be restful and restorative.

No, what I mean by wilderness times is . . . Well what Hagar and Ishmael experienced when they were cast out by Abraham, and what Jesus experienced when he was cast out into the wilderness for forty days and forty nights before he began his earthly ministry: times of testing and trial, times of uncertainty and doubt, times where you don't know where you are or where you are going, when you don't know who you are, what you are to become, and what is to become of you; times when all the familiar landmarks—the touchstones and beliefs that tell you who you are and where are going—are gone; times of fear and danger, of loss, disappointment, and pain; times when you feel lost: your backpack, empty; and your GPS, like your heart, broken.

Wilderness times. We all have them. Sometimes it's right after graduation—freshmen year in college or the first year of the job, or of looking for the job. Sometimes they can go on for years and years: the Israelites wandered for forty years in the wilderness before they reached the promised land. I don't know why we all have them—part of our human condition, I guess; part of God's providential plan, I suppose; maybe so we can grow stronger, including stronger in our faith. Maybe—I don't know. But I know we all have them.

And it's in the wilderness times especially that we need our angels. Now, you know that real angels don't necessarily look like the ornaments on our Christmas trees, with wings, halos, Elmer's Glue, gold glitter, and all the rest. I suppose angels might look like that on occasion, but they don't have to. The danger is that, if we get that Christmas-tree-ornament image fixed in our heads—if we think that angels *have* to look like that to be angels—then we're going to miss the real angels God sends to us.

An angel—the Greek word means simply “messenger”—is anyone or anything sent from God that opens our eyes and points us to life. Think of the angel God sent to Hagar: “Then God opened her eyes and Hagar saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink.”

God sent an angel to my daughter, Anna, during in her freshmen year in college. “Why that was just Dr. Walton, her psychology professor,” someone might say, “a nice enough person for sure, but no angel.” But to my mind, she was sent by God to open Anna's eyes and to show her the way to her new life. She was—and still is—a real angel. And I know that any parent or grandparent, anyone who has ever loved at all, would agree with me: As the Bible puts it, “sometimes we entertain angels unawares.”

An angel is anyone or anything who brings the Word of God to us so that we can find our way out of the wilderness. “Do not be afraid,” the angel says to Hagar, “for God has heard you and the voice of the boy; and God will make a great nation of him.” And they do find their way out: we're told, “And God was with the boy as he grew up.”

Or think of Jesus after he had been fasting forty days in the wilderness: the Devil tempts him with, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” But the Word of God comes to him: “It is written,” Jesus replies, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” “And so,” Mark tells us, “the angels waited on him.”

And sometimes the Word of God does come to us in the words of Bible, as it did for Jesus, as it did for one of you confirmands who quoted Nehemiah in your statement of faith, “Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

But sometimes the Word of God can come to us in our own words. Another of you confirmands said: “I believe I experience God when I am hurting and have no one that I feel I can turn to. God is like a trusted friend who will always support me, forgive me, and care for me.”

But whether in the Bible's words or our own, God sends an angel to open our eyes and to show us the way out. And to show us that, even while we're in the wilderness, God is still with us. Another one of you confirmands said, "I believe that Jesus is a savior and friend. He is always with me, through thick and thin, even if I don't feel his presence, even if I don't feel like it's possible. And he always gives me hope, in the hardest times, even if I am hopeless."

And that is what it means to be a Christian, what it means to profess our shared faith in Jesus Christ: not that we won't have wilderness times—we will, we all do. But that we believe that God will find us in that wilderness, and lead us safely home, whatever shape or form our angel may take. Another one of you said this in your statement of faith: "Being a Christian means knowing God is with you at all times. God may test you and push you in every direction, but in the end, God will call us into eternal peaceful life."

Emma, Jackson, Andrew, and Mawuena, when I heard you on Tuesday night, when I read your statements of faith later in the week, it was clear to me that God has already sent you angels in the wildernesses you have known.

But for a parent or a grandparent, for anyone who loves you for that matter, one of the hardest things, one of the greatest tests of our faith, is to trust that God will honor our love by assuring us there will indeed be angels for you in the wilderness. So let this be my prayer—our prayer—for you: May you find angels in the wilderness.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.