

# Angels Among Us

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## Bible Reading

I will tell of the kindnesses of the Lord, the deeds for which he is to be praised, according to all the Lord has done for us--yes, the many good things he has done for the house of Israel, according to his compassion and many kindnesses. He said, ""Surely they are my people, children who will not be false to me""; and so he became their Savior. In all their distress he too was distressed, and the angel of his presence saved them. In his love and mercy he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old. (*Isaiah 63:7-9*)

*Read also: Luke 1:26-38*

## Reading from Swedenborg

The Bible mentions "the angel of Jehovah" several times. Whenever this expression is used in a good sense, it refers symbolically to some essential quality that is in and from the Lord. . . . Angels were sent to people, and they also spoke through the prophets. But what they said did not originate in those angels; it came through them. In fact, at the time they were sent they were in a state of mind in which they thought they actually were Jehovah--the Lord. But as soon as they finished speaking, they returned to their previous state of mind and spoke as they normally did, from their own thoughts. . . .

So that we can hear things in the same language we know in the physical world, the Lord sends angels as messengers by filling them with the Divine presence and putting to sleep everything that is their own; so for the time being they think that they themselves are Jehovah. In this way, the divine being of Jehovah, which dwells on the highest levels, comes down to the lowest level-- which is the material world where we see and hear things. (*Arcana Coelestia #1925*)

## Sermon

Angels have become quite popular in recent years. There are many books and articles on the subject, as well as TV and radio programs, and even whole stores devoted to angels.

Why are people so fascinated with angels, near death experiences, and other spiritual phenomena? I believe the resurgence of interest in things spiritual springs from an inner human yearning for God and spirit--a yearning that has been suppressed for decades by the now crumbling reign of materialistic science. I believe our culture is going through a change of consciousness.

These events in our current spiritual history have deep roots. When Emanuel Swedenborg came upon the spiritual scene in the mid 1700s, he found a vast wasteland in Christian theology. God was portrayed as an angry, petty, and arbitrary being who would condemn all human beings to death for an infraction perpetrated by their most distant ancestors--Adam and Eve. Many irrational and downright cruel things were taught in the name of religion. And the people had had just about enough of it.

At that time, Christianity was still the reigning philosophy. But Swedenborg saw that it was crumbling. He foresaw its downfall as the major worldview of Western culture. As Christianity fragmented from a unified Catholicism into a bewildering number of competing sects, the Christian church also lost its political power and its hold over both the popular mind and the scholarly world. What gradually took its place, over the two centuries since Swedenborg's time, was materialistic reason and science.

By the mid-twentieth century, science's triumph was complete. Few people in leading roles who wished to maintain their reputation as rational people would publicly admit to believing in spiritual phenomena such as angels and spirits--or even in God.

This left a tremendous spiritual vacuum in our culture. Yes, the traditional Christian churches continued to function, but they were in retreat. People with a spiritual bent often moved toward Eastern religions. But many found that these religions did not entirely satisfy their spiritual yearning either--though they may have provided some needed spiritual inspiration. Fundamentalist churches also sprang up, appealing to people's need to feel that they have the truth. But the spiritual yearning continued.

This was the situation when Raymond Moody published his book *Life After Life* in 1975, describing amazing experiences of many people who had a close brush with death--experiences that are remarkably similar to what Swedenborg described over two hundred years earlier in his book *Heaven and Hell*. Moody's book, and others that followed it, began a sustained resurgence of interest in angels and spirits that has grown stronger and stronger.

Although many "hard" scientists continue to distance themselves from any kind of spiritual phenomena, there is no longer such a great social stigma attached to a belief in angels and spirits. Most people who incline toward a belief in God and the spiritual world now feel free to express their beliefs openly.

This has had a great freeing effect on our church, since we have held a strong belief in angels and spirits from the beginning of our existence. This is due to Swedenborg's still unique, long-term experience in the spiritual world. Many Swedenborgians formerly soft-pedaled Swedenborg's claim of having had his spiritual eyes opened while still living in the material world. Now that popular belief has caught up with us, we are scrambling to let the world know that Swedenborg described these things way back in the eighteenth century--and that his books still constitute the most extensive and detailed source of information about the spiritual world. Where we used to be shy, now we are inclined to brag!

Despite claims by skeptics that those who tell angel stories are merely grandstanding, neither shyness nor bragging has much to do with the resurgence of interest in angels. It is the presence of the angels themselves that draws our attention like a magnet, just as it drew the attention of Biblical people such as the virgin Mary.

We have heard the Bible's angel stories so often that for many of us, they have lost their compelling power. Contemporary angel stories rekindle that sense of awe and wonder at the presence of these

powerful, otherworldly beings. They help us to approach the Biblical stories with a new sense of wonder and appreciation.

In his book *Angels in Action*, the Rev. Bob Kirven recounts some of his own experiences with angelic presences. One is particularly appropriate to our topic this morning. Speaking of events in which angels communicate with humans on earth, he says:

One such event . . . occurred during the late years of the European phase of World War II. In retrospect, it is clear that Allied victory was growing near; but to my depressed mind, American defeat seemed a frighteningly real possibility. . . . Then one night I dreamed I was standing in an open field. There was no person or building in sight; just me, standing before a massive tangle of coiled barbed wire that stretched to the horizon on my left and on my right, fencing me in. As I stood there, an angel, appearing as a light too bright to look at, came over the hill ahead of me, leaving a paved highway in its wake. It approached me, passing through the barbed wire, which it vaporized before it, and then passed by and moved on out of sight behind me. Realizing I was free, I walked forward on the road in the direction from which the angel came. I woke. My obsession with the war, and my general depression, was lifted from that time on. The angel had saved me from the irrational fear that had held me captive. . . . My experiential certainty that angels can do such things has helped me break free from other fears as well.

This angel story comes in contemporary images that we can understand. War. Barbed wire. Highways paved by a blinding light that vaporizes any obstacles in its path. . . . Well, most of the images come from our experience! It is the angel who introduces a new and surprising element into our everyday experience. Before, there was a sense of depression at being trapped; now there is a new way out of the apparent dead end. There is new life brought to us from the spiritual world--and ultimately from God.

Doesn't this sound similar to our readings from the Bible? Let's hear our reading from Isaiah again:

I will tell of the kindnesses of the Lord, the deeds for which he is to be praised, according to all the Lord has done for us--yes, the many good things he has done for the house of Israel, according to his compassion and many kindnesses. He said, ""Surely they are my people, children who will not be false to me""; and so he became their Savior. In all their distress he too was distressed, and the angel of his presence saved them. In his love and mercy he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old. (*Isaiah 63:7-9*)

Yes, our angel experiences today have the same liberating effects as did the appearances of angels in Biblical times. The angels of the Lord's presence can still lift us up from our distress and carry us as they did in the days of old. Angels represent to us the eternal presence of God and spirit in our lives. Materialism may satisfy for a moment, but lasting joy comes only from having our lives filled with the spirit of God--which angels can communicate to us.

As we approach Christmas, there is a special event that the angels announced to Mary--and to us, too. The angel Gabriel was the messenger of the gladdest tidings ever brought to a weary and depressed world: the news, not merely of the coming of an angel of light, but of the coming of the source of that light. For the angel Gabriel announced the coming of the infinite God into our small, dark world.

The spiritual situation at the Lord's advent was similar to what we as a culture have recently experienced. The religion of the time had become corrupt, and had lost its spiritual power as a guiding force for the people. It had been largely replaced by the human desire for material knowledge, comfort,

wealth, and power. Yet as with the materialistic science of our day, these had been tried and found wanting. There was a tremendous spiritual vacuum.

At that very moment in human history, when people were most ripe for it, angels came to vaporize the obstacles in the path of the Lord's coming. They came to announce to those who would listen that the salvation of human beings from their dreary slavery to worldly living was on its way.

And then that salvation came: our Lord Jesus was born, destined to break the power of selfishness and materialism wherever human hearts made room for that divine presence.

The power of the angels in our lives is really the Lord's power. As Swedenborg says, "Angels were sent to people, and they also spoke through the prophets. But what they said did not originate in those angels; it came through them" (*Arcana Coelestia* #1925). What comes through the angels comes from the Lord.

The Lord's angels wish to speak to us, too. They may not always do it in a living voice; many of us will not feel an angelic hand on our shoulder in this earthly life. But if, at this season of Advent, we open ourselves up to the Lord's divine presence in our lives, we will feel the angels' presence deep within us, lifting us up from the distress, disappointment, and pain of this world into a higher level of our existence. We will feel the Lord's presence coming to us through the angels, reassuring us that God loves us and wants to be born anew in our hearts, minds, and lives. We will feel the angels within us and among us, giving us a message of new hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

## **Prayer**

Lord Jesus, as we approach this time of celebrating your birth into our world, we find that the light within us is darkness. Yet we know you do come to us at our darkest times. Send your heavenly angels to announce to our souls the good news that you are coming to us gently, and quietly yet powerfully bringing the peace that passes all earthly understanding. Open our ears to hear the angel voices calling us to your birth within us and among us. Amen.