

## Advent Reflections 2021: Angels (Week 1)

### Anonymous Angels as the Voice & Presence of God

Angels appear all way through the Bible in different forms and guises. Generally, we find two types of angels mentioned in Scripture: there are those carrying out a mission from God on earth (sometimes in human guise) and those who remain in heaven, carrying out their duty of constant praise and worship to God. Angels are therefore connected with different spheres of being in biblical thinking, covering the whole of creation, both on earth and in heaven.

The Hebrew term typically translated as 'angel' is 'malakh' ('angelos' in Greek), which means 'messenger' and is a term used for messengers of any sort, be they heavenly or human. So, angels appear as messengers of God throughout the Bible. They generally appear without a name (particularly in earlier OT writing) and often do not really seem to have a personality of their own. They are carriers of God's voice and a visible sign of God's presence and typically do not act independently of God.

Two passages from the OT illustrate this close angelic connection with God's presence and voice. Both are intriguing in their own right, for one is more associated with God's appearance, while the other is an example of God's voice.

The first of those passages is from the Book of Exodus, the famous story of the Burning Bush – the scene where God is revealed as Yahweh (the I AM who I AM - or perhaps better translated as the 'I am who I will be') and where Moses is chosen to lead the Israelites out of Egypt and towards the Promised Land. What is intriguing in this scene is that an Angel of God appears solely to capture Moses' interest, rather than for the giving of a message:

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. <sup>2</sup>There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. <sup>3</sup>Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.' <sup>4</sup>When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' And he said, 'Here I am.' <sup>5</sup>Then he said, 'Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.' <sup>6</sup>He said further, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. (Exodus 3.1-6)

This is an unusual passage in many ways, not least because God very rarely appears in visible form to human beings in the OT. Maybe this is why an angel is needed here: God generally cannot be seen (Moses is one of the noteworthy exceptions to this rule), so someone else needs to be holding that visible focus and space, translating God into the sphere of human perception. But note, how quickly the focus shifts away from the angel to God's presence: the angel has no separate character or function here, beyond this invitation into and the holding of sacred space.

God sometimes works like that in our lives as well: something might make us stop in our tracks or attract our attention, because it is unusual. God makes us step aside from our usual paths and thought-patterns to introduce us to a deeper calling and life.

**Q: How does God make you stop in your tracks? What helps you to kindle your sacred interest?**

The other passage illustrating the idea of angels as an extension of God's voice is from the Book of Genesis and part of the story of Abraham and Sarah. You might remember that God promises to Abraham and Sarah that they will be ancestors of a great nation, yet they remain childless. They decide to take matters into their own hands and, as a consequence, Hagar (Sarah's maid) bears a son, who is named Ishmael. After God's promise is fulfilled and Sarah gives birth to Isaac, Abraham and Sarah send Hagar and her son away, yet God does not stop caring about their well-being and call to life (even if Abraham and Sarah fail to do so):

Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. <sup>15</sup>When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. <sup>16</sup>Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, 'Do not let me look on the death of the child.' And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. <sup>17</sup>And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, 'What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. <sup>18</sup>Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.' <sup>19</sup>Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink. (Genesis 21.14-19)

Here the Angel of God serves as God's voice, reassuring Hagar of God's care and presence as her eyes are opened to the solution to her problems. Again, the angel does not really have a personality of its own here, but only conveys God's message – which typically includes a variation on the line 'Do not be afraid.' Might this line be an indication of who is really speaking and help us to discern God's voice?

**Q: When under pressure or in distress, we particularly might have difficulties hearing God's voice. What might help us to hear when things aren't good? And who might be the angels around us helping us?**

There is yet another passage from the Book of Genesis which might be of interest for us here as we discuss angels as extension of God's voice and presence – particularly interesting, perhaps, because the passage does not mention angels at all! In the story of Jacob as told in Genesis, there is the famous passage of Jacob wrestling as he prepares to cross a ford at the river Jabbok - a multi-layered story, full of meaning and rich in mythological symbolism. We read that Jacob wrestles with 'a man' until daybreak, who then turns out to be a supernatural being associated with God's presence:

The same night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. <sup>23</sup>He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. <sup>24</sup>Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. <sup>25</sup>When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. <sup>26</sup>Then he said, 'Let me go, for the day is breaking.' But Jacob said, 'I will not let you go, unless you bless me.' <sup>27</sup>So he said to him, 'What is your name?' And he said, 'Jacob.' <sup>28</sup>Then the man said, 'You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.' <sup>29</sup>Then Jacob asked him, 'Please tell me your name.' But he said, 'Why is it that you ask my name?' And there he blessed him. <sup>30</sup>So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, 'For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.' <sup>31</sup>The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

Jacob receives a new name here: Israel (Yisra-El = God-Wrestler), which indicates that he indeed strives with a presence very much associated with God. Although the term for angel is not used here, tradition associates the 'man' of our story with an angelic extension of God's presence and strength (in later rabbinic tradition, this 'man' even becomes the archangel Michael). What makes this story so interesting is that angels are portrayed not only as a place-holder for God's presence or the voice of God, but that they apparently can be physically active in the fulfilment of God's plan. Angels as messengers from God not only help us to see God's presence or hear God's voice, but they allow us to wrestle with God, which, although sometimes painful, can lead to spiritual growth if we keep at it. Sometimes we need to shout at God in order to realise how God is already involved in our lives.

All these examples of angels as involved as messengers (of sorts) of God do show powerful beings dramatically involved with the human story – but their power is in their close association with God whom we are to seek with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

Here is an artistic rendering of Jacob's wrestling by Marc Chagall, powerfully capturing the atmosphere of the biblical story and Jacob's determination not to let go and be blessed:



Marc Chagall, *La lutte de Jacob et de l'ange*, 1960-1966, 251 cm x 205 cm, donation Marc et Valentina Chagall, 1966, musée national Marc Chagall, Nice.

**Q: What do you see in this image? Is there something of your own story reflected in the biblical account or this artistic rendering of the story? How do you wrestle with God?**