

Sermon "Angels Unaware"

Sunday, September 23, 2018

Scripture: Proverbs 31:10-31, Mark 9:30-37

Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading is Proverbs 31:10-31. In this concluding section of the book on wisdom, chapter 31 begins with the mother of King Lemuel, offering advice, first, concerning her son's role as king (he must remain focused on caring for the poor and needy), and, second, concerning the kind of woman he should marry. When one views the variety of activities of this potential bride, one suspects that the subject matter is actually the woman, Wisdom. We are grateful for the strength, dignity and resilience reflected in the character of wisdom, whether working within a home, overseeing a household or working outside the home, within a profession, or both. May God open our hearts and minds to the hearing of God's word.

A capable wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels.

¹¹ The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain.

¹² She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life.

¹³ She seeks wool and flax, and works with willing hands.

¹⁴ She is like the ships of the merchant, she brings her food from far away.

*¹⁵ She rises while it is still night and provides food for her household
and tasks for her servant-girls.*

¹⁶ She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.

¹⁷ She girds herself with strength, and makes her arms strong.

¹⁸ She perceives that her merchandise is profitable. Her lamp does not go out at night.

¹⁹ She puts her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle.

²⁰ She opens her hand to the poor, and reaches out her hands to the needy.

*²¹ She is not afraid for her household when it snows,
for all her household are clothed in crimson.*

²² She makes herself coverings; her clothing is fine linen and purple.

²³ Her husband is known in the city gates, taking his seat among the elders of the land.

²⁴ She makes linen garments and sells them; she supplies the merchant with sashes.

²⁵ Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come.

²⁶ She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.

²⁷ She looks well to the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness.

²⁸ Her children rise up and call her happy; her husband too, and he praises her:

²⁹ "Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all."

³⁰ Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.

³¹ Give her a share in the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the city gates. Amen.

Our second scripture reading is Mark 9:30-37. This interaction between Jesus and his disciples follows the encounter we read last week at Caesarea Philippi where they learned their Messiah would suffer and die and rise again. When Jesus hears that the disciples were arguing about greatness and with it, of course, power, they are directed by Jesus to open their arms to the powerless. It is not the child's naiveté or innocence or trustfulness that is highlighted here, rather it is the child's vulnerability, without rights or power. Hear now God's holy word.

***30** They went on from there and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know it;*

***31** for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is to be betrayed into*

human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again." 32 But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him. 33 Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" 34 But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. 35 He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." 36 Then Jesus took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 37 "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." Amen.

The title of the sermon: Angels Unaware

The text: "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the One who sent me." Mark 9:37

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, give us the wisdom to welcome those who visit us as angels unaware and the grace to grow and change from the challenges and new perspective they present. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

It was Sarah, the wife of Abraham, who provided hospitality to the three strangers that arrived unexpectedly outside their tent by the oaks of Mamre as recorded in Genesis 18. As Sarah prepared the meal and provided food with willing hands, she and Abraham learned from these three strangers that they would welcome a long awaited son into the world beyond their childbearing years. Sarah and Abraham later believed these strangers were messengers or angels sent by YHWH to bring the unforeseen news that would change their lives.

The entertaining of angels unaware is revered in the New Testament as a part of the teachings to early Christians in the book of Hebrews, chapter 13, verse 2: *Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unaware.*

Each one of us, no doubt, has experienced an unexpected encounter with a stranger when, by the grace of God, we have extended hospitality and found ourselves changed through the experience. The disciples were changed through the experience of welcoming Jesus into their lives, a stranger they met on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. They were drawn to Christ and recognized him as the Messiah; however, they resisted his teaching that suffering will be a part of his journey home.

In the tension of the anticipated loss, they argue amongst themselves about who is the greatest. It is in this context that Jesus places a child in their midst to teach them what greatness means in the kingdom of God.

Dr. Marion Soards, New Testament scholar, points out that *it is easy for us to misperceive Jesus' message. In our world, where children are the apples of their parents' eyes, the virtual princes and princesses of the family, we are apt to miss Jesus' point. In the Greco-Roman world, including the Jews, children were thought of as unbridled little bits of chaos. They were not considered naïve, innocent, sweet, and trusting; ancients regarded children as terrible nuisances. Children were without status and possessed no power.*

It is those without power or status that we are called to welcome as angels unaware. When we do so, we welcome Jesus and the One who sent him. When we do so, we recognize the

character of our God, the Creator of the ends of the earth, the One whose understanding is unsearchable and, yet, who bends down to lift infants, the One who gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless. When we do so, our perspective on power changes and we discover a new power within ourselves: the power to love, the ability to accept our own vulnerability, and the courage to walk the roads of sorrow that are a part of each of our journeys.

Roy Rogers, the King of Cowboys, known for his trademark song “Happy Trails to you...” became a changed man when he and his wife, Dale Evans Rogers welcomed a baby girl into the world on August 26, 1950. Their daughter, Robin Elizabeth, had Down Syndrome. A recent article in the *Journal of Pediatrics* by Drs. Hugh Evans and Sarah Rice tells the story of these film, TV, and rodeo megastars:

Fearing the negative publicity and shame, Roy and Dale initially kept Robin’s diagnosis secret. Many midcentury Americans felt that a child with intellectual disability indicated deeper inherited problems. The stigma was so strong that most pediatricians recommended early or even immediate institutionalization for the affected newborns, before the children became entrenched in the hearts of their parents. This counsel to institutionalize pervaded pediatric textbooks, journal reports, and popular magazine articles for most of the 20th century. Doctors explained the necessity of institutionalization by using the reasoning that Dale recalled: mothers would become overwhelmed and neglect their wifely and maternal duties...so much for the good wife in Proverbs 31.

Despite their physicians’ advice, Dale and Roy took Robin home. Over the next two years, they welcomed her into their family, built a house and provided round the clock nursing care. Robin died of mumps and complications related to her congenital heart defect 2 days before her second birthday. Grief-stricken, Dale felt called to write about how their daughter changed their lives. She told her story from the perspective of Robin as an angel looking down from heaven and described how Robin brought their family closer and deepened their Christian faith. Because of the unexpected gift of Robin, they found “Peace in the Valley.” The 63-page book entitled “Angel Unaware” was published in 1953. At the cost of \$1, it sold over two million copies. It was the first time a parent wrote a book about raising a child with Down Syndrome.

According to the article in the *Journal of Pediatrics*, *Angel Unaware* was more than a book about the power of faith to overcome difficulty. It empowered families who felt alone and shunned to share the joys of raising affected children. *Angel Unaware* signaled a shift in public and professional attitude about children with Down Syndrome from institutionalization toward supporting them with therapeutic, educational, and community resources. *Angel Unaware* revolutionized our societal and medical approach to vulnerable children with disabilities, thereby expanding and enriching their lives. Children with Down Syndrome now live into old age and lead fulfilling and productive lives.

"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the One who sent me."

Thank God for all the *angels unaware* that have fortuitous come into our lives to build our character, to expand our worldview, and to deepen our understanding of God’s welcome. As we continue to build a house together, may we celebrate the unity that is ours in Christ and may Westminster be a place where all are welcome. Amen.