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Luke 22:39–46, NLT.

³⁹ Then, accompanied by the disciples, Jesus left the upstairs room and went as usual to the Mount of Olives. ⁴⁰ There he told them, “Pray that you will not give in to temptation.”

⁴¹ He walked away, about a stone’s throw, and knelt down and prayed, ⁴² “Father, if you are willing, please take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine.” ⁴³ Then an angel from heaven appeared and strengthened him. ⁴⁴ He prayed more fervently, and he was in such agony of spirit that his sweat fell to the ground like great drops of blood.

⁴⁵ At last he stood up again and returned to the disciples, only to find them asleep, exhausted from grief. ⁴⁶ “Why are you sleeping?” he asked them. “Get up and pray, so that you will not give in to temptation.”

A Guardian Angel.

Recently, in one of our Zoom Bible Study sessions, we looked at angels in the Bible, a topic that tends to be ignored by modern Bible readers – but Angels are mentioned at least a hundred times in the Old Testament, and there are at least twenty references in the New Testament. I won’t summarize our Bible Study, but as a very quick overview, there are two classes of angels in the Bible, “elect” or good angels, and “fallen” or bad angels. Michael the Archangel is the top elect angel and Satan is the top fallen angel. Satan fell largely due to his pride. Elect angels often act as messengers (“angel” means God’s messenger) between God

and humans, in particular prophets. An angel told Mary she would give birth to the son of God. Satan's followers, the fallen angels, and there are legions of them, are responsible for driving people to murder and to lie. Angels are limited in their power, but they existed before God created the universe, and while they resemble us in many ways, they are superior to us. Angels are filled with wisdom and beauty, except for fallen angels, who have lost these traits. At times, they look like us, perhaps with an extra glow. They are a class of eternal beings that play a major role in the Bible. It's just that angel-related stories are strewn throughout the Bible, making the sum total of angel stories somewhat difficult to pull together and integrate into a coherent narrative. As one example of an angel serving as a protective force for an individual, consider Daniel, as he is trapped in the lion's den, certainly facing a bloody death. Daniel is speaking to the King of Babylon:

²¹ Daniel answered, "Long live the king! ²² My God sent his angel to shut the lions' mouths so that they would not hurt me, for I have been found innocent in his sight. And I have not wronged you, Your Majesty."

The idea for today's message came to me during the Bible Study when we were looking at the quote for today, from the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 22. Jesus knows that he is about to be arrested, tried, tortured, and then murdered in the most humiliating and agonizing fashion imaginable. Jesus leaves the upper room where the Last Supper has just been held, and where the Apostles would end up

gathering and praying after Jesus is killed, and where the Holy Spirit would descend upon the Apostles. Jesus goes to the Mount of Olives, which today overlooks the brilliant white stone Old City of Jerusalem. He advises the Apostles, who have come with him, to pray that they will remain strong and courageous. He separates himself from the others, then kneels down to pray. Jesus says:

⁴² “Father, if you are willing, please take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine.”

It’s what happens next that we want to pay close attention to:

⁴³ Then an angel from heaven appeared and strengthened him. ⁴⁴ He prayed more fervently, and he was in such agony of spirit that his sweat fell to the ground like great drops of blood.

⁴⁵ At last he stood up again and returned to the disciples, only to find them asleep, exhausted from grief. ⁴⁶ “Why are you sleeping?” he asked them. “Get up and pray, so that you will not give in to temptation.”

Jesus is at his lowest, when he is about to succumb to the worst part of being human, and that is facing pain and death, but Jesus is not alone. An angel comes from Heaven to give him strength. It allows him to pray more fervently, despite his spirit being so agonized that his sweat turns to blood. Then, after he has prayed, his courage renewed, he turns to his Apostles to give them strength. This is a common theme in the Bible, angels defending and protecting us when we are in need. Angels act as intermediaries between God and people, helping us communicate with God and helping us when we call out for God’s protection.

We're probably all familiar with the concept of a "guardian angel". It's difficult to track the roots of this specific term, but the idea is solidly rooted in the Bible, at least in the sense that there are angels that are available to rescue us when we face threats. The Bible does not say, however, that there is a one-to-one match-up between angels and people. It does not say that each of us has our own, private, unique angel to protect and guide us. Jerome, who is a Catholic Saint, lived in the 300's A.D. He lived in Dalmatia, which is in Croatia today. He wrote this:

So valuable to heaven is the dignity of the human soul that every member of the Human race has a guardian angel from the moment the person begins to be.

The way Jerome puts it, our souls, our eternal futures, are so important that God has assigned a guardian angel to watch over each of us. In the time of Jesus Jews and early Christians believed so strongly in the protection of angels there was apparently a problem with people worshipping them as if they were God. The issue is so severe that in Colossians, Paul gives us this warning:

¹⁸ Don't let anyone condemn you by insisting on pious self-denial or the worship of angels, saying they have had visions about these things. Their sinful minds have made them proud, ¹⁹ and they are not connected to Christ, the head of the body.

In the Book of Revelation, the author, John, who received his vision while exiled on Patmos because of his faith, makes the same reflection, that while angels are powerful protectors and sit above us in the order of creation, they are not God:

⁹ And the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb." And he added, "These are true words that come from God."

¹⁰ Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said, "No, don't worship me. I am a servant of God, just like you and your brothers and sisters who testify about their faith in Jesus. Worship only God."

When I was five years old, I was riding my bike in front of our house. A man who was out on bond for having killed a little girl in a school parking lot while driving drunk, and who was not supposed to be driving or drinking at all, swerved into me. I was thrown twenty feet and landed on my head. In order to allow the brain to grow properly, the elastic tissues that hold the cranial bones together in children can stretch. At the time, my parents were told that the movement of the bones on my skull helped absorb the energy of the impact, and this kept me from suffering a devastating brain injury. My mother was a very deep believer. Multiple times, as I was growing up, my mother, when she talked about this incident, blamed my salvation, not on the segments of my skull being fluid, not on the EMT's (whom we called "ambulance attendants" back then), not on the doctors who worked to lessen the swelling of my brain, not on the physical therapists who taught me to sit up in a chair and to walk again, and not on all of her fervent prayer, but on my "guardian angel". I'm not offering this as proof that guardian angels exist, because again, this is not a literal biblical concept. But when we were talking about angels

during our Bible Study, and the topic of guardian angels came up, I remembered how strongly I believed in this concept – because of my mother.

While I am not comfortable preaching the existence of actual, so-called guardian angels, I am quite comfortable with saying this: our God created us in his image, and our God values and loves us enough to put into place a multi-faceted set of protections for us. We have the Holy Spirit living within us, to guide us, to pull us closer to God when we begin to drift away, and to inspire us to live according to the will of God and the example of Jesus Christ. God also has a hand in the unfolding of human events, and on an ongoing basis, God ensures that all that happens is in line with his purposes. When we have faith, when we believe, those purposes often serve to protect us. There is something else, as well. The Bible makes it clear that God, before creating the universe, including Earth and the life upon the Earth, created a class of beings that are called angels in the Bible. These angels are there to further guarantee our security, our physical and spiritual safety.

Let's look at the flip side for a moment. The archangel Michael and all the angels under him are the so-called "elect" angels. What about the "fallen" angels? The Bible makes it clear that Satan and his associates are constantly trying to undermine our ability to live faithful, moral lives. Most Christians do believe in evil, but the Bible goes one step further and tells us that there is indeed a Satan, a living

embodiment of evil. Satan tempted Jesus in the desert, offering him all the kingdoms of the world if Jesus would only worship Satan. Here is a quote from fairly early in the Book of Acts, the story of the spread of the faith from Jerusalem outward. The Apostles are working with Jewish converts to the teachings of Jesus, and these people were particularly poor. The Apostles have been urging those who are better off to help those who are in need. We are told this in Chapter 5:

But there was a certain man named Ananias who, with his wife, Sapphira, sold some property. ² He brought part of the money to the apostles, claiming it was the full amount. With his wife's consent, he kept the rest.

³ Then Peter said, "Ananias, why have you let Satan fill your heart? You lied to the Holy Spirit, and you kept some of the money for yourself. ⁴ The property was yours to sell or not sell, as you wished. And after selling it, the money was also yours to give away. How could you do a thing like this? You weren't lying to us but to God!"

When Ananias lies to Peter about the value of the land that he sold in order to help those followers of Jesus who were worse off, Peter makes it clear that Satan played a clear role. It was Satan, and not simply some personality defect, that led Ananias to lie to his fellow believers and to God.

In Chapter 8 of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus cures a man who is possessed by demons. It is not explicitly stated in the Bible, but a demon is apparently a fallen angel. The story unfolds, beginning with Jesus asking the possessed man his name:

³⁰ Jesus demanded, "What is your name?"

“Legion,” he replied, for he was filled with many demons. ³¹ The demons kept begging Jesus not to send them into the bottomless pit.

³² There happened to be a large herd of pigs feeding on the hillside nearby, and the demons begged him to let them enter into the pigs.

So Jesus gave them permission. ³³ Then the demons came out of the man and entered the pigs, and the entire herd plunged down the steep hillside into the lake and drowned.

The man tells Jesus that his name is Legion. This is from the Roman military construct; a legion consists of five thousand soldiers, although the number varied over time. He calls himself Legion because there is a legion of demons inside of him. Jesus tricks the demons into leaving the man and going into a group of pigs. Jesus then drowns the pigs. Jews, of course, held pigs in very low esteem. The point of this story is that this man wasn't a sinner. He wasn't someone who had fallen to the temptation of Satan or other fallen angels. Rather, they had invaded him and corrupted him. Many people reading this story today assume that in truth this man was mentally ill, perhaps schizophrenic. Ignoring this theory, it's clear from the Bible that fallen angels are indeed very dangerous, that they can infiltrate us and cause us to lose control of our thoughts and actions. The point is that the Bible tells a continuous, albeit fragmented, story of elect angels acting as a shield between us and fallen angels. There is no question that, if you believe the Bible, angels are very real. So are, at least in some general sense, guardian angels. It's up to us to consciously turn to them for support when we are in spiritual need.

As you go about your week, think about the added protection from God that you might never have realized was there. Hebrews is an elegantly written document that tells us that we have direct access to God through Jesus. Here is the beginning of the closing words in the Book of Hebrews, where the author reminds us that we must live like Jesus and offer love and kindness to all people:

13 ¹*Keep on loving each other as brothers and sisters.* ²*Don't forget to show hospitality to strangers, for some who have done this have entertained angels without realizing it.*

There you have it. If the example of Jesus isn't enough to live with empathy and grace for all people, you might remember that the next person you bump into might be an angel. They can look just like us when they want to. But seriously, the story of angels in the Bible is the story of just how committed God is to providing help to us whenever we need it. We don't have to worry about having the strength to cast aside our anger, our hatred, our envy, and our pride. We are never alone, never helpless, never hopeless. You walk with God's protection, God's angels every day of your life. When you are afraid, sad or anxious, just think about that angel standing next to you, ready to embrace you and protect you. Please pray with me.

God, we thank you for looking after us, for making sure that no matter what dangers or crises we must confront in life, we will have everything we need to overcome spiritual and physical challenges. You are always there for us. Amen.