

JANUARY 17, 2021

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

“Connecting people with Jesus Christ so all can experience his love and joy.”



SERMON Jan 10th, Guardian Angels: Psalm 91, Psalm 34

This morning we are going to take another look at something we touched on a few weeks ago. The subject is actually the product of a request I received during Advent which was to do a few messages on angels. If you recall, our Advent series centered around the characters from the nativity story that delivered a monologue and lit the wreath. The final Sunday in Advent, we heard from Beaugard the angel. To recap the message that morning, we noted that in the Nativity story the angels served three main roles. Those roles reflected both much of the angelic work in the Old Testament and each role also corresponded to one of the persons in the triune Godhead. We saw them as protectors/agents to hold people accountable, reflecting the might and authority of God the Father. They served in a ministering capacity of mercy, healing, and compassion reflecting God the Son. They served as messengers, calling and guiding people reflecting God the Holy Spirit.

Today we are looking at a kind of subset of one of these roles. In the role of protecting, we hear about the idea of guardian angels.

This is a wonderfully comforting and sentimental idea. There is comfort in believing that God has assigned each and every one of us our own personal protector. These angels have appeared in many movies, books, and stories through the years. The stories are almost always heart warming and make us feel good when we think about or experience them.

The question we have to ask, though, is whether or not this idea is truly Biblical. Certainly the idea that God has a protecting presence in our lives is Biblical. And I'm not wanting to trample on ideas that give us that warm fuzzy feeling. Unfortunately, the idea of the guardian angel is more human convention than it is supported in the Bible. Fortunately as so often occurs, when we push past an idea we want to hang on to because it makes us feel good and into what scripture really tells us leads us to a much fuller, more applicable, and I would say greater picture of how God is at work in our lives.

The anchor for the idea of the guardian angel we find in Psalm 91. Psalm 34 also adds to the idea by telling us that God dispatches angels to watch over us. Psalm 91 even uses the term "guardian."

So why isn't that sufficient? Let's look at the fullness of that specific Psalm 91. It is entirely unambiguous. We are told in no uncertain terms that we will be protected from all harm and sickness. That while people may be dropping all around us, because of our relationship with God and the presence of God's angels we are untouchable.

Life doesn't bear this out. All of us endure sickness. All of us have harm befall us in some way throughout our lives. And that this is a reality helps us understand how to better understand these Psalms and how they correspond to life.

The reason this reality shows us that the idea of the guardian angel isn't accurate is due to the nature of angels. As we understand them, angels are missing something that you and I have, free will. They are not free agents who can choose to obey or reject God. They are created specifically to carry our God's directions. They can't disobey.

Therefore, if an angel is charged to guard over someone, to protect them from disease, injury, and harm, they are incapable of failing to do so. The caveat in the Psalm is that these angels are promised only to those who abide in God, those who love God. So every person of faith should be free from sickness and harm. We are not.

Sometimes we chuckle when something bad happens and say "my guardian angel must have been napping." It's a way of passively hanging on to this comforting idea even when circumstances would deny it. None of us like to relinquish comforting ideas, and in fairness there isn't a whole lot of harm in this particular idea. However there are places in life and faith where a held value or idea is harmful, and the only way to get closer to God's desires and design is to let it go and search out what God genuinely wants from us.

The other thing we need to remember is where we find this anchoring scripture. It's in the Psalms. This is important, particularly when we recognize that what is written isn't reflective of the realities of life, at least not when taken in the most literal sense. To make this observation is not to question God's word or say it isn't true or real. To make this observation is a call to ask where the truth is in the scripture if it can't be what it seems on the surface.

This is easily answerable in the Psalms. The Psalms are poetry and hymnody. If we are going to faithfully understand them, we have to read them as such. What this means is to allow that they are written with all of the devices of a poem. They are written with exaggeration and symbolism. Poetry

uses these devices so they have more power to evoke feeling and make a point. Maybe more than any other form of writing, the exaggeration in poetry recognizes that often to help someone grasp an idea it needs to be communicated in exaggeration rather than the more moderate form with all its subtleties. Why? Because most of us tend to hear something and naturally scale it back. So hearing the exaggeration we land in the actuality when we process it and pull it back a bit.

A more physical image of this I'll share from one of my TKD instructors. When he teaches stances, he'll teach them longer, wider, and deeper than they are actually supposed to be. His reasoning is that holding stances for an extended time tires the legs, and so students naturally shorten the stance. When they do, if they start out bigger and deeper, they will end up in just the right position.

To further make the point, note the imagery of God spreading God's wings over us and covering us with feathers. We know God isn't a bird, nor have any of us ever seen someone walking around with a giant wing over them.

But the Psalm DOES evoke a feeling of comfort. It lets us know that God is watching over us. God has our back. God loves us and takes note of our circumstances. God has mechanisms in place to guard us. And all of this is true.

So if not a guardian angel, what is the protecting presence of God?

First and foremost, just because there may not be a guardian angel, it doesn't mean that God never uses angels to protect us. We saw it in the nativity story as the angel commands Joseph to take his family to Egypt to spare them from Herod. The angel closed the mouth of the lions for Daniel. They rescued Lot and his family from Sodom. They were prepared to strike down the army that came for Elisha and his servant. So certainly scripture supports a protective angelic presence.

What we don't know specifically is how, why, or when God chooses to send them in this role. This is one of the mysteries of God that we'll likely never have an answer to. It's also throughout scripture the exception rather than the rule.

In fact I would say that if we experience that kind of angelic intervention, we see it in hindsight as we reflect on a circumstance.

God also intervenes, I would say most frequently, through the presence and voice of the Holy Spirit to guard us. The guarding is accomplished through the guiding. The Holy Spirit convicts our hearts when we are ready to do something wrong with the hopes of steering us away from that choice. The Holy Spirit is a discerning presence in our heart when we have choices to make, influencing us to choose in a way that honors God. The Spirit calls us to direct us away from decisions, actions, and words that might cause us harm.

God is constantly working to protect us from those parts in our nature that want to do what we oughtn't do. The catch is that pesky free will. Free will gets in the way sometimes because we can choose to ignore the Holy Spirit. Yet free will is also one of the greatest expressions of God's love, allowing us the freedom to choose to love God or not. God's love is abundant, but God also knows that love forced isn't love at all.

I'll share with you that I am utterly convinced of this reality. When I was in my early 20s I was driving a back road, too fast I'll add, to work. At one point I literally heard a voice say "slow down". No one was in the truck with me. I didn't slow down. What I didn't know is that the township had graded the road and there was gravel all over an upcoming turn. When I hit the gravel I fishtailed and when I got traction again it shot me into the bank on the right side of the road where I went up the bank and rolled the truck. Everything, with the exception of me, that was in the front of the truck ended up outside the truck launching out the busted windows.

I believe that the Spirit was sending me a warning. I didn't listen and quite literally got wrecked.

So we have the sometimes angelic intervention, and the voice of the Holy Spirit guarding us.

We also have the Word of God. Through scripture there are countless instructions intended to guide the course of our lives in a way that guards us from creating or participating in circumstances that may but us unnecessarily in harm's way. Even in Psalm 34 we see this as the reader is encouraged to not lie, to stay away from evil acts, and seek peace. We have the 10 commandments, the sermon on the mount, the witness of Christ's life laid out in the gospels. We have the basic, fundamental commands to love God and love one another. Many lament that life doesn't come with a manual. In a sense it does in scripture.

Finally, we have one another. In fact, that we have one another brings us back to this idea of angels. While we don't mean it in the most literal sense, when someone does something unexpectedly loving, or helpful, especially when the timing is spot on, we refer to one another as angels. Without question, often through the nudging of the Holy Spirit, God uses us to watch out for each other. We step in in times of need. We call each other out when headed down the wrong path. We uplift one another to keep us from despair too deep or hopelessness. We are guardians of one another.

God's protection of us is so much broader than a guardian angel. God at every turn is guarding our lives with the intent to keep us from circumstances that would do us harm. This is the extent of God's love for us.

I would also remind us that this guarding isn't just about our physical being. Perhaps even more importantly it is about our spiritual being. It is about guarding our hearts. Scripture asks us "what good is it to gain the world but lose your soul?" The presence of the Holy Spirit, the witness of scripture, the relationships we have with one another are all instruments of God to ensure our hearts are in the right place. To keep our attitudes and values in proper order so the bitterness and venom of the world don't darken our heart. And after all, if our actions and words flow from the heart, the foundation of guarding our physical lives and choices begins with guarding the condition of our hearts.

Jesus knew this well. Jesus understood that the protection of God works in connection with how we exercise our free will. When He was tempted in the wilderness, Psalm 91 was twisted. He was taken to the pinnacle of the temple and challenged to toss Himself off because according to this Psalm angels would swoop down and save Him so he wouldn't dash His foot against a stone. Jesus' response? "Don't put God to a foolish test."

In other words, if we want to experience the protecting, guarding hand of God, make sure that we are listening to the instruments God is already at work with to lead us in a correct path.

I want to remind us of something this morning. Whatever hardship, pain, or difficulty any of us are enduring right now, that suffering isn't God's ultimate desire for us. God is merciful, not sadistic. And so if there are physical hardships, emotional hardships, take time to avail yourself of the spiritual strength and connection that every child of God has access to. Let the Spirit guard your heart so that you can endure with peace of mind and spirit and have a wonderful witness on the other side of what you are going through.

I would be remiss this morning to not address the events of last week. They actually go fairly hand in hand with our message this morning. Precisely because we have free will and free agency, harm occurs sometimes whether or not we choose correctly. Violence occurs when the heart has not been guarded from rage and hate. It compounds and continues when others allow the rage and hate to be contagious. The question before every person of faith is what we will do with our own free will and agency. Are we guarding our hearts? Are we allowing our spirits to be open to what the Spirit is doing to keep us safe?

I shared with a few people over the past couple days something that I think is incredibly important, and part of how we protect our hearts. There is a lot of chatter from all corners that essentially say "never forgive." We can't let this sentiment infiltrate our hearts. Forgiveness is

foundational to what it means to be a disciple of Christ. Not just our own, but our ability to offer forgiveness. In fact, if we believe scripture, our own forgiveness hinges on our willingness to forgive one another. It's only in setting aside bitterness that we can ever begin to move forward together in a way that truly honors God.

Lines have been drawn so deep that it seems many are waiting for whatever their "other side" is to go first. Someone has to. People of faith need to go first. To lead the way. Not to shun accountability, but to guard our hearts, and pave the way for the Kingdom to come and God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

BIBLE STUDY John 13

John 13 puts us in what for many is familiar territory. We are centered around the Last Supper. John, however, takes his telling of this event in a different direction than Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Noteworthy is that John doesn't mention anything about the institution of communion. He instead shares the foot washing. This difference is in keeping with the different tone of John's gospel. Communion is a moment foreshadowing and symbolic of Jesus' death on the cross. Matthew, Mark, and Luke have a more chronological and historical kind of feel while John is more symbolic and theological in nature. What we see over the next several chapters is Jesus using this moment to continue teaching His disciples. Rather than being another event along the journey to the cross, John paints the moment as almost "parting instructions" to the disciples not just foreshadowing His death, but preparing them for what they should do and who they should be going forward.

As we go into this chapter we continue to see the disciples misunderstand exactly what Jesus is sharing with them in a variety of ways. What is helpful to remember in terms of having a more gracious reading of the gospel is that we know things the disciples did not. For example, we know where the story goes and ends, they didn't. We read it loaded with centuries of Christian tradition that engrain the meaning of the events as well as the events themselves rather than centuries of Jewish tradition with a very different Messianic understanding. John tells us that Judas was a thief, but there's no indication the disciples were aware of it. We also know the fullness of what the betrayal results in, the disciples did not.

The first thing we get in this chapter is the famous foot washing. This is an incredibly humbling moment. The custom then was that the lesser always washed the feet of the greater, not the other way around. This makes sense in the worldly sense of pride and status. The act of washing feet would have been particularly gross then. Often we think about perhaps a thin layer of dust that would have been on the foot. Remember that the streets were not just littered with dirt. There were animals throughout the cities and towns "doing their business" in the streets. There was all other manner of things that may have been discarded on the streets and roads. Likely the feet were covered with more than just a little dirt. As such to wash someone's feet was a truly hospitable and humble act.

As Jesus engages in this practice, once again we see a kind of double meaning to His words. As He washes their feet, Peter objects. The thought of the Lord doing such a thing is unthinkable. How can the Master wash the feet of the servant? As he objects, Jesus replies that unless He "washes" them, they have no part with Him. Symbolically Jesus conveys to Peter, and those that heard Him, what was about to occur on the cross. Unless Jesus redeems Him and we embrace what that means, we miss out having a part in that redemption and what that redemption means to the world. Peter of course misses this point and is focused on the physical, not the spiritual. He wants Jesus then to give him a full on bath. The symbolism is lost in the moment on Peter. Jesus takes this moment to comfort Peter that he is already washed. He has already committed himself to Jesus. He also takes this moment to hint that one among them is there with bad intentions. If Peter is clean, there is one among them who is not.

Jesus also instructs them to follow His example. This is the double sense of what has happened. It's about both redemption, as well as the expected attitude and actions of those who claim to follow Jesus. In reminding them that they are correct about Jesus being in a position that is elevated above them He isn't "putting them in their place". Jesus is acknowledging the reality to drive home the example that it doesn't matter what status one has, the call to humbly serve is expected by everyone. Something incredibly noteworthy is that there is no indication that Jesus didn't wash Judas's feet. In other words, this humble service was unconditional. There were not requirements placed on who "deserved" to be ministered to.

This is such an incredible example and lesson. So often when we read the gospels and see an example of this our minds also go to the opposite of what Jesus calls us to. We are reminded that the opposite of humility and service to others is pride, status, and self-service. What's been driven into us is to apply this accusation to the Pharisees, scribes, and leaders that were against Jesus. The reality is that this opposite isn't reserved for them then, but has occurred throughout the history of Christianity even into today.

Every week in churches all around, there is a mix. There are those who have taken the humility and servanthood of Christ to heart and seek to set aside self for the sake of faith and the world around them. There are also those who throughout the week, and will continue in the week following, have spent their energy doing whatever they need to to chase and hang on to power, status, wealth, and so forth, believing that they are entitled and allowed to step on whomever they need to in the process. Some get it, others do not.

This goes back to when Christianity became the state religion of Rome. Many of those who had been faithful and endured persecution continued to find and seek ways to stay humble, to serve, and endure suffering for Christ. Others embraced their newfound status and prestige, letting the influence and opulence that came from being so closely tied to the ruling power that they were willing to pursue those ends to the detriment of both their faith and the faith of those they were intended to faithfully serve. This is our human nature at war with our spiritual selves. It is a battle that has always been and always will be.

The call of Jesus to His disciples then and now is to continually fight against the lesser side of our nature, and give way to the brighter side in Christ. It was His example to them, calling them to be the same example to the world.

After this ceremony of sorts, they are sitting at the table. Jesus is troubled. Once again we see a remarkably comforting humanity to Him. He knows one of His inner circle is going to sell Him out. One who had travelled and ministered with Him, and one whose feet He had just washed in a symbol of love and service. His state of mind and heart is an affirmation that a "good Christian" isn't all smiles and no worries. We aren't constantly at peace. There are moments in life when we sense something happening or about to happen and it troubles us to our very soul. For Jesus He knew it was inevitable and part of the mission He came to complete. For us, however, this troubling is often something different.

Being troubled in spirit is a warning of sorts. We are being warned that something isn't right, and perhaps we need to be on our guard. Sometimes this means we are prompted to change direction and chart another course. Sometimes this means we need to steel ourselves for a sacrificial moment. As we continue on the course God has laid for us, we are being prepared that there will be a difficult consequence. This second sense is where Jesus lies here. He knows where He is bound, and He knows the consequence awaiting Him.

There is a disciple Jesus loved sitting next to Him. Many assume this is John, however there is nowhere in the gospel that presumes this. In fact that the lengths the writer of the gospel goes to to conceal the identity may suggest that it actually isn't John at all.

Regardless, Peter is next to this disciple and pushes him to ask who the betrayer is. The question is asked, and the answer given. Not only is the answer given, but we are told that Jesus specifically gave the bread to Judas, dismissed him, and went back about the meal. This poses some questions. The first and easiest to answer is if Jesus told this disciple and by extension Peter who was the betrayer, why did everyone assume Judas was going out to complete a chore of some sort? This is simple to interpret. The "all" likely implies everyone but those two. The next question is more difficult. If this disciple and Peter knew who it was, why didn't they stop Judas from what he was about to do? On Tuesday night we spent time on this, and I'll offer you some of the conjectures that came up. I'm doing so because this gives us pause to fill in a gap, and in speculating it can lead us down paths of thought and conversation that help us assess more than the passage, but call us to examine our own lives and circumstances in light of how we might react in a similar situation.

Perhaps there was a lag in time between revealing Judas and actually handing him the bread. It may have slipped the disciple's minds. Perhaps there was a distraction and they missed to whom the bread was given. Perhaps they didn't take it seriously because while we know the extent of the betrayal, they did not. Perhaps they had some measure of disbelief that it could be Judas. While we are told Judas was a thief, clearly they must not have known about it. Judas continued to hold the money pot. Had they known he was stealing common sense says they would have relieved him of the position. Maybe that Judas was entrusted with this responsibility gave him a character status among the twelve that made it difficult to conceive he could be a betrayer.

Perhaps if Jesus saw them starting to act He quietly told them to stand down, knowing that what was coming had to pass. We don't know for sure, but what we do know is that this moment was clearly noteworthy and a trigger point. When Judas leaves, Jesus makes the statement that the Son is now glorified. Judas exiting is the trigger that puts in motion the events that the next day will glorify Jesus on the cross as He redeems creation, and glorifies Him once again a few days later as He rises from the grave. This moment is a big deal. As Jesus continues to foreshadow what is coming, the disciples continue to misunderstand. "Where I'm coming you can't follow". This was confusing to the Jews challenging Him earlier, and is confusing to the disciples now. What exactly does He mean? Earlier in the gospel people wondered if this meant He was about to travel to Greece or to kill Himself. We don't know specifically what the disciples thought, but we do know they didn't fully grasp it as Peter offers to lay down his life for Jesus.

Jesus' uttering these words casts forward to perhaps, once again, two understandings. If so, the disciples with the exception of John to a degree would all one day understand. The first is that Jesus is headed to heaven, and it is not their time to follow Him there....yet. The other is that Jesus is going to a martyr's death. This is not their moment to participate in such sacrifice. Yet one day, they would.

In the midst of this, we see Jesus give a fervent instruction that we all do well to remember today. While the beginning of His "final instructions" was a bit muddled in symbolic acts, this is a clear statement. "Love one another as I have loved you. They will know you are my disciples by how you love one another."

Jesus gives them direct understanding of what is at the foundation of discipleship. Loving one another. He doesn't say the world will know it by their creeds, statements of faith, bumper stickers, or otherwise. The world will know by how we love each other. By our actions and how we use the gift of our words. Yes, the command and Spirit to fully love comes from knowing Jesus, but to those who don't know Him, they need to see our faith in action. In the words of James put another way, "faith without works is dead."

To expect people to simply go on our "say so" is putting the cart before the horse. Most around us have already heard and not believed for a reason. Many times that reason is the unloving attitudes and actions of those claiming to follow Jesus. We prove the reliability of our words by the love that we show. The love we show builds relationships that pave the way to share the source and inspiration for our love. Christianity that confines its love only to other Christians, or more troubling only to Jesus and doesn't show it to the world is no Christianity at all. "Love one another, and the world will know you belong to me."

The chapter ends with Jesus' famous words to Peter that he will deny Jesus. This is a reminder of several realities. It reminds us that even those closest to Jesus have the potential to make significant mistakes. It happened with Peter and it happens with us. It reminds us that even though we are fallible, Jesus loves us and doesn't exclude us. Remember, Jesus washed Peter's feet and pronounced him "clean", I would suggest because of the true nature of Peter's committal to Jesus.

It reminds us that even a bad mistake doesn't have the last word. Remember that once Peter did what Jesus knew he would do, his heart broke. He repented and went on to be a powerful apostle of the early church.

It reminds us that forgiveness is available. Jesus forgave Peter along with all the rest of us, and moved on restoring and empowering Peter to be a shining light to early Christians.

Through this chapter we see misunderstandings and mistakes. At the same time we see the infinite patience of Jesus, and the overwhelming and boundless love of God that doesn't give up on us.



January 17, 2021

Prelude

Greeting and Announcements

Opening Prayer

Hymns

#158 Come Christians Join to Sing

#504 The Old Rugged Cross

Joys and Concerns

Pastoral Prayer

Scripture

Revelation 12:7-9

1 Corinthians 14:30-33

Sermon

All Things in Order

Closing Hymn

#672 God Be With You Til We Meet Again

Benediction



Giving

Offering	\$7,644
Improvement	\$155
Gale Love memorial	\$20
Missions	\$135
Building fund	\$50
Received	\$7,779
Needed	\$8,134

Special Offerings

1st Sundays: Improvement Fund

2nd Sundays: Building Fund

4th Sundays: Missions

On these Sundays, the Sunday School offering will go toward these collections, and folks are encouraged to make a special donation to these ongoing needs.

The logo for Marion Community meals is framed by a red and white plaid border. The word "Marion" is written in a large, cursive font at the top. Below it, the words "COMMUNITY" and "meals" are written in a bold, sans-serif font. "COMMUNITY" is in all caps, and "meals" is in lowercase. A horizontal plaid bar is positioned between "COMMUNITY" and "meals".

February 9
Quarter Chicken