

Hebrews 1:4-14
Jesus is Greater than Angels
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In 1990, the singer Bette Midler recorded a song that made it to the top of the Billboard Charts. It has been remembered throughout the years as one of the top 20 awesomely bad songs of the 80s. The song I'm referring to is called, *From a Distance*. Now, as your pastor and shepherd of this community, I feel it is my duty to warn you of dangerous and potentially destructive things, particularly in the realm of popular culture. My wife Amy will attest, there few things in the world that get me as worked up as bad theology in popular music. And this one, my friends, may be one of the worst.

*From a distance we all have enough; and no one is in need.
And there are no guns, no bombs and no disease, no hungry mouths to feed.
From a distance we are instruments marching in a common band.
Playing songs of hope, playing songs of peace, they are the songs of every man
God is watching us, God is watching us, God is watching us, from a distance.*

I remember being on a car trip with a bunch of classmates in college and we were listening to the radio and this song came on and immediately the girls in the car began singing along. Are you serious? Are you listening to the theology of this garbage? God is watching us from a distance? God is not off at a distance. This is not the orthodox biblical faith we cling to, my fellow college freshmen, as we head to the bowling alley. Don't you remember your catechisms, isn't there an alarm going off in your heads as you hear these words that are inconsistent with the Apostles' Creed, let alone the Bible? There wasn't.

The God we meet in Scripture is not one who sits back comfortably at a distance. The God of the Bible is not the great impersonal watch maker who winds everything up and lets it go. The God we meet in the Bible is intimate and near, and wants to have a personal and transformative relationship with his children.

Now many in our culture these days like to keep God neatly and quietly separate... at a distance. We like the idea that God's not all that concerned with intimate details of our daily life, but is off somewhere with the angels in an unsoiled heaven, singing uninterrupted choruses—and when we're in a pinch, the red phone rings and God jumps into action. Truth be told, this is how many of us choose to think about God. God's not interested in our little sins, our little concerns, our little lives. Jesus, you stay up there with the angels, we've got things under control here. As we talked about last week, we don't like it when God's will challenges our will.

There's a Christian sociologist by the name of Charles Taylor who has written a monumental book called *The Secular Age*. In it he suggests that in this age, we have pushed God far enough from us that we no longer concern ourselves with God's judgment. Instead, what we worry about is everyone else's judgment. We've replaced what God thinks with what everyone else thinks. Wisdom and morality and law are no longer determined by an all-powerful creator; now it's by all popular consent.

When God isn't the one who tells you who you are, we understandably look for that meaning wherever else we can find it.

Do I live in the right house? Do I have a nice enough lawn? Do people "like" what I write on social media? Or the one that I struggle with the most, do people think well of me when I speak—am I smart enough? Do you see how easily and effortlessly we can slip into these thought traps?

This is invariably what happens when God is watching us from a distance.

What the author of Hebrews wants us to know is that God's love for humanity is so unique and special, God's priority in his creatures is so extraordinary, that he reveals himself to us in a way that we understand—a human, flesh and bone person, Jesus of Nazareth. God doesn't remain at a distance, and Jesus doesn't take his place with the angels, but he physically lowers himself to be with us so that he might be for us.

In this morning's text, the writer of Hebrews takes up the issue of angels. Interestingly, because from the sound of it, you would think that angels are a big issue for the writer. But this isn't the case, he's using them to make a greater point. The reason we know this is that angels never show up again in the entire book. For those who would be tempted to lump Jesus in with the angels, in the words of Greg Allman, Jesus says, "I ain't no angel."

The first thing we need to address is this business of angels, the caricature we use of little rosy-cheeked, doughy-figured cherubs with wings and harps, doesn't fit Scripture's description. First, the word angel (*angelos*) means messenger or herald. The angels' primary role is to share news. In the book of Genesis, angels are the gatekeepers in the Garden of Eden; messengers who come to Sarah and Abraham, and provide comfort to Hagar; they are there at Sodom and Gomorah; and provided rescue for Isaac in the form of a ram caught in a thicket nearby and prevent Abraham his dad from doing the unthinkable to his only son Isaac. Angels are seen in Jacob's dream ascending and descending a ladder to heaven when Jacob was fleeing from his brother Esau; they came to bring the great news to Abraham that one day his offspring as numerous as the sands of the seashore.

We see them in the New Testament, as well. It was an angel messenger who came to announce to Mary that she was to give birth to the Christ Child, and it was angels who were there at the empty tomb Easter Morning telling the disciples Jesus was not there, but risen.

Scripture clearly has a valuable role for angels to play. But their presence and influence is limited, and their purpose is confined to an intercessory one. They are a supporting cast member in God's unique story of humanity.

Our passage from Hebrews is, at its core, a collection Old Testament quotations strung together delineating Jesus' relationship over and above the angelic beings. It begins by quoting Psalm 2 saying, **"to which of you did God say, 'you are my son, today I have begotten you?'"** Just one verse before, he says, the name Jesus inherited is more excellent than theirs.

Jesus is greater than the angels, because his name is greater than theirs.

The Bible speaks clearly about the power that comes with having the right name. The book of Proverbs speaks about the value of a good name; it is more precious than gold or silver. Having the right name behind or before you provides certain securities and privileges.

A few years ago, my brother and I had the chance to go to a Minnesota Wild Hockey Game while we were home on vacation. While we were there, a friend of mine contacted me, telling me that he was also at the game, only his seats were not down in the stands with everyone else's. His father is an executive for Excel Energy and his seats were in the Excel Suite—which is the name of the arena where we were watching the game. He said, go to this location and tell them you're with the Johnson Family.

The second thing the text does is tell us how the angels relate to Jesus. Here the author, again quoting the OT, this time Deuteronomy 32, saying, **“Let all God's angels worship him.”** The angels are sent to minister to Jesus, in his wilderness temptation after Satan was through tempting him. Matthew says that angels came to minister to Jesus. Angels are a part of the heavenly chorus in Revelation who sing, **“Worthy is the lamb who was slain to receive power and honor and glory and power forever amen.”**

Then he quotes Psalm 104: **“He makes his angels winds, and his servants flames of fire.”** Here the text implies that God takes the natural elements and turns them into obedient servants, or that like the natural elements—like the wind—that comes and goes, angels are obedient to the will of God.

Finally, this morning's passage moves to its crescendo, where the righteousness and power of Jesus is brought to its pinnacle. The author drives the point by quoting Psalm 110: **“to which of the angels has he ever say, ‘sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet’”?**

For ten verses, the writer of Hebrews makes a big fuss about why Jesus is superior to angels. This is made more curious by the fact that talk of angels doesn't show up at all in the rest of Hebrews. So why all the commotion? Why make such a big deal about angels?

The problem may not lie with our perception of angels, but with our understanding of Jesus. It's not that we are tempted to give too much glory to angels, but if we're honest, there are times when we are tempted to give too little of it to Jesus.

Despair and faith fatigue can easily creep in. You've begun this race well, you are firmly on your way, new in your faith; but your old friends keep calling, wanting you to come hang out like you used to. They want to pull you back into that dead end lifestyle you just left. And after a while, the thought occurs to you that having bad friends is better than no friends. That unhealthy destructive relationship that you got out of because it was just bringing out the worst in you, all of a sudden doesn't look so bad, compared to the difficult thought of being alone.

The challenging part about picking up and following Jesus is not his glory, it's his humanity. Sometimes Jesus seems to be lower, less powerful, even helpless, in comparison to the angels. In Hebrews 2, he says Jesus of Nazareth was human and like all of us, he sank into the depths, too. And if we're honest, sometimes it seems like he is powerless to help.

It's not that the Hebrews didn't want to believe in Jesus, they did. It's just that they were just tired and worn out from being Christians. In our most difficult moments as parents, when our energy is shot and we've got nothing left in the tank, Amy and I will look at one another and say: "I'm just having a real hard time being a Christian right now." And I bet every single one of you can relate.

But instead of joining us in our pity party, the author of Hebrews doesn't pretend that experiences aren't hard and life isn't painful. Hebrews doesn't say to us: "Hey, things aren't so bad, look on the bright side, or count your blessings." Instead of offering trite truisms, the kind you find on Hallmark Greeting cards, the author of Hebrews begins to preach the truth into the hearts of the Hebrews. And the only antidote for grief is gospel, the only answer for heartache is hope, the only balm that can soothe a loneliness is love.

There are some truths that cannot be seen, there are some powers that cannot be perceived through the human eye, they must be infused into the human heart. What the author of Hebrews is telling this congregation, and he is telling you today, is that this experience you're going through now is not the end of the story. Because Jesus, this Jesus who was at one time weak and "made lower than the angels", this Jesus who is broken and bloodied on the cross of Calvary, this Jesus who was laid limp and lifeless in the tomb and who sank into the very depths of Hades itself did it so that you would know that no matter how low you sink, there is always a Savior there waiting for you to raise you out of your depths.

And this Jesus is also the heir of all things, seated at the right hand of God almighty, who lives and reigns in the power of the Holy Spirit. This Jesus, verse 4 says, **"is as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs."**

God is not watching us from a distance. The true God, the God attested in Jesus Christ in the Scriptures, leaves the comfort of eternity, and descends into the depths of his creation. Lowering himself, emptying himself, for you. As Craig Barnes says, Jesus Christ was literally dying to love you. And the great gotcha of faith, the real trick God played on the devil is that even in his broken and bloodied state, as he hung there lifeless on the cross, even then Jesus held the world in his hand, and was extending his arms to you in a loving embrace.

Will you finally give up searching, will you finally give up your doubting, will you finally give up the illusion that you're doing just fine without him, and will you let Jesus, in the depths of his suffering, embrace you in the depths of your sin? The good news of the gospel, my friends, is that for a little while Jesus was lower than the angels...but only for a little while.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Almighty and risen Christ, meet us we ask, where we are, in the struggles we have, the grief and heartache that we deal with. And give us the strength and faith to endure with others through their struggles, their heartaches. But in doing so, please grant us an extra measure of your Holy Spirit that sustains us and keeps our faith secure, knowing that you are greater than angels. That with you we will not always remain where we are, but the hope of your Gospel is that life always comes after death, and hope always springs from heartache. Show us how near you really are, through your Holy Spirit, who lives and reigns with you in power and love, amen.