

Angels

Reverend Rachel Rivers
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The Swedenborgian Church of San Francisco

Lord, send thy angels to lead us. Send thy angels to teach us. Send thy angels to inspire what we shall say, what we shall think, what we shall do.

These are the words of the anthem that the choir just sang and there's an interesting story behind this song. It's kind of like Kim's story (she shared with the children this morning) about the stained glass windows discovered in a barn.

I think it was about ten years ago... it was sometime in the 1990's that someone in this church was going through the music archives and they found a copy of an old song that was written in the 1950's by someone who was a member of this church at that time. It was called "Swedenborg's Prayer". We dusted it off, the choir sang it again, and the congregation was captivated by it.

Somehow it became in our minds "Swedenborg's Favorite Prayer", and we even had it printed on these beautiful special coffee mugs that some of you may still have. Then Reverend Jim and I got thinking and saying "You know what? We never heard of this prayer before in our studies." We didn't know this was Swedenborg's favorite prayer, and we did some research. We actually couldn't find it in any of the biographies or any of the information about Swedenborg. And, so then we asked those who would really know everything about Swedenborg, our former professors. They hadn't heard of this prayer either.

So, then we came to think that perhaps it was written very much with Swedenborg in mind, but that somehow it was poetic license. An then, Thursday night, I found in Swedenborg's book Heaven and Hell, in §228, it's pretty much the words of the song. So, Swedenborg did write these words a few hundred years ago: "We pray that God send us angels to lead us, direct our steps, teach us and inspire us in what to think, and what to say, and other like things."

All of you, who have ever been to this church before, know that Emanuel Swedenborg was a great man of science, and that he prayed devoutly every day. You've heard me say before, I've quoted a Stanford research study that said that Swedenborg was one of the most brilliant people to have ever lived. And, he believed in angels. He spoke with angels. He wrote about angels, especially in the wonderful volume called Heaven and Hell.

This morning I want to tell you just a little bit, piggybacking on what Reverend Kim had to say to the children, who angels are. And then I want to tell you, describe to you four ways that angels help us. These descriptions come directly from the first chapter of Robert Kirven's book, Angels in Action, about what Swedenborg saw and heard. Bob Kirvin was one of my professors when I was in seminary.

So, first about angels... like Reverend Kim said, angels, as Swedenborg describes them, were once people, once human beings, living on this planet, or another planet, but coming from the physical world.

Angels are messengers. They are messengers of divine love, divine wisdom, and a power for goodness. And each one of us, surrounded by angels, all the time. And we especially have near us, and around us, angels who have values, goals and attitudes that we ourselves have. And, yet, fortunately, they're farther along the path than we are. These angels seek to lead us, to teach us, and to guide us. But with one very, very important point always in place that Swedenborg

emphasizes again and again and again, and that is that we are always left in freedom, each one of us to choose our way.

Why? Because we have a job to do on this earth. And that is to become ourselves: Messengers of love. Messengers of wisdom. Messengers of power for good. We are here on this earth to become angels... angels in the making.

Bob Kirven again describes in the first chapter of his book, Angels in Action, what Swedenborg saw and heard. He describes four specific ways that angels help us – that angels help humanity. There are many, many more ways indeed than four.

The first is, angels help us to make the transition from this world to the next. Angels help us when it's time to die. Sometimes we can begin to feel them helping us before we die, and always after we die, when we find ourselves waking up in a spiritual world. There are particularly sensitive angels there who help us with this transition to awaken into this new dimension of reality.

As a minister, one of the greatest privileges of my role is to be with people when they're close to dying. And I have countless stories I could share with you. There's one in particular that comes to my mind this day. There's a story of a woman who I met 15 years ago, and I met her in her last week of life. She was in her early thirties. She herself was a scientist. She had contracted AIDS and was dying. I had some talks with her, and upon first meeting me, she made it clear that she actually wasn't really this person, and she did not believe in any life beyond the life of the physical world.

One afternoon as we were speaking, she told me that earlier that morning at her home, she had heard a knock on the door. She explained, it wasn't the door of the house. There was a knock on the door. I asked her who it was. She said it was Sarah. And I asked, "Who's Sarah?" "Sarah", she said, "was someone from my support group of women who were dying of AIDS." I asked her to tell me more about Sarah. And it turns out that this woman – her name was Rebecca – had helped Sarah, especially because they had a close connection, because Sarah was dying... and Sarah had died several months before. And, so Rebecca said to me, "Sarah's knocking at the door. Should I let her in?" I said, "Rebecca, that's up to you."

Rebecca decided to let Sarah in and allowed Sarah to continue her role as a member of the support group for women who were dying to help make her transition a little smoother, a little more understandable, a little easier.

One way that angels help us is, they help us through all the big transitions of life... including leaving this world and going to the next. They also help us on the other side of things. When we're newborn babies, Swedenborg said that we are surrounded by the most especially loving angels. He called them celestial angels. At our time of birth, and early weeks and months in this world, these angels have a special divine love and wisdom that we then are able to connect with on an unconscious level.

Many people had the blessing of having parents who mirrored that angelic love. And for those who did not have the blessing of having parents who were able to mirror that deep love, they still had the angels themselves. This can help us understand why some people can be so wise, and so loving, when they had such difficult beginnings on this earth.

The presence of these angels in our early lives also help us understand why, when we are dying, and have died and are waking up in the spiritual world, why we feel like comfort immediately with these angelic presences, most people, because something in us recognizes them, and remembers. It also helps to understand why so many of us are so totally captivated by newborn babies. We want to be near and close to them, and feel that special love that is with them, that is within them, and around them.

Angels also help us throughout our lives whenever we need help, whenever we ask for it sincerely, and when we open ourselves to receiving it. It's not always the help we want. It's not always the answers we want. It doesn't always come in the form that we want. But it is there. And it is just what we need to help us through whatever it is that we're facing.

Three short stories about this... The first comes from my father when he was married and had six kids, me included, and we were on a road trip from Florida to New England. Both of my mother's parents had died when she was in her early twenties. My father's father had died recently before this event that my father was describing. He was feeling a little overwhelmed and burdened by the responsibility that he was shouldering and carrying. And he remembers thinking on this drive, "What if the car breaks down? Who would I call?"

That night, sleeping, he had a dream. And he dreamed that he was driving along the road heading up north, and a car full of all of us. And he noticed over to the side of the road, there was a great big tractor, and there was a man, strong and robust man driving the tractor. And my dad looked at the man, and the man looked at him and smiled. And it's then that my dad recognizes him – it's his father! A younger more robust version of the man he was used to seeing, but it was his father. And my father woke up from that dream, knowing deep down inside that his father was there for him in just the way that he was needed.

The second story about angels being there when we need them is a little more playful. You know, I sent out an email letting you know what the topic of today's message would be, and one person sent back an email with stories from 8 and 9-year-old kids about angels. She said, see if there's anything in here you can use for Sunday. Two just warm ups, then three short ones that describe how angels help us...

From Molly, age 8: "I hear angels all the time in my dreams, and I'm sticking with that no matter how many people tell me I'm crazy."

From Olive, age 9: "Everybody's got it all wrong. Angels don't wear halos anymore. I forget why, but scientists are working on it."

8-year-old Henry says: "My guardian angel helps me with math. But he's not much good for science."

And then two more...

Vicky, age 8: "Some of the angels are in charge of helping heal sick animals and pets. And if they don't make the animals get better, they help the kids get over it."

And then Katelynn, age 9: "My angel is my grandma who died last year. She got a big head start on helping me while she was still down here on earth."

We can all get a big head start by helping each other while we're down here on earth.

And one last little story about angels helping us... This is from my life, from a number of years ago – can't remember how many – but it's when I had and was driving a motorcycle. Some of you may have heard some of my motorcycle stories. This was when I had a Honda 360, and I was driving down the freeway between Santa Rosa and Petaluma, going probably about the speed limit, hopefully. All of a sudden, I just felt an uneasy sense. I don't think I actually felt a wobble, or if I thought I felt a wobble. But, I slowed down immediately and started pulling over into the breakdown lane, and then my back tire blew! Not a good thing when you have only two tires in the first place. I was going so slowly at that point that I was able to keep the bike upright. So, I was quite shaken.

Within 30 seconds, a pickup truck pulled over in front of me. Two guys got out. They had a ramp in the back of their pickup truck. And they had the knowledge, and the desire, and the strength to help me. In a moment, they just whipped that bike up the ramp into the back of the pickup truck, tied it in, drove me to the Honda dealer in Petaluma... and that's the end of that story! Except that that was a long time ago, and I still remember that experience.

Angels come in many forms, all sizes and shapes and ages. They come from within us, and among us, and from beyond us. They're here to help us.

The fourth way that angels help us... they help us celebrate! Angels feel joy to an exponential degree of what we are capable of feeling. But when something happens, large or small, that makes our hearts sing, that touches us, that makes us happy – the angels are happy too. And their happiness touches us in such a way that our joy grows, and expands, and fills us, to the degree that we will let it.

Lord, send thy angels to lead us. Send thy angels to teach us. Send thy angels to inspire us, what we shall say, what we shall think, and what we shall do.

Amen.

This sermon text was transcribed from an mp3 audio recording also available at www.sfswedenborgian.org.

Reverend Dr. Rachel Rivers is pastor at the San Francisco Swedenborgian Church since 1990. She graduated from the denomination's seminary in 1983 and was ordained on July 3rd of that year. When she first began reading Swedenborgian theology over 25 years ago, she found that it opened her mind to new vistas of understanding and encouraged her heart to open as well. All of these years later, the experience of reading Emanuel Swedenborg's theological works continues to be true for her, and she says she has as much to learn now as when she first began.

What excites her most about what Swedenborgian theology has to offer is its inclusive scope and the depth of its spiritual understanding. She says she would not embrace a faith that believes that its message is the one and only way of truth and its adherents the only ones who will find God. She believes Swedenborg's articulation of Christianity clarifies that God's love and truth is for everyone, and that there are many different ways of believing that can lead one to the good of life. For example, from a Swedenborgian understanding, Christ's words, "I am the way", means that Love is the way. Love is the essence of life itself, and truth is love coming into existence, into form. Truth leads us to love, and we are here on earth in order to love, and to grow in our capacity to love.

Reverend Rachel says, "It is a joy in my life to be a part of the San Francisco Swedenborgian Church community. I appreciate the warm and simple beauty of its sanctuary and I appreciate the rich complexity, sincerity and good-heartedness of its congregation. We are a community of spiritual seekers who find that exploring Swedenborg's insights into Christianity and sharing in our journeys enriches our experience of the Divine. Please feel welcome to worship with us any Sunday morning at 11 AM."

You may contact her by phone at 415-346-6466, ext. 12 or via email at rivers@sfswedenborgian.org. She is usually at the church office Wednesdays & Thursdays, and Saturdays & Sundays.