

January at the Movies, III
City of Angels: Angels and Things Unseen

1 Peter 1: 3 – 12

Today is week three in our series “January at the Movies”, a sermon series in which we’re looking at themes in some popular films that are also found in the Bible. It’s been a kind of a dialogue with our culture, and I hope you are enjoying it. I know I am!

The film I chose for this weekend is a bit different than our first two films (and next week’s). For one thing, it is a bit older – **City of Angels** was released in 1998, and is actually a remake of a 1987 German film called “**Wings of Desire**”. I’ll take a little bit of time this morning to look at *City of Angels*, but I actually chose this film more as a representation of a *genre* of films that we seem to be seeing more and more of recently – i.e., films with the theme of Immortality, particularly the fascination of our culture with immortal supernatural beings – real and imaginary...angels, demons, vampires, ghosts, and all the rest.

I think the whole Vampire thing – which seems to be everywhere these days - in films, TV shows, books – boils down to this theme of immortality. Like, which would you choose? The down side of being a vampire is the blood sucking part, but *they get to live forever*. Is that a good or bad thing? That is a question that lies at the heart of most of these movies, and it is also a central question in *City of Angels*.

I stopped by Barnes and Noble the other day and I saw a sign promoting an event that they were hosting yesterday (*this*) morning called “Angels Everywhere”. A woman with a degree of “ATP” (I discovered, is Angel Therapy Practitioner) was there offering “Free Angel Card Readings”. I’ll come back to this later on; but if nothing else, hey, we’re current here in our sermons!

As I mentioned, *City of Angels* came out in 1998, which was right in the middle of the nine year run of a very popular TV show, *Touched by an Angel*. That show aired until 2003. In that light, the thought did occur to me that this film – especially in the beginning – might have been better titled ‘*Stalked By an Angel*’, but that’s just me. It was just a little bit creepy watching Nicholas Cage spying on this woman...

Meg Ryan stars as Maggie Rice, a heart surgeon who does some serious soul-searching after she loses a patient on her operating table. In that context she asks, “What if we're not the ones really

January at the Movies, III
City of Angels: Angels and Things Unseen

in control?” one of many significant theological questions raised in the film. This question attracts the attention of the angel *Seth*, played by Nicholas Cage. At first, he’s intrigued by Maggie. Eventually, that intrigue turns to romantic interest, then love. But she’s a human and he’s an angel. What’s an angel to do?

Enter Dennis Franz as Nathaniel Messenger, (now, this is a cute play on words, as the Greek word for angel – *angelos* – literally means ‘messenger’). Mr. Messenger is a feisty heart patient that lets Seth in on his deep secret. He was a former angel who gave up his spiritual existence in order to become human, fall in love, and experience everything we humans do, including death.

[**show clip...]

“*Some things are true whether you believe them or not.*” If Seth wants to follow in Nate’s footsteps, he needs to exercise “the most incredible gift ever given” – i.e., free will. He needs to “fall,” (interesting choice of words!) and fall in love with Maggie. The scene where Seth makes that choice is one of several very moving points in the film. The ultimate outcome of his choice is everything, and nothing, that he expected it to be. Remember, as I also mentioned earlier, the real theme of this film is *immortality*. And the film centers around a question, “Which is greater, love or immortality?”

It becomes apparent in the plot of the film that Seth can choose, but he has to choose one or the other. He can either experience *immortality*, or he can experience *love*. Now, I’m not going to kill this flick based on its theology, I know some of you enjoyed it. And as a love story, if you like that kind of thing it was ... nice.

But I think a word of caution is in order about learning theology from Hollywood. There is a kind of ‘folk religion’ out there, in our world, that runs through many of these films, TV productions, and so forth, which in some places clearly contradicts the teachings of Jesus and the Scriptures. Many films portray Spirituality in ways that people would probably *like* it to be. A spirituality where everybody is right, where everybody goes to heaven (except the *most* terrible people), where ‘Salvation’ is based on our works (and ‘good’ and ‘bad’ are relative terms – because God grades on a curve), a spirituality I which God is, generally speaking, an impersonal

January at the Movies, III
City of Angels: *Angels and Things Unseen*

force (hence the need for intermediaries like angels, and departed spirits), where there is no need for Jesus, and so forth. That's the spiritual world of Hollywood.

Ultimately, how we experience and process these films and their messages (which are in there!) – is going to be based on what we consider to be our ultimate source of authority. So, for myself, as a Christian, I need more than a feeling of 'Oh, that sounds like a good or noble idea' to accept something as the *truth*. My authority, for faith and practice, is the Scripture, and I have many reasons for believing that; it is not blind faith, or simply because that's what I grew up with. (If you're interested in what some of those reasons are, you can look on our Website in the sermon archives at a series of messages I gave last summer called "Why I Believe". Two of those messages were specifically about "Why I Trust the Bible".)

So, if the Scriptures are my standard for truth, then it stands to reason that not everything *can* be true. *City of Angels* raises some good questions, some good issues, and it is entertaining, but it is not something that I'd want to base my life – my eternity – upon.

The line, uttered by the 'fallen angel' in the diner ("...*some things are true whether you believe them or not*") is a good starting point for talking about some issues that the film brings up, issues on which the Bible sheds some light. That is really a pretty deep and culturally penetrating statement, that probably implies more than the screenwriter intended it to. Because what it is really saying is that our personal experience is not the bottom line of truth...I'm not the final judge of truth, nor are you. And it implies that there is a *Source* of truth that stands *outside* of my own limited field of reference. Whether I believe or not, does not change what is true or false. Interesting.

When it comes to *angels* we can see this dichotomy between what we humans have speculated and fantasized about, and what the Scripture actually teaches. The problem is that angels in the Scriptures are very mysterious beings, and we really don't know very much about them. There are some passages that just beg for further information, but we don't have it. And when people try to 'fill in those blanks', many times they end up going too far, and crossing some lines – meaning that their 'explanations' contradict things that are *clearly* taught in the Bible. There are

January at the Movies, III
City of Angels: Angels and Things Unseen

many things that we just don't know, will likely *never* know, and probably *can't* know. At least in this life. But that's a hard reality for us humans to accept sometimes.

Well, the Bible definitely teaches that angels exist. They are not humans, never were and never will be. Neither will you nor I ever *become* an angel. Angels are a separate created order of sentient beings, present in Creation from very early on, even before the creation of humans. Like all things God created, they were created in a wonderful way, for a purpose. There is reason to believe from Scripture that the number of angels is fixed – i.e., they are not increasing or decreasing in number, but there are a lot of them.

The Scriptures speak of a whole range of spirits that God has created – things we can't see - including both good and evil angels, as well as special categories such as cherubim, seraphim, and the archangel. Angels are mentioned at least 108 times in the Old Testament and 165 times in the New Testament¹.

In Hebrews 1:14 we have one of those intriguing angelic job description statements:

Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?

So, angels are essentially “ministering spirits,” but what does that actually mean? Ministering in what way? Well, we see some examples of that, but there is little reason to conclude that their work is limited to these sorts of things. Their work ranges (in Scripture) from being ‘heralds’ – i.e., the ones who announce important happenings. One reason why we see angels depicted on Christmas cards is that they are so prevalent in the story of the Incarnation – announcing Good News to Zechariah, Mary, Joseph, the Shepherds, possibly the Magi, and some others.

We see them also in the Resurrection – *announcing* to the visitors to the Tomb the fact that Jesus was no longer there, and why not.

We also see angels ministering to Jesus in the wilderness at the end of his forty day temptation, we see them releasing Peter and Paul and others from prisons as the Gospel began to be preached

¹ (Chafer, Systematic Theology, II, 3)

January at the Movies, III
City of Angels: Angels and Things Unseen

and persecution resulted. We find them leading worship in awesome scenes around the Heavenly Throne, we find them waging war against other spiritual domains on this earth (something that Frank Peretti used, and abused in his overly long series starting with 'This Present Darkness').

The Bible says, as we saw, that angels are *spirits*, however, it is also clear that they can only be in one place at a time. They must have some localized presence. Angels can take on the appearance of human beings when the occasion demands. So we read in Hebrews 13:2,

“Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.”

So, apparently, Angels are among us, often unknown to us, fulfilling their commission to “minister to the believers”. On the other hand, their appearance is sometimes unveiled, and in those times they are seen in dazzling brightness and blazing glory (Matthew 28:2-4). A number of times in the Book of Revelation an angel brings a message to John, and his response is to fall down before them in fear and awe. He has to be reminded more than once: ‘Stop! I am only the messenger... don’t worship *me!*’

But it’s that interaction with believers that people want to know more about, and it’s why we have a cottage industry of things like ‘Angel Therapy Practitioners’, Angel Card Readers, and the like. Frankly, I think the issue is that we (humans) want to be the ones who determine what that ‘ministry’ should look like. You know what I’m saying? We want to be the ones who decide what the angels should be doing for us. And those demands, (like, contacting departed spirits, telling our future, giving us advice in love and relationships, asking for healing, etc.) I’m sorry to tell you, are not typically supported in the Bible, and this is where some people go outside the faith.

I looked up a Web site of an Angel Therapy Practitioner. Her services include (but are not limited to) teaching people to ‘listen to the voices of *their* angels’, mediation (i.e., contacting spirits of deceased humans for messages), healing (of many sorts), guidance in the areas of romance, sex, career, finances, etc.

January at the Movies, III
City of Angels: Angels and Things Unseen

Many of these services counter *specific* prohibitions in the Bible, as well as warnings. Others are simply unnecessary – healing, for example. We don't need a celestial intermediary to pray for healing for us. Jesus invites us to 'cast our cares on *him*', he promises that he is *always* ready to hear our prayers, to welcome us, and to forgive us, to work his will in our lives. We can trust him.

One of the big themes in the Book of Hebrews is the supremacy of Jesus over all the 'competition'. One of those 'pretenders' are angels. (So, this is nothing new!) And the writer of this book in our New Testament asks the question, why would someone worship angels, or elevate them to a position that they were not meant to fill, when we can go straight to God in Jesus Christ? So in Hebrews 1:13 we read:

To which of the angels did God ever say, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet"?

And in Colossians 2:18 this warning:

Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you. Such people also go into great detail about what they have seen, and their unspiritual minds puff them up with idle notions.

Not much has changed. I read this 'question and answer' exchange under "Frequently Asked Questions" on the Website of an Angel Therapy Practitioner"

Q: What about fallen angels? Is there such a thing? Aren't you worried that the devil will disguise himself as a beautiful angel and trick you?

A: As a clairvoyant, _____ can see the spirit world in great detail. She says, "There are beings that are referred to as 'fallen angels.' In reality, they aren't angels at all. Angels are glowing beings, filled with the inner radiance of God's love. Angels have soft, feathery wings. Angels always talk about, and act from, Love. The "fallen angels," in contrast, have no light in them. They have short, bat-like bony wings and clawed talons. They're commonly called "gargoyles." These beings aren't creations of God's love; they're creations of man's fear.

Now, remember what I said about our source of authority? I'm not saying that she is *wrong*, but I can confidently say that she is directly contradicting scripture here.

January at the Movies, III
City of Angels: Angels and Things Unseen

And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants also masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve. (2 Corinthians 11:14)

The Bible teaches that some angels *have* fallen, not into enlightenment (i.e., Seth in our movie), but due to their unwillingness to be obedient to God. They were cast out of heaven, and are now servants of Satan to resist goodness in all forms.

In Revelation 12 (which, admittedly is a highly symbolic passage) we have a summary of other Scripture teaching and tradition regarding the spiritual state of our world...

And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.

Again, people may say that they don't believe this, many people don't *want* to believe this. Maybe we'd all prefer a 'kinder gentler version' of the spiritual landscape... and fine. But as I would ask anyone who says things with confidence about the nature of the universe we live in, "what is the basis for your belief?" Where are you getting it? Is it a trustworthy source? Are you willing to bet your life on it? "*Some things are true whether you believe them or not.*" (Mr. Messenger!)

I have to say a quick word or two about a very popular concept as well here... so, what do the Scriptures say about the idea of 'guardian angels'? Well, it's easy to see how that concept would emerge from that passage we read earlier – about angels being 'ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation', although that passage in itself doesn't necessarily lead to the conclusion that an angel is assigned full time to every believer.

But that's not the only statement like that. In Matthew 18:10, Jesus says of children:

January at the Movies, III
City of Angels: Angels and Things Unseen

“See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven”.

That seems to imply that there are angels ‘assigned’ at least, to *children*. But again, we need to exercise caution in our understanding of what their *task* is. It is *not*, apparently, to keep them from physical harm. Because we know the reality of this world. Perhaps it is to protect their hearts or their souls from the terrible evils of this world... I don’t really know. But something is going on there, according to Jesus.

We’d like to know more, but beyond this is speculation.

So, The unnamed angels who appear most often in Scripture carry out a variety of tasks—all designed to serve God...

Worship and praise - (Isaiah 6:1-3; Revelation 4-5).

Revealing - Guiding - Angels gave instructions to Joseph about the birth of Jesus (Matthew 1-2), to the women at the tomb, to Philip (Acts 8:26), and to Cornelius (Acts 10:1-8).

Providing physical needs such as food for Hagar (Genesis 21:17-20), Elijah (1 Kings 19:6), and Christ after His temptation (Matthew 4:11).

Protecting as in the cases of Daniel and the lions, and his three friends in the fiery furnace (Daniel 3 and 6).

Delivering - Getting God's people out of danger once they're in it. Angels released the apostles from prison in Acts 5, and repeated the process for Peter in Acts 12.

Strengthening and encouraging - Angels strengthened Jesus after His temptation (Matt 4:11), encouraged the apostles to keep preaching after releasing them from prison (Acts 5:19-20), and told Paul that everyone on his ship would survive the impending shipwreck (Acts 27:23-25).

Answering prayer - God often uses angels as His means of answering the prayers of His people (Daniel 9:20-24; 10:10-12; Acts 12:1-17).

And this is not an exhaustive list.²

² Author: Dr. John Bechtel.

January at the Movies, III
City of Angels: Angels and Things Unseen

The thing is, as much as we'd like to... it is not up to us to initiate the contact. Our task as believers, as followers of Jesus Christ is to *keep our eyes on him*. Our privilege is, as children of God, to trust him to take care of us – whatever the means God chooses to utilize. And to live in the sure knowledge that every hair on our heads is numbered, our days are known, and we are loved and always welcome into God's glorious presence. Now and forever.

Amen!