Sunday, March 11, 1973
ANGELS AND THE TRANSCENDENT DIMENSION (No. 1 in a Series)
Luke 22:39-46

We hear a lot about demons, but what about angels? Angels are mentioned in the Bible as much as demons if not more so. In the scripture passage just read, Luke says that while Jesus prayed before his coming trial and crucifixion, there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him.

In other places in the New Testament, angels intervene in moments of crisis. They also bring special messages as they announce the birth of Jesus and John the Baptist. An angel warns Joseph to flee to Egypt from Bethlehem to save the life of the infant Jesus. And according to the Gospel writers, angels rolled the stone away from the tomb at the resurrection of Jesus.

What are we to make of angels? Perhaps as in the case of demons, angels are symbolic of a deeper reality, another dimension in our living which we sometimes call the “spiritual,” or the “transcendent,” or “transpersonal.“ The imagery of angels signifies that there are powers of God at work in the world that our ordinary language cannot describe. Or to put it another way, the imagery or belief in angels is an attempt to cope with the mystery of God at work in the world and among people. Angels are a part of our attempt to describe the “supernatural” dimension.

There is a transcendent or spiritual or supernatural dimension in our living and beyond our lives whether we call it the power of God or something else. During this season of Lent and especially in this sermon series, we are going to take a fresh look at this dimension, the evidence for it, what our Christian faith has to say about it, and its implications for our living — what part it can play in our day to day living.

Today in this first sermon of the series, I want to lay the groundwork for the next four sermons. It is a way of introducing the subject.

I. First of all, to talk of the spiritual, the transcendent, to speak of angels, means that we have to continually take V· a fresh look at the world, at ourselves and at God.

There was a time not too long ago when the reigning con-ception of nature and the world, including all of creation was seen as being one of a rather simple order. People believed, and some still do, that the world was largely know- able and that soon through science and other fields of knowledge we would know just about all there was to know and what we wouldn’t know we weren’t supposed to know anyway or wasn’t important enough to know.

The world, creation itself, was seen as being rather shallow, closed and not too mysterious. Science was expected to find its final explanations relatively close to the surface of things.

People in general saw all of creation, the earth included, as a kind of fixed, closed and largely unchanging, smoothly running, predictable system. A number of so-called natural laws were developed to explain the way the system worked. Creation was seen as being complete.

This kind of worldview permeated almost everything. In the field of philosophy, grand systems were constructed which supposedly explained all things. Everything could be understood in terms of a certain system. In economics, both communism and capitalism were thought of as

complete and finished systems. In religion, a similar kind of pattern existed. God was thought of as static, unchanging. It too had a closed world view.

Creation was often seen as a kind of large machine which God kept running according to certain determined rules and laws and therefore it always ran pretty much the same way. All things were predictable, “surprise-free.”

The world was seen as having boundaries. Creation had boundaries. God had boundaries. Human beings had boundaries beyond which we could not go.

Much of our education was designed to prepare persons for life in a relatively stable, static and secure environment. And we believed that if only everyone could be educated in the right way, most of our problems would be solved. Only in science fiction did we hear about mysterious other worlds and strange creatures and weird happenings — but that was only someone’s wild imagination. After all, we human beings are rational creatures and even religion became mostly rational.

Today however, in science and other disciplines world is no longer seen as simple, but infinitely complex and full of deep mystery. In fact, the more we study the material and spiritual order L the more the degree of complexity and variety in creation seems to increase. The more deeply one penetrates reality or substance, the more complex it becomes.

We are learning more and more that we do not live in a closed, fixed world, but an open, ever changing, evolving, emerging creation. Increasing what we know, does not seem to decrease what we do not know. Rather it’s the other way around — increasing what we know only increases what we do not know.

Creation is not experienced as deterministic. Events are brought about by both cause and effect and by change and by forces even unknown to us. Events are only partly pre-dictable and are always partly unpredictable. Einstein used to say there is an element of caprice in all of creation.

The more we explore space, the more we realize there may exist realms of physical and spiritual reality with extension throughout space-time-depth of which we are not aware. All of the men who have been to the moon have come back changed persons in a spiritual sense. They have experienced the deep mystery all around them.

People who have delved deeply into the processes of creation like Loren Eiseley have also been touched by the mysteriousness of creation and of the continuing creation. One of Loren Eiseley’s latest books is entitled — THE UNEXPECTED UNIVERSE. He shows how we are beginning to discover the surprises in the universe, the things we had not expected.

There is something about this creation, about life, that slips through the fingers of the mind. There is something beyond the rational that points toward an unexpected, unforeseeable future and to a present in which life is strangely mingled with death.

We do not live in a “surprise-free” world, that is a world which present trends continue to unfold without the intrusion of totally new and unexpected factors. One of the elements that keeps history from being a bore is that it is full of surprises.

Now, what about religion, particularly the Christian faith?

For a while, Christianity was prized by many mostly for the sake of its ethical teachings or because of the impressive figure of Jesus Christ. These are a very important part of our faith, but it's definitely the religious side, worship, prayer and the rest that were frequently regarded with some suspicion, even by some people within the church.

It was furthermore believed by some that we had entered a new kind of age where human beings had outgrown religion --the truly secular society.

But now there is evidence that secularization may not have been as all-embracing as some had thought; that the supernatural has survived in the hidden nooks and crannies of the culture. Some for that matter are not all that hidden. We are now again aware that sizable numbers of modern contemporary human beings have not lost a propensity for awe, for the uncanny, for the spiritual, for the transcendent dimension, and maybe even for angels.

Note these items from recent news accounts.

1. There's an increase in interest in all kinds of mystic-ism. Yoga is on the increase — and if you talk to persons who attend yoga classes, they will tell you they go not only for the physical exercise, but also for the meditation and prayer-like mood of the class. They go for worship. They go for religious reasons — to experience God through that discipline.

2. In last week's issue of the NATIONAL OBSERVOR, there was a feature s1tory with the headline — "HIGH, BUT WITHOUT DRUGS." The story related how people are altering consciousness without drugs — having a kind of religious experience. The story began, "Chuckle if you will at talk of mystic reveries, visions, and the ecstasies of transcenden-tal meditation, scientists did too at first."

And the article went on — Recently eleven top flight scientists demonstrated their interest at an unprecedented conference on altered states of consciousness, and they told some bizarre tales. The persons at the conference testified in many ways to a human being's ability to achieve ecstasy and euphoria without drugs. Fasting, frantic dancing, sensory deprivation, chanting and music have induced altered states of consciousness.

3. Another news story describes how in Wilton, Connecticut, in a dimly lighted room the young people stood in a semi-circle erect as fence posts. Eyes closed, they held their hands with palms pressed together in prayer. For minutes there was nothing to be heard but the occasional distant barking of a dog. Then from behind them came the sound, at first low, then rising in volume until it resounded from the beamed ceiling like a fog-horn — 0000000000MMMMMMMMMMM!

The sound from the Sanskrit word "Aum," is said to be the divine syllable that accompanied the creation of the universe. It is intoned every Monday night during meditations held by an Indian guru. The sessions attract so many adherents that they fill two floors of the red frame house.

4. A news story in the Lincoln Journal of March 3, 1973, reported that classes in Transcendental Meditation will begin in Lincoln later in March. Transcendental Meditation is based on the theory that there exists in every human being the constant source of intelligence, energy, and happiness. This source can be drawn upon by persons through the systematic practice of meditation which brings the individual into increasingly refined states of awareness. Translate for "meditation," "prayer," and for energy "an angel strengthening a person."

On the same subject another article in a recent issue of the Yale University Alumni magazine reported that over 1000 students and faculty at Yale are part of the Transcendental Meditation Group. To show how much times have changed, that Transcendental Society now occupies a suite of rooms which were formerly the offices of the S. D. S. Students for a Democratic Society.

5. Along the same line an article in the March 5, Lincoln Star by the Associated Press religion writer George Cornell, reports that across the country after a period of decline, prayer is regarded by many authorities as now making a strong comeback. It's a turn to the living roots of truly fruitful action. The resurgence shows up in the spread of prayer houses, prayer retreats and shared prayer groups. People all about us are hungry for the dimensions of mystery, for experience of the spirit.

6. Added to all the various kinds of meditation and prayer groups and other forms of mysticism, is the growing human potential movement which has a deep and transcendent quality 5. to it. Centers are springing up all over the country and people pay well for the privilege of participating in sensory awareness, meditation, and a new understanding of themselves and the world. They want to be "turned on," or as we Christians would say, converted, changed, saved, liberated. People want and need angels to strengthen them.

All of these examples show that people are searching for ways to experience and know God and to connect in some way to the transcendent dimension.

It's also related to the hunger we all have to make some sense out of life. We need help in dealing with life's mysteries and tragedies. That's why Jesus was praying in the Garden of Gethsemane so intensely. If he was going to carry through with his mission and ministry, he knew he couldn't do it alone. He needed God's guidance and power. He needed angels to strengthen him.

And not only when we face difficult decisions or tragedy, but at other times as well, we human beings need moments of rapture, peak experiences. We need those experiences I in which we can sense the presence of a power which urges human life toward a richer harmony. This is part of what worship is supposed to be. We need spiritual sources of exaltation. Human life often gains the greatest part of its richness from the capacity for ecstasy, any experience of stopping outside the taken-for-granted reality of everyday life, any openness to the mystery that surrounds us on all side.

Too often we have only shaped our lives around the practical, the utilitarian, devoid of dreams and vision, higher concerns and enthusiasm and angels.

Now all of this is not to condone all that is presently going on that seems to have a religious flavor to it, even though much of it is a judgment on the church for neglecting an important aspect 0f the faith. Too much in recent times we in the church have mistakenly assumed that most people were basically skeptical, objective, purely rational, somewhat disengaged, "cool" toward religion and other forms of meaning. Instead of getting Christianity without religion, we have witnessed the revival of religion without Christianity.

We human beings are more essentially religious than many have assumed. We thirst for mystery, meaning, prayer, community, and even for some sort of ritual.

This should not surprise us who call ourselves Christian, for our faith has always in its fullness emphasized the “transcendent” or spiritual dimension as well as the immanent or physical dimension, whether we use the imagery of angels or not. Jesus was a deeply spiritual person.

Furthermore, our faith underscores the fact that the practice of religion, properly understood, is an important dimension of human freedom and dignity. It’s part of what makes us a total person so that we’re not flat or one-sided.

Sure, religion is a crutch, but what makes us think we don’t limp. Like Jesus and others, all of us need angels to strengthen us.

In future sermons in this series. we shall explore how this can be more effectively done through prayer, worship, and how one becomes a more saintly or spiritual person, and what some of the gifts of the spirit are. Amen.

Discussion questions:

1. How do you view the world, creation, reality? Do you believe everything is pre-determined, or do you believe the creation is open, still evolving and only partly predictable?

2. Describe some transcendent experiences in your own life. When have you felt as if angels were strength-ening you? What have been some of your highest spiritual experiences?

3. Are you yourself in search of a deeper spiritual life? What kind of person would you like to be? How can the church aid you in your search?

4. What parts or points in the sermon would you like clarified in future sermons in this series? Are there some additional questions you would like discussed in a sermon? If so, list them as they are discussed in the group so that the minister can deal with them.