

Sermon

It seems so beautiful to choose for a short baptism sermon the words from Psalm 91:

“God commands his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.”

We all know how many stones there can be in the way...
at which we can dash our feet and hurt ourselves.

We know how heavily pain and risk and danger can weigh in our lives.
We know how often we cannot protect ourselves and our loved ones against the terrible blows of fate.

We know how helpless one can feel.

And therefore we need these images of guardian angels to carry us through.

And talking about feet not being hurt by the stones of our life journey can help us to believe in God's protection of our lives against all blows and odds.

Parents cannot guard every path their child takes.

And the idea that the child has an angel can free us parents from excessive worry.

Our children can grow up happily because God and his or her angels are watching over them and leading them.

When we – the parent generation – look back at our lives, we may find a lot of tracks the angels have left there.

There were angels making us feel at home,
helping us become strong and confident human beings,
letting us experience a sense of wholeness and healing.

Angels are messengers of a loving and caring God.

They show us the way to God and open our eyes to the mystery of God.

Angels create the connection between heaven and earth, between God and humankind.

In a fascinating Old Testament story they climb down Jacob's ladder from heaven and fix God's message in Jacob's heart.

We all know that the guardian angel does not protect us from all harm and evil. That would be too nice and easy.

But our angel, the messenger of God, is there, when we have to face pain and difficulties.

The angel makes sure that our inmost soul remains safe and sound...

...that even after darkness and despair, after having gone through hell, we can hopefully and trustfully envision the future.

Such knowledge is important and precious – especially when we think of children whose young lives don't begin all easy and happy...

We must understand that talking about angels, believing in the presence of God, does not mean that our children will stay far away from danger and harm. It means that we and they are offered the ability to see the traces of the angels and the godly care beyond the hardships and sorrows.

With angels at our side we will be able to cope with whatever life holds in store for us.

With angels at our side, watching over us, carrying us, leading us – we will be able to let go of the sadness, the fear, the despair, the hopelessness.

With angels at our side, we can discover the forces of healing and grace that we all bear in our hearts and souls:

our children just as much as we ourselves... everybody.

We must only allow God and his messengers to touch our lives with genuine and unconditional love.

The Bible shows us how to speak about angels... in order to understand God and God's effect on people.

Often images are used:

a being that surrounds us,
an experience of loving closeness,
encouragement,

an inner light,

or a shining spiritual being.

Whether dreams, or visions, or visible things,

all images help to understand the healing and protective closeness of God.

One famous example is the story of Jacob and the ladder from heaven, on which angels walk up and down in order to connect Jacob with God.

Jacob flees from his brother Esau.

He is afraid.

Jacob had betrayed Esau, had stolen his older brother's right of the firstborn and the blessing that usually is passed on by the father to the oldest son in the family.

Understandably Esau is mad with rage.

Jacob – on the run – has to spend the night in the middle of the desert and uses a rock as a pillow.

There he has a dream:

there was a ladder reaching from the earth right up into heaven.

God's angels were ascending and descending on it.
And God,
standing at the top of the ladder promises to Jacob that he will be with
him,
that he will keep him wherever he goes,
that he will give him a place to stay and a home,
and that he will not leave Jacob before all this has come true.

The angles in the story create a connection between heaven and earth.
They open heaven to the one who is on the run, to whom the future seems
dark and done.

All of a sudden the life of this person who fearfully runs away
takes on a greater dimension.

Jacob's horizon widens;
and he now knows that his life will succeed,
that God will be with him and fulfil his promises.

Where Jacob has given up all hope, angels cross his path and shed a new
and brighter light on his whole situation.

The dead end becomes the starting point of a new beginning.
Jacob's soul recovers, and the desert loses its threatening harshness.
Jacob still has to make his way through it,
but he now knows for sure that God is at his side.

The stone which Jacob chooses as a pillow
can be an image of the many stones that lie on our path
that we run up against and fall over.

The stumbling block becomes a strong foundation for the ladder to
heaven...

Where Jacob stumbles, falls and fails, the angels open heaven to him.

Wherever we struggle with stones on our paths
we may find chances to widen our view,
review our direction and discover sense and purpose.

It is not without reason that at the end of the story Jacob takes the stone,
sets it upright, and anoints it with oil.

It becomes for him a reminder of the time and place at which God had
spoken to Jacob and promised him fulfilment, protection and success.

Jacob pours oil over the hard and heavy stone.

He deals with the rough and hard parts of his life gently and tenderly...

...and so the place of fear and hardship becomes the turning point towards
fullness and blessing.

The stone becomes a symbol of God's blessing that flows over us and fills us
with warmth and light when everything around us and inside us feels like
stone.

And often you can only see in retrospect how stumbling blocks became places of blessings.

On this Sunday of 4 baptisms the story of Jacob shows us that angels are always beside us when we stumble and struggle...

When we fall on our face, the heavens above us can open widely and fill our lives with grace...

...sometimes differently from what we may have expected, but always full of promise...

We don't have to be perfect... nor blameless... nor ever so good...

we just have to be open, receptive and willing to move on...

...on this path God's angels are showing us

...which leads ever closer to God .

We may stumble and fall and wonder and worry many, many times in life, we may make mistakes,

we may run away or feel like running away,

we may not see a way out and get stuck in the desert,

we may live through rough times and dark times,

and we may feel so terribly abandoned and alone,

but on the whole

we have God's angels at our side

who guard us in all our ways,

who bear us up

and keep us safe.

Amen.