

*This sermon was preached by Professor Paul Zell on Wednesday, September 29, 2010, at the St. Michael and All Angels festival service held in the chapel at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. Professor Zell teaches New Testament and Homiletics at the seminary.*

Psalm 91

“He commands his angels concerning you!”

Dear Father in heaven, look down from above,  
Bless Mommy and Daddy and those who I love.  
Let angels watch over my slumber and when,  
The morning is breaking, awake me. Amen.

My first bedtime prayer. Perhaps much like your first bedtime prayer. A two-year-old finds comfort for the night, knowing the love of the heavenly Father and trusting that the words of the psalmist still hold true: “HE COMMANDS HIS ANGELS CONCERNING YOU to guard you in all your ways.”

Likewise the 22-year-old Marine as he heads out on another assignment. He’s glad for his armor-plated truck and his armored vest. He’d never leave his helmet back in the barracks. But more than anything he is counting on God’s words: “HE COMMANDS HIS ANGELS CONCERNING YOU to guard you in all your ways.”

It’s for the mom passing the hours in the hospital lounge, her infant undergoing life-threatening surgery. It’s for the fellow thinking about his grandchildren crossing streets or riding a school bus near their home hundreds of miles away. It’s for the young man pressing the accelerator to get up to freeway speed and merge with vehicles careening down the road at 75 miles per hour. It’s for the world traveler buckling himself in and ignoring the flight attendants as they explain what will happen if the plane goes down in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. “HE COMMANDS HIS ANGELS CONCERNING YOU to guard you in all your ways.”

Is there one angel assigned per person who will inherit salvation? You know, the proverbial guardian angel? Or are there many standing at their posts every moment of every day? And since these are spirit beings with no body, really, how many angels can dance on the head of a pin? Some questions we put aside when the Scriptures don’t answer them. But so many impressive answers are given.

- All-knowing and all-powerful God created each one, and afterwards he saw that each one was “very good.”
- The angels are invisible spirit beings, yet some have appeared as winged creatures; others as human beings so ordinary looking that “people have entertained (them) without knowing it” (Heb 13:2).
- They are not omniscient. For instance, they don’t know “that day or hour” when the Son of Man will return. Still they serve in the presence of God and have been commended for what they do know.
- A single angel can annihilate an entire army (2 Chron 32:21). A single one, Daniel learned, can “shut the mouths of lions” (Dan 6:22). Yet when Daniel saw the Ancient of Days upon his judgment seat, “thousands upon thousands” attending him (Dan 7:10), and St. John heard “ten thousand times ten thousand” (Rev 5:11).

So, brothers and sisters, when you turn off the light at night; when danger or disaster is near; when your mind races over what may happen to someone you love, let Psalm 91 be on the mind and heart: “No harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent. For HE COMMANDS HIS ANGELS CONCERNING YOU to guard you in all your ways!”

But “our struggle is not against flesh and blood,” is it? You and I are physical beings. We give thanks for the protection to life and limb afforded by “Michael and all angels.” But Scripture is clear. Our most treacherous enemy is not the defective heart valve that can take the life of a mother’s only child. It’s not the drunk driver speeding down a neighborhood street. It’s not mechanical failure on a jet plane or an improvised explosive device buried by a Taliban fighter. “Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph 6:12). The old evil foe means “deadly woe.” So do his unseen minions, fallen angels, the depths of whose wickedness you and I may never fully grasp.

- ✓ The devil was that snake in the garden. He asked, “Did God really say?” He claimed, “You will not surely die.” The woman fell to his deceit. So did the man. They both lost the image of God with which they were made. They were expelled from their home. They died.
- ✓ The devil is that bird hunter with his snare. He sets out the tasty seeds of his little lies and big lies. Makes what those lies promise look like exactly what is needed. He waits for hours, days, years, decades. Then he yanks the string, grabs his victim, and pummels him to death.
- ✓ What the devil spreads is a deadly pestilence. He gets his wickedness into the bloodstream, into the mind, into the

**Comment [g1]:** With each successive example, the introduction is not just some “cute” and “interesting” story somewhat remotely related to the message of the sermon. By striking near the heart of the sermon (and yet without giving everything away!), the preacher is giving us reason to follow him into the body of the sermon – even though in just a moment he is going to shift our thought to an even deeper reason to recognize the danger posed by the evil angels and to give thanks to God for the ministry of his good angels!

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**Comment [g2]:** Please note the memory device that Professor Zell has built into his sermon. In three places in his sermon he has lined up parallel points as a bulleted list. That could indeed prove an aid to committing that part of the sermon to memory. The mind’s eye sees the bullets as the mouth preaches them.

**Comment [g3]:** There is a bit of logical gap here. “But” doesn’t seem to quite carry enough weight to make the shift in thought that is being proposed here. We are being asked to move from visible, physical dangers, to invisible spiritual ones. The persistent and attentive listener will soon realize that a shift is taking place, but is there a danger that others might fall through the logical crack?

Especially in an inductive sermon (that slowly leads up to its key point) like this one, in which there is no “bill-boarding” of where we are going ahead of time, such transitions are especially critical. The hearers whose thinking takes them on a tangent may not even realize they are on a tangent since they haven’t been handed a complete road map ahead of time. That is not an argument against inductive preaching, but it testifies to a special challenge to anyone choosing an inductive path for his sermon.

**Comment [g4]:** Notice the vivid, clipped speech! This is often indicative of writing sermons for the ear, not writing essays for the eye. It’s how we often speak to one another in conversation. This points to a critical part of what homiletics is: the art of exalted conversation.

heart. So “a thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand” (Ps 91:7), annihilated from the disease of the one who was a murderer from the beginning.

✓ “Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Pt 5:8).

That snake; that sly murderer; that source of a deadly spiritual plague; that stalking beast is so evil, he takes this very word of God to tempt you and me to sin. “It is written,” he says, “He will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. They will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.” So go ahead, he says; have still another drink, just one more. So go ahead, hurry it along a little; those laws about speed limits and about texting while you’re driving are just silly. Go ahead; indulge yourself with that woman who is not your wife. Go ahead; take the money that’s not rightfully yours. No one will know. Go ahead; bypass that opportunity to hear or study the Scriptures. You’re one of the chosen ones, he whispers. Your God will still take care of you. You even have your guardian angels. That snake in the grass lies again. You fall yet again. Or so do I.

But then we see our Champion in the desert. Jesus Christ hears the devil misuse the psalm. Led by the Spirit he clarifies the Word of God. He pulls out the sword of the Spirit again and then he does it again and he holds the field for you and me. Satan retreats.

Then we watch as he trains up disciples. The seventy-two go from town to town and house to house. They warn. They speak of the kingdom and of peace with God. “The seventy-two return with joy and say, ‘Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name.’ He replies, ‘I saw Satan fall like lightning from the sky.’” What did Jesus see? Well, with the report from the seventy-two ringing in his ears and with every advance of the Word of God, our great Prophet saw what was going to happen at the culmination of his own earthly ministry. With his life lived holy to the very end; with himself offered up on the cross; with his resurrection Satan would experience a spectacular fall.

Now listen carefully. Holy angels guard us by testifying to this very truth:

- Isaiah cries out, “I am ruined!” A man of unclean lips, he’s seen the King who is Holy, Holy, Holy. “Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, ‘See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.’” (Is 6)
- “Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife,” the angel says, “because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” (Mt 1)
- “Do not be afraid,” the angel says, “for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said.” (Mt 28)
- “They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ‘Men of Galilee,’ they say, “‘why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.’” (Acts 1)

Angel messengers have testified to that atoning sacrifice on behalf of sinners; to the name of Jesus, the Savior; to his resurrection; to his return at which all of them will serve once again for his saving purposes. Their words too -- God’s words -- they protect you and me and countless others from doubt and confusion and fear. “HE COMMANDS HIS ANGELS CONCERNING YOU to guard you in all your ways!”

Psalms 91 is brilliantly arranged. At the start the psalmist confesses his own confidence: “I will say of the Lord, ‘He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.’” At the end the Lord himself speaks. He promises rescue and protection and salvation and even honor to everyone who calls on him. And in between, words for hearing and for believing and for singing and rejoicing. The Spirit’s writer addressing you, singular. It’s an assurance worth hearing one more time -- to the praise of our merciful, gracious God:

Surely he will save you from the fowler’s snare and from the deadly pestilence. He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart. You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday. A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. You will only observe with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked. If you make the Most High your dwelling — even the Lord, who is my refuge — then no harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent. For HE COMMANDS HIS ANGELS CONCERNING YOU to guard you in all your ways. (Ps 91:3-11)

**Comment [g5]:** Notice the clear and textual path Professor Zell uses to proclaim Christ from this Old Testament text. The use of this Psalm in the combat between Satan and the Valiant One who holds the field for us, provides the preacher his opportunity to proclaim he who is found in this Psalm as surely as he is found in John 3:16. How strange that it is Satan who provides for us the entree to proclaim the gospel clearly!

**Comment [g6]:** This comes from the gospel for the day.

The day’s gospel – to which all the day’s lessons correspond – provides to the one preaching in the context of the liturgy a second broad avenue to show how Christ is the heart of all Scripture and therefore also of this sermon.

**Comment [g7]:** As has been noted in all three sermons posted with this first key issue, here is the use in spoken communication of a threefold repetition to drive home a key point.

Such threefold repetitions are common features of spoken rhetoric since it depends on purposeful repetition to highlight and drive home key points. Two parts often have a feel of too little, and four or more can easily become pedantic. In classical rhetoric such repetition was called “anaphora.”

**Comment [g8]:** While not one of the more typical forms of conclusion, the text itself (or a portion of it) can often serve as a fitting way to close the sermon. In a very real sense, this type of conclusion gives the inspired text the last word!