

"WAITING FOR THE ANGELS"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
March 4, 1990

## "WAITING FOR THE ANGELS"

### INTRODUCTION

The scene is the wilderness. Jesus has been led there by the Spirit. Not by the devil, mind you, but by the Spirit. This is a necessary experience for Jesus if He is to fulfill God's plan. He must face the Temptor, for temptation is very much a part of human existence. Each of us must spend time in the wilderness...struggling with Satan...going "eye ball to eye ball" with the Devil.

After his famous expedition to the South Pole, Admiral Richard Byrd was asked by a man on a train, "And what did you miss the most down at the South Pole?"

Byrd replied that they had missed a lot of things. Some of them they really didn't mind missing, and others they did. He went on to say that he was discussing that very thing in the middle of the six months long Polar night with one of the Irishmen in the camp, a Jack O'Brien. Byrd asked, "Jack, what are you missing most from civilization?" O'Brien answered without any hesitation, "temptation".

### DEVELOPMENT

Temptation is a very real part of life. Temptation to stray from the values we hold dear. Temptation to take the short cuts, to avoid the struggle, to find the easy way through a situation. We all have to deal with the Temptor. In fact, it may be that temptation is essential to our growth, to our spiritual development. We struggle with our passions, our human drives, and out of that struggle comes character.

In the stories of the Desert Father there is one concerning Abbot John, the Dwarf. Abbot John prayed to the Lord that all passion be taken from him. And his prayer was granted. He became impassible. In this condition he went to one of the elders and said,

"You see before you a man who is completely at rest and has no temptations!"

The elder surprised him. Instead of praising him, the elder said,

"Go and pray to the Lord to command some struggle to be stirred up in you, for the soul is matured only in battle."

Abbot John did this, and when the temptations started up again, he did not pray that the struggle be taken away from him. Instead he prayed, "Lord, give me the strength to get through this fight."

The Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. How else could He know our situation, if He had not walked the valley that we walk? The Spirit led Him into the wilderness. It is a very familiar scene to us. Eric read it well to us a few moments ago. Jesus had been fasting. He was hungry. The devil came to Him and said,

"If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread."

Jesus gives us a hint that He is the Son of God by resisting the devil, saying, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God'".

Then the devil took Him to the Holy City, set Him on the pinnacle of the temple and said,

"If you are the Son of God, throw Yourself down; for it is written, 'He will give His angels charge of You', and 'on their hands they will bear You up, lest you strike your foot against a stone'".

Again Jesus provides us with a clue to His Sonship with God by resisting the devil saying, "Again, it is written, 'You shall not tempt the Lord Your God'".

Finally, the devil took Him to a very high mountain and showed Him the Kingdoms of this world and the glory of them, and he said to Him,

"All these I will give You, if you will fall down and worship me."

And Jesus said, "Begone Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord Your God and Him only shall You serve.'"

And now, notice how this dramatic story ends,

"Then the devil left Him, and behold the angels came and ministered to Him".

I love that line. It suggests the title and theme for today's message. "Waiting for the Angels". Three thoughts to build around.

LIFE IS DIFFICULT Life is difficult. It is filled with tests, with trials and with temptations. And they never seem to end.

Last year marked the 75th Anniversary of the Morton Salt Girl with her umbrella and the slogan, "When it rains it pours". How many times have you felt that way? Yes, sometimes it seems that way...that everything goes wrong all at once.

The recent death of Malcom Forbes reminded me of something that I came across a while back in Forbes magazine. I clipped it and put it in the sermon notebook. It said,

"Mosquitoes cause us trouble but not as much as they could. There are about 41,000 mosquitoes for each of us".

Ouch! Sometimes it seems that all 41,000 mosquitoes gang up on us at once. As somebody said about Murphy's Law:

"If anything can go wrong, it will. Murphy was an optimist."

In 1916, Georgia Tech played a football game against Cumberland University, a tiny Law School. The Georgia Tech football team that year was something of a powerhouse and rolled over Cumberland by the score of 222 - 0. Needless to say, Tech also pretty well beat the Cumberland players to a pulp.

Towards the end of that game, Cumberland quarterback Ed Edwards fumbled a snap from center. As the Tech linemen charged into his backfield, Edwards was heard to yell to his backs, "Pick it up. Pick it up!"

Edward's fullback, seeing the blitz from the monsters rushing in who had battered him all day, yelled back, "Pick it up yourself. You dropped it."

That fullback was tired of being beaten to a pulp, and we sympathize with him. Life does that to us sometimes. Life is difficult. Jesus was led into the wilderness. And sometimes we must enter that wilderness as well.

BUT IN THE WILDERNESS ANGELS COME

It is in the wilderness, though, that we experience God's ministering angels. And that is the "Good News" for the day. Satan leaves us and the angels come and usually those angels are other people.

The Russian writer, Dostoevski, tells about an experience he had as a boy. As a child, he loved to walk in the forest on his family's country estate. And often he searched for mushrooms in the forest. One day, he heard the most terrifying cry a child could ever hear in that part of Russia. It was the cry "Wolf". And hearing that cry, Dostoevski panicked and dashed for a clearing in the woods. His scamper drove him right into the arms of an old serf who was working for his father. The peasant quieted him and held him for a few moments. He soothed his fears and reassured the lad that he would guard him and protect him until he reached home.

Writing about this incident years later while in prison, Dostoevski remembers the gentle caress of this old peasant. As he reconstructed that experience he realized that in the kindness of that uneducated man he had experienced the comfort of a loving God. And that is the way God most often comes to us, through other people. They become God's ministering angels.

And indeed, that is the most beautiful ministry that God gives any of us to become a ministering angel. I have had angels minister to me. So, too, have many of you. Usually, they are friends, fellow church members perhaps, people you and I already value and know...people we trust and can count on.

Sometimes, however, God comes to minister to us directly. William Hinson tells about an amazing article that appeared in his local Texas paper. Over the past several years in Houston, there have been a rash of incidents in which dogs have attacked small children. As a result, the papers have run some stories about the attacks, some of which have been pretty gruesome. There was one, however, involving a little boy called D. J. that was not so tragic.

A reporter asked D. J. how he managed to come away from a recent dog attack unharmed. You can almost picture the serious expression on the little boy's face as he said, "Well, right in the middle of the attack, the Lord spoke to me". "Oh, really" asked the reporter, "and what did God say to you?" He said, "Run, D. J. run!"

There may have been times in your life when God has whispered in your ear, "Run, Jim...run" Or, "Run, Sally...run". This is a valuable message in those moments when we are tempted. In one way or another, to those who believe in His promises, God always sends His angels. Sometimes we really don't want to hear that voice and go our own way, but that's another story.

IN LIFE'S DIFFICULT MOMENTS

I believe that this is particularly true in life's most difficult moments, especially in those moments when death is involved...our own or somebody else's.

I love the story that singer Johnny Cash has shared with us. It's somewhat dramatic and had to do with his older brother's death. He worked in a wood-shop, a lumber mill and fell across a saw. He lingered for a week before dying, drifting in and out of consciousness, sometimes hallucinating, and then falling back into a coma. As his condition became more and more critical and it was obvious there was no hope, the family gathered in the hospital room. Johnny Cash tells the story.

"I remember standing in line to tell him good-bye. He was still unconscious. I bent over his bed and put my cheek against his and said, 'Goodby, Jack'. That's all I could get out.

My mother and daddy were on their knees. At 6:30 am, he woke up. He opened his eyes and looked around and said, 'Why's everybody crying over me? Moma..don't cry over me. Moma, did you see the river?'

And she said, 'No, I didn't son.'

'Well, he said, 'I thought I was going toward a fire, but I'm headed in the other direction now, mama. I was going down a river and there was fire on one side and there was heaven on the other. I was crying....God, I'm supposed to go to heaven. Don't you remember. Don't take me to the fire. And all of a sudden I turned and now..Moma...can you hear the angels singing?'

She said, 'No, son, I can't hear 'em...'

And he squeezed her hand and shook her arm, saying, 'But mama, you've got to hear it'. Tears started rolling off his cheeks and he said, 'Moma'.....'listen to the angels. I'm going there, Moma.'

We listened with astonishment.

'What a beautiful city' he said, 'And the angels singing... Oh Moma, I wish you could hear the angels singing'.

Those were his last words. And he died. Johnny Cash added,

"The memory of Jack's death, his vision of heaven, the effect of his life on others, and the image of Christ he

projected have been more of an inspiration to me, I suppose, than anything else that has ever come to me through any other person."

We all wonder about such "near-death" experiences and may have our doubts and our questions. But, I'll say this...I hope that when that moment comes to me or to someone I love dearly, that I'll be listening for the angels. Because, they do come. Yes, they do come in this life, in this world, when we face temptation and trouble...and they come, too, even as we approach the life beyond this.

So, look for them and listen for them. I believe they're there. "And behold, the angels came and ministered to Him".

SHALL WE PRAY      Make us sensitive to Your presence and Your nearness, dear God, as we recall this scene in the wilderness when Jesus felt Your presence, power and peace in His life. We remember, too, how in the garden in the last night of His life, following His Last Supper, with the disciples, He again felt the angels ministering to Him.

"And He walked with me, and He talks with me,  
and He tells me I am His own..."

And the joy we share as we tarry there...none  
other has ever known".

May we feel that joy and that peace in our lives. In His name we pray. Amen.

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, March 4, 1990

I. HOLY COMMUNION

- A. It has long been the custom of our Church...to celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion...and we like to announce for the benefit of....that the Table of Our Lord is open to all...that one does not have to be a member...
- B. His Table is open to all...and we invite all of you to receive the Sacrament...trusting that this time for you may be an occasion of spiritual renewal...rededication...to the will of God as it comes to us in the life and love...
- C. A word regarding procedure. The elements will be served to you in the pews. Upon receiving them, please hold them..

II. GREETING / VISITORS

- A. We welcome the visitors in the congregation. Make yourself known to us. Share your name by filling out a visitor card or signing the guest book. Join us downstairs. Worship with us....work with us, too, in the programs of outreach.
- B. We have been doing the "Lord's Work" here at this busy corner of His Kingdom...1837. We minister in the name of Christ and it is in His loving spirit that we greet you.

III. PARISH CONCERNS

- A. Parish concerns are wirtten up for you in the bulletin. Take a moment to review them, noting the two flyers in the bulletin - one about the "Hounds of Heaven"...study group on Tuesday evenings...new book, "We Are An Easter People"... Good time to come and get involved...part of Lent observance.
- B. Also, note that next Sunday we shall be holding another of our "Each One, Bring One" Sundays...we all have friends "out there" that just might benefit from an invitation to come to Church...surprise them with a call this week and bring them along..."gossip the Gospel"...some of you came here as a result of the invitation of a friend or member...pass it on.
- C. Pick up your copy of the monthly news sheet...copies by the door, etc....thanks to Lucy....mention death of Mrs. Wm. Herman Smith.
- D. Meetings this week. Trustees. Education Committee.

IV. OFFERING

- A. Jesus said: It is more blessed to give than it is to receive.  
In this spirit, let us worship God with our morning offering.



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DATE: March 4, 1990

READER: Eric Morris

The Scripture Reading for today is taken from the Gospel According to  
St. Matthew,

Chapter 4

Verses 1 - 11

It is found on page 837 in the Bible that is in the pews.

(Eric...allow people time enough to locate  
the reading before you begin...)

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(After you've finished reading from the Bible, then close off with -

Thus endeth the reading taken from the Scriptures.

May God add His blessing to the reading of His word and to our understanding  
of it.

Thanks be to God. Amen!

"I CAN RESIST EVERYTHING.....

EXCEPT TEMPTATION"

(Mark Twain)

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Philip A. C. Clarke

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106 East 86th Street  
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February 25, 1996

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### INTRODUCTION

The scene is the wilderness. And Jesus has been led there by the Spirit....not by the devil, mind you, but by the Spirit. This is a necessary experience for Jesus if He is to fulfill God's plan for His life. He must face the Temptor....for temptation is very much a part of our human existence. Each of us must spend time in the "wilderness", struggling with Satan and going "eye ball to eye ball" with the devil.

Some of you may remember that after his famous expedition to the South Pole that Admiral Richard Byrd was asked by a man on a train, "And what did you miss the most down there at the South Pole?"

Byrd replied that they had missed a great many things....some of those things they didn't mind missing at all and other things they did. He went on to say that he had even discussed that very thing in the middle of the six months long Polar night with one of the Irishmen in the camp, a man by the name of O'Brien... Jack O'Brien. Byrd asked him, "Jack...what are you missing most from civilization?" O'Brien answered without any hesitation...."TEMPTATION". Mark Twain...

### DEVELOPMENT

Temptation is a very real part of life. We're all familiar with it. Temptation....to stray from those values we hold dear. Temptation....to take the short cut....to avoid the struggle...to find the easy way through a situation. We all have to deal with the Temptor. In fact, it may be that temptation is essential to our growth, to our spiritual development. We struggle with our passions, with our human drives, and out of that struggle comes character. As Tug McGraw once reminded us, "On the debris of despair, character....real character is so often built!"

In the stories of the Desert Father there is one concerning Abbot John, the Dwarf. Abbot John got down on his knees and prayed to the Lord that all passion be taken from him. And his prayer was granted. He became impassible....incapable of injury, emotion or feeling. And so it was that in this condition he went to one of the elders and said, "You see before you a man who is completely at rest and has no temptation!"

The elder surprised him and instead of praising him, the elder said:

"Go and pray to the Lord to command some struggle to be stirred up in you....for the soul is matured only in battle!"

Abbot John did this and when the temptations started up again, he did not pray that the struggle be taken away from him. Instead, he prayed, "Lord....give me the strength to get through this fight!"

The Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. How else could He know our situation, if He had not walked the valley that we walk. The Spirit led Him into the wilderness. It's a very familiar scene to us. Dan and Alana read it well to us a few moments ago. Jesus had been fasting for some time and He was hungry and the devil came to Him and said,

"If YOU are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread."  
(Matthew 4: 3)

And right away Jesus gives us a hint that He is the Son of God by resisting the devil, saying, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God'".

Then the devil took Him to the Holy City, set Him on the pinnacle of the Temple and said to Him,

"If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down; for it is written, 'He will give His angels charge of You', and 'on their hands they will bear You up, lest You strike Your foot against a stone.'"

And again Jesus provides us with a clue to His Sonship with God by resisting the devil saying, "Again, it is written, 'You shall not tempt the Lord, Your God'".

Finally, the devil took Him to a very high mountain and showed Him the Kingdoms of the world...of this world...and the glory of them and He said to Him,

"All these I will give You....if You will fall down and worship me."

And Jesus said, "Begone Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord, Your God and Him only shall You serve.'" And now, pause and notice how this dramatic story ends, how it closes out...

"Then the devil left Him, and behold the angels came and ministered to Him". (Matthew 4: 11)

I love that line. It's one of my favorites and it suggests the title and theme for today's message on this First Sunday of Lent. "Waiting for the Angels". Three thoughts come to mind in connection with it.

### LIFE IS DIFFICULT

First-off, life is difficult. Life is filled with tests, with trials and with temptations and they never seem to end.

I think it was last year that we marked the 80th Anniversary of the Morton Salt Girl with her umbrella and the slogan, "When it rains it pours". How many times have you felt that way? Yes, sometimes it seems that way...that everything seems to go wrong...all at once.

With Steve Forbes in the news in recent months, I'm reminded of something I came across a while back in Forbes magazine. It made my way into my sermon notebook. It said,

"Mosquitoes cause us trouble, but not as much as they could....for there are about 41,000 mosquitoes for each of us."

Ouch! Sometimes it seems that all 41,000 mosquitoes gang up on us at one time and as somebody once said about Murphy's Law, "If anything can go wrong, IT WILL. Why, Murphy was an optimist!" Murphy was an optimist...

Back in the early part of this century...I think it was 1916...Georgia Tech they say, played a football game against Cumberland University, a tiny Law School. Georgia Tech was a powerhouse and rolled over Cumberland by the score of 222 - 0. Needless to say, the Cumberland players were pretty well beaten up in that game. Near the end of that game, the Cumberland quarterback, Ed Edwards, fumbled a snap from center and as the Tech linemen "blitzed" the quarterback, Edwards was heard to yell and scream to his teammates, "Pick it up. Pick it up".

Edward's fullback, seeing the charging linemen of Georgia Tech coming in... who had battered him all day, yelled back, "Pick it up yourself. You dropped it!"

The fullback was tired of being beaten and bruised all day long...beaten to a pulp, and we can sympathize with him. Life does that to us sometimes. Life is difficult. Wasn't that the first line in Scott Peck's book? Jesus was led into the wilderness and sometimes we must enter that wilderness as well.

BUT IN THE WILDERNESS ANGELS DO COME

But it is in the wilderness that we experience God's ministering angels. And that's the "Good News" for this day. Put that down as the second point of this three pointer from downtown. Satan leaves us and the angels come and usually.....usually those angels are other people.

✓✓ Dostoevski, the Russian writer, once wrote about an experience that he had as a boy. As a child, he loved to walk in the forest on his family's country estate. And often he searched for mushrooms in the forest. One day he heard the most terrifying cry that a child could ever hear in that part of Russia. It was the cry of "Wolf". "Wolf". And hearing that cry, Dostoevski panicked and dashed for a clearing in the wood. His scamper drove him right into the arms of an old serf who was working for his father. The peasant quieted him and held him for a few moments. He soothed his fears and reassured the small boy that he would guard him and protect him until he reached the safety of home.

And writing about this incident years later while in prison, Dostoevski remembers the gentle caress of that old peasant. As he reconstructed that experience he realized that in the kindness of that uneducated man he had experienced the comfort of a loving God!

And that, dear friend, is the way that God most often comes to us, through other people. They become God's ministering angels. And to that add this: That is the most beautiful ministry that God gives any of us...to become one of His ministering angels. I've had angels minister to me. So, too, perhaps have you. Usually, they are friends, friends who take the time to listen...to respond, to reach out and help. Perhaps a fellow church member...people that you and I already know and whose friendship we value. People we can trust and count on.

But then, sometimes God comes to minister to us directly. A Methodist minister down in Houston tells this one. It seems that there was a rash of incidents in which dogs attacked small children and some of those attacks were gruesome. But one little boy whose name was D. J. somehow managed to escape from a recent dog attack unharmed and when a reporter asked him about how he managed to escape, D. J. put it this way. He said,

"Right in the middle of that attack, the Lord spoke to me". "Oh" said the reporter, and "what did he say?" He said, "RUN....RUN....D. J. RUN!"

There may have been moments and times in your life when God has whispered in your ear, "Run, Jim....run". Or, "Run, Sally....run". This is a valuable message in those moments when we're tempted. In one way or another, to those who believe in His promises, God always send His angels.

Oh, sometimes we really don't want to hear that voice and prefer to go our own way, but that's another story...another sermon...and ignoring that little voice inside, that red light that is blinking, we charge ahead and then there's trouble. And we wonder why...

IN LIFE'S DIFFICULT MOMENTS

But God always sends His angels and I, for one, believe this is particularly true in life's most difficult moments...and especially in those difficult moments when death is nearby, our own or somebody else's.

Johnny Cash, the singer, has shared a beautiful story with us. It's a bit dramatic, but it does touch us on those deeper levels. It has to do with his older brother's death. Apparently he worked in a wood-shop, a lumber mill and fell across a saw. He lingered for a week before dying...drifting in and out of consciousness, sometimes hallucinating, and then falling back into a coma. As his condition became more and more critical and it was obvious there was no hope, the family gathered in the hospital room. Johnny Cash tells the story.

"I remember standing in line to tell him 'good-bye'. He was still unconscious....I bent over his bed and put my cheek against his and said, 'Good-bye, Jack.' That's all I could manage to get out...."

My mother and daddy were on their knees. At 6:30 am, he woke up. He opened his eyes and looked around the room and said, 'Why's everybody crying over me? Moma, don't cry over me....Moma, did you see the river?' And she said, 'No, son...I didn't.'

'Well' he said...I thought I was going toward a fire, but I'm headed in the other direction now, moma. I was going down a river and there was fire on one side and there was heaven on the other. I was crying..... God, I'm supposed to go to heaven...don't you remember? Don't take me to the fire. And all of a sudden, I turned and now...Oh, moma....can you hear the angels singing?'

She said, 'No, son, I can't hear 'em.....'

And he squeezed her hand and shook her arm, saying, 'But, moma....you've got to hear it'. Tears started rolling off his cheeks and he said, 'Moma...oh, Moma, just listen to those angels. I'm going there, Moma.' And we listened with astonishment.

'What a beautiful city' he said....'And the angels all singing....Oh, moma...I wish you could hear the angels singing.' And those were his last words, and he died.

Johnny Cash added,



"The memory of Jack's death...his vision of heaven and the effect of his life on others...and yes, the image of Christ that he projected have been more of an inspiration to me than anything else that has come to me...that has ever come to me through any other person "

CLOSING

We all have our doubts and we entertain our questions, but...you know....I hope that when that moment comes to me or to someone I dearly love...that I'll be there "listening" for the angels, for I believe that they do come.....in this life, in this world, in those difficult moments of loss, of trouble, of temptation. They do come and whisper words of hope and faith and courage.

Kenneth Filkins in a poem entitled, "The Pit" says it for me as he speaks of a man who fell into a pit and couldn't get out.

Buddha said: "Your pit is only a state of mind...."

A Hindu said: "This pit is for purging you and making you more perfect".

Confucius said: "If you would have listened to me, you would never have fallen into that pit."

A New Ager said: "Maybe you should network with some other pit dwellers."

A News Reporter said: "Could I have the exclusive story on your pit?"

A County Inspector said: "Do you have a permit for that pit?"

A Realist said: "That's a pit, believe me!"

An Idealist said: "The world shouldn't have pits like that!"

An Optimist said: "Things could be worse."

A Pessimist said: "Thing will get worse!"

And Jesus seeing the man.....took him by the hand and lifted him out of that pit!

Dear friends.....a pit is an awful place to be....particularly the pit of temptation. But remember, always, that there is One who will help....that there are angels who come....I don't know of any other lasting remedy to the reality and the ruin of temptation. Fill your life with faith...full of Christ and His promises....Christ, the Redeemer, the One who lifts us all. For as it is written as He came out of the wilderness of temptation:

"Behold...the angels came and ministered to Him!

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your nearness and to Your presence, O God, even as we feel the deepest things within us are being stirred up, that down below the surface of our lives, your Spirit is striving to bring forth the highest and the best that we are meant to be. Wrestle with us until we are conquered by Your love.

Help us in these coming days of Lent to see Jesus with new eyes and with deeper understanding.....and to find in Him that which makes Him unlike all others who have ever lived. Minister to our personal needs. Walk through this community of faith now and be the help and comfort, the inspiration and sustenance of our souls. In His name and spirit, we pray. Amen.