

### OPENING PRAYER

All-powerful and all-compassionate God, throughout the ages you have sent angels to comfort, coach, encourage and protect us. In these last days you have sent your beloved Son, Jesus, who himself was served by angels. Make us mindful of and present to the depth and height of your love for us. May your Spirit guide us today in this study of your heaven-sent servants. In Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

### SUGGESTED HYMN

- “Oh, Love, How Deep”  
(ELW 322, verses 1-4, with special attention to verse 2)

### FOCUS VERSE

“For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.”

(Psalm 91:11)

### MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV)
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW)

### CLOSING HYMN

“On Eagle’s Wings”

(ELW 787, verses 1-4)

# Journeys with angels

## Session three

Comforting, encouraging,  
protecting angels

BY CHRISTA VON ZYCHLIN

### INTRODUCTION (5 minutes)

Whenever I’ve mentioned the study of angels, I’ve received questions such as: *Are there guardian angels? Will angels do our bidding? Should we call on angels? How can we harness the power of angels?*

Of all the heavenly host, none are probably so misunderstood as guardian angels. If you go to a store that sells crystals, tarot cards and incense, there’s a good chance they also sell guardian angel statuettes and laminated prayer cards picturing winged white women in frilly dresses. (People, angels in the Bible are not once described as white women with wings!) I did once find a clever angel-themed visor clip that read, “Don’t drive faster than your guardian angel can fly.” I was less charmed by a guardian angel bath & floor wash available online for \$5.95. The instructions said to either pour the lotion into bathwater and “soak yourself for 15 minutes while concentrating on your desire” or use it to “mop your floors from the front of your home to the back.” No further explanations were given, but one customer review said the angel bath & floor wash smelled “heavenly.” I did not order a bottle to try myself!

### Share aloud or reflect:

1. What are your initial thoughts on “guardian angels”? What have you been taught

on this subject?

2. Can you think of any protecting angels in the Bible?

### ANGELS — NOT INDEPENDENT AGENTS! (2 minutes)

This month, in our Journeys with Angels Bible study, we are looking at “comforting, encouraging, coaching, protecting angels.” I usually shy away from the term “guardian angels” because of the many nonbiblical associations with it, bordering on the occult. Famously, the devil himself tempted Jesus to put his trust in guardian, or saving, angels.<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Michael Rogness, professor emeritus of preaching at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, is one of our contemporary experts on biblical angels. He cautions us:

*Angels are mysterious beings, but the one incontrovertible assertion from the Bible is that there is no such thing in the Bible as an angel acting independently. Angels do God’s work. All the advice in popular books about “getting in touch with your angel” is twaddle. The biblical view is: Forget about getting in touch with an angel—get in touch with God! Don’t ask angels to do anything—ask God! Wherever you find an angel in the Bible, there is God acting.<sup>2</sup>*

I appreciate Professor Rogness’ rigorous theological analysis: *twaddle!* And it’s true, we often find much ado about angels in the most sentimental corners of religious bookstores or New Age boutiques.

Nevertheless, we are “people of the book,” and comforting and protecting angels do exist in the Bible. They don’t work like genies or fairies,

granting wishes if you use the proper formula or mop your floors in the right direction! Rather, these angels are messengers of God—messengers who usher us into the goodness of God. Let’s meet some of them in Scripture.

### HOLDING HAGAR: AN ANGEL OF COMFORT AND COACHING (25 minutes)

The first comforting and coaching angel we meet in the Bible (and the first use of the specific word *angel*<sup>3</sup>) is the angel who swoops in to encourage a woman who has gotten short shrift in life. Hagar is a left-out woman, a sent-out woman, a bereft woman.

Just as many North American history classes used to focus only on conquering colonialist European-descent “heroes” and only recently began to pursue the many hidden stories of the Americas—the richness and suffering of Native American cultures, the slavery-entangled strands of African American builders and resisters—so too has there been a tendency to plasticize the biblical narrative into a chain of “hero” stories. No Sunday school program was complete without heralding the father and mother of our faith, Abraham and Sarah. Yet how many of us ever learned about Sarah’s mean streak, Abraham’s apathy or the way God intervened to send God’s personal representative—an angel—to Hagar, the mistreated, pregnant woman who was enslaved?

The Bible is relentless in pushing us to face the truth of our complex histories. Although we have pride in our mother Sarah with her faith, sassiness and sense of humor, we can love our ancestors without ignoring their vicious and even deadly sins. It’s not by accident, I think, that the first angel in the pages of the Bible arrives to comfort and strengthen

1 See Matthew 4:5-7.

2 Michael Rogness, “A Fascination with Angels,” *Word & World* 18, no. 1 (1998), 60. [https://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/issues.aspx?article\\_id=1037](https://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/issues.aspx?article_id=1037). Emphasis in the original.

3 In Session 1 we discussed the word *malakh* as the specific and common Hebrew word for “angel” that also means “messenger.”

a woman too long pushed down into the footnotes of our Bible studies.

📖 **Read:** Genesis 16:1-13

**Share aloud or reflect:**

3. Hagar is called a “slave-girl,” yet she’s old enough to become a wife and a mother. What do the words “slave” and “girl” tell us about her status in the eyes of the household?
4. Hagar is an Egyptian slave, apparently acquired during Abram and Sarai’s sojourn in Egypt, when there was a famine in their own land (see Genesis 12:10-20). What might Hagar’s status as a foreigner suggest to us about her situation in Abram and Sarai’s household?
5. It is Sarai who tells Abram to go have intercourse with Hagar in order to provide her, Sarai, with a child. This was a feature of marriage contracts of the time: to protect a wife against abandonment in the case of infertility, she could use another (subservient) woman’s body to produce a child for herself. Often we think of women as having a special responsibility to care for the well-being of other women. How does this legal sexual contract hurt the relationship between Hagar and Sarai?

Hagar is a slave, a foreigner and a sexualized competitor to Sarai. After Hagar makes the mistake of flaunting her fertility, she promptly loses Sarai’s care and protection. Sarai treats Hagar harshly, and Hagar runs away.

That’s the moment the angel of the Lord steps

in, just when Hagar seems abandoned and out of options. Like a great coach, the angel asks Hagar to assess where she’s been and where she’s going. The angel gives Hagar a tough assignment from God: to return to Abram and Sarai’s household and accept their protection for the time being. But the angel also gives Hagar a tremendous promise: The son she is carrying won’t belong to Sarai; he will be Hagar’s son. He will bear a proud name of faith: “Ishmael,” meaning “God hears.” And Ishmael will be a “wild ass of a man” (v. 12)—which may not sound like such an angelic promise but must have been music to Hagar’s ears. It appears that Ishmael will stand up for himself; perhaps he will take after Hagar more than after his “go along to get along” dad, Abram!

The crowning touch of this story is when Hagar realizes she was not only comforted and coached by the angel of the Lord, but that truly it was Godself who had visited her—a mark of favor and incredible distinction. Moreover, Hagar has the honor of giving a new name to God: El-roi, which means “the God who sees.” God sees the one who is left out, sent out, bereft, and God sends her the first comforting angel of the Bible.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

6. Count the number of times Genesis 16:7-11 says “the angel of the Lord.” Yet verse 13 says it is the Lord who speaks with her, and Hagar says, “Have I really seen God ...?” Can you think of a time when you were comforted and encouraged by someone (a human “angel,” perhaps) and only later recognized it as the presence of God?

Things didn’t end “happily ever after” for Hagar, even after that remarkable encounter with the angel of the Lord. Angel sightings don’t always solve all our problems, or even most of them.

**Read:** Genesis 21:9-10

**Share aloud or reflect:**

7. What name is Hagar given by the text in verse 9? What name is Hagar given by Sarah in verse 10?
8. Why does Sarah want to get rid of Hagar and Ishmael? How do the names used for Hagar show us Sarah's shading or interpretation of the situation?
9. What correlations do you see between Hagar's situation and that of refugees and migrant workers today?

**Read:** Genesis 21:14-19

This second time Hagar flees into the desert wilderness—with her son now—there is no going back. Worse, this time they've run out of water, and it appears the death of Ishmael is imminent. However, God is true to the name given by Hagar: *El-roi*, "God sees." And God is true to the name given to Ishmael: "God hears."

Again, God intervenes and sends an angel into this desperate situation. Again, the angel brings a promise: Ishmael will be the founder of a great nation. The angel also brings some practical help—a whole well full of life-giving water.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

10. Have you ever run out of water? Describe your situation and feelings. Who helped you get water again?

I moved to the southwest part of the US just a couple of years ago. Immediately, I was confronted by two new realities. One was the need to

continually drink water in a climate with humidity levels in the single digits. My husband and I once went for a day hike that turned out to be both longer and hotter than we'd expected. We carefully rationed our water and still ran out with two miles yet to go in 100-degree temperatures. I used my cellphone to call our young-adult son, who ran up the mountain path to meet us, carrying two icy-cold water bottles. I'll never forget the sweet taste of that water. He was our angel from the Lord, no exaggeration!

The second new reality we confronted in the Southwest? Refugees with young children who cross the border, fleeing the drug and sex trades, extreme poverty and often the threat of death, in order to start a new life in the United States. Crossing the border into the southwestern US sometimes means crossing the desert under brutal conditions. Soon after we settled in New Mexico, we heard about an American citizen named Scott Warren, who was arrested and charged with felony crimes for providing water and food to two migrants who had just crossed the desert into Arizona. Mr. Warren worked with a faith-based organization called No More Deaths. He was acquitted of the charges in late November 2019, as it was decided he was acting according to his religious convictions. Perhaps some in that courtroom recognized an angel when they saw one!

The ELCA AMMPARO program (*amparo* is Spanish for "protection") takes the angel role even further, by "accompanying migrant minors with protection, advocacy, representation and opportunities." God's people can get involved by praying, becoming a Welcoming Congregation to help migrant families transition to new lives in the US, or offering the physical presence of *El-roi*, the God who sees, in courtrooms, through the AMMPARO Guardian Angel Program. You can see a video about this at <https://vimeo.com/157458987>.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

11. In what ways do these two contemporary examples of protecting angels—No More Deaths and the ELCA AMMPARO ministry—parallel the Hagar story? In what ways do they differ?

**ANGELS WHERE NEEDED MOST (10 minutes)**

The book of Daniel features several visions of angels, including a mysterious vision of “ten thousand times ten thousand” heavenly attendants (Daniel 7:9-10), and the only Old Testament mention of the angels Gabriel (Daniel 8:16; 9:21) and Michael (Daniel 10:13, 21; 12:1). Both angels wondrously reappear in the New Testament, Gabriel in Luke’s Christmas story (1:19, 26) and Michael in a gripping battle scene in Revelation (12:7). Let’s look briefly at two well-known Bible stories of protecting angels: the stories of the three men in the fiery furnace and Daniel in the lions’ den.

**THE FIERY FURNACE**

📖 **Read:** Daniel 3:16-28 (or if time allows, all of Daniel 3)

The delightful tongue-twister story of Daniel’s three friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, is another Sunday school classic, and for good reason. Who can forget the three who refused to fall down and worship King Nebuchadnezzar’s statue? This story is considered so important that it is one of the appointed readings of “the Old Testament’s Greatest Hits” during the Easter Vigil. God’s people peacefully protested a tyrant’s orders and laid their bodies on the line rather than worship a golden image. In the end, King Nebuchadnezzar himself recognizes what has happened when he says, in verse 28, “Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his

servants who trusted in him.” If we wonder whether the Bible teaches anything about angels protecting us, here is a clear example of God sending one at just the right moment.

**THE LIONS’ DEN**

Just three chapters later, Daniel himself goes through a similar ordeal. There’s a new king in town, King Darius, who has rather carelessly signed a decree that, according to the law of the land, even he can’t change. Anyone caught worshipping anyone besides the king will be thrown into the lions’ den. King Darius’ advisors had plotted to get this new law because they were jealous of Daniel, who had become a rapidly rising star in the kingdom. The conspirators knew that Daniel was a faithful Jew who worshipped God three times a day. When the king realized he had put Daniel’s life in danger, he was devastated, but it was too late. Daniel was caught, and as the sun went down, he was put into the lions’ den, and the opening was sealed shut. King Darius himself spent the night fasting, sleepless, and hoping against hope that Daniel’s God would somehow prove true.

📖 **Read:** Daniel 6:19-22

Again God sends angels. In this case, they come to shut the mouths of the lions. God sent angels to rescue Daniel.

I recently went through a weird period in my own life when, within a few weeks, I was: 1) struck by a car, 2) bitten by a dog, and 3) by myself in the desert when I came within feet of a rattlesnake! In the first instance, I was swept onto the hood of that car, and I walked away without a bruise (after giving a calm, firm lecture to the young driver about the importance of stopping for stop signs). In the second instance, I walked away from the dog with only a bruise but no broken skin (and after giving another calm but firm lecture to the owner). In

the third situation, I backed away from that snake, rattled but not bitten (and without giving that snake any lecture at all)! Could angelic intervention have been at work? Or did I get lucky in the first two chance happenings and use my God-given ability to choose wisely to step away in the third one?

**Share aloud or reflect:**

12. The two stories in the book of Daniel have to do with God's angels protecting people of faith. Are you aware of any such protection stories in modern times?
13. Have you had a near-accident experience in which it seemed an "invisible hand" saved you? Do you identify that experience with angels who protect?

**DOES JESUS NEED ANGELS? (12 minutes)**

Now we turn again to angels in the New Testament. Last month we looked at warning angels, like those who appeared to Joseph, fiancé of Mary. For Joseph, angelic appearances took place in dreams. Jesus himself, however, apparently received angel visits in person. The devil, historically considered a fallen angel, found Jesus out in the desert wilderness and tempted him with the broad promise of guardian angels: After all, shouldn't God provide protection for someone who claims to be the Son of God?

📖 **Read:** Psalm 91:1-4; 9-12 and Matthew 4:1-7

The devil taunts Jesus. Instead of carrying a message from God, the Tempter is the anti-angel, bending the stories and words of holy comfort to his own purposes. He tempts Jesus to commandeer God's holy angels into a trivial role as his personal security detail. Growing up in a Jewish household, Jesus would have known Psalm 91 by heart. He would've been familiar with the stories of the

protective angels of Daniel 3 and 6. We can see how the temptation would have been real—why not show the devil who has the real power? Yet Jesus puts the promise of Scripture in context: Angels are not at the beck and call of human—or devilish—capriciousness. Angels do God's work, for God's purposes, in God's time.

📖 **Read:** Matthew 4:11

After Jesus endures the temptations, God sends angels after all! They wait on Jesus, and I like to imagine them providing him with delicious food, a cool breeze and maybe, as for Hagar during her time in the desert, fresh water from a well. Remembering that the word "angel" simply means messenger, I wonder if these were human or heavenly beings. Could they have been "just" a group of day hikers who offered food and drink to a hungry stranger—who happened to be the Son of God?

**Share aloud or reflect:**

14. Can you remember any sort of "angel" (God's human or heavenly messenger) who brought you comfort after a physically challenging time?

📖 **Read:** Luke 22:39-44

The first comforting angels came to Jesus at the very beginning of his public ministry. Only the Gospel of Luke includes this bookend appearance of an angel also at the end of his ministry. We see Jesus pouring his heart out in agonized prayer on the Mount of Olives. He appears to still dare to hope God's plan might not have to include a full crucifixion. An angel arrives. This is no picnicking stranger, but specifically "an angel from heaven." The angel doesn't rescue Jesus but strengthens him. Jesus' anguish continues, but he knows he can face the

heavy task at hand.

📖 **Read:** Matthew 26:53-54

Also at the end of Jesus' ministry, when one of his followers tries to protect him through violence, he points out that he could call out "twelve legions," or a whole army of angels to defend and rescue him. But Jesus has already resisted the temptation to bend angel actions to his own will. God has a higher purpose for Jesus, a plan that doesn't, this time, include an angel rescue.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

15. What kind of angels might our world most need today: comforting, coaching, encouraging or protecting angels? Which type of angel ministry are you, or members of your church, most motivated to offer to others?

**CONCLUSION (1 minute)**

In this leg of our "Journeys with angels" Bible study, we have been uplifted and encouraged by *El-roi*, the God who sees. God sent angels to comfort, coach and minister to Hagar. We've observed a silent angel who protected three men from death in a fiery furnace and another angel who shut the mouths of lions. We also met angels who didn't protect anyone from harm, but who served and strengthened Jesus to face the trials set before him. Apparently we *all* need angels to journey with us! Next month, we will study the feasting and rejoicing angels who bring the best news ever to God's people and to us. 🌿

# Journeys with angels

## Session three

Comforting, encouraging,  
protecting angels

BY CHRISTA VON ZYCHLIN

### OVERVIEW

This session takes us through most of the season of Lent, looking closely at angels who attend to people in distress: Hagar in the desert, three friends thrown into a furnace, Daniel shut into a lions' den, and Jesus: first, amid the agonies of temptation, then years later, the night before his crucifixion. We explore the difference between the temptation to passively expect guardian angels to fix our problems, and Scripture's witness of angels who respond to our genuine human needs but also strengthen us for God's toughest assignments.

### REACH OUT

Try sending regular and potential new participants a short text message, email, video link or a simple postcard to remind them of and invite them to the upcoming study. Encourage them to invite a friend. We all have something to contribute—that's how Bible study works!

### PREPARE FOR THE SESSION

1. Pray for the Holy Spirit to accompany you in your planning. Pray also for the Spirit to prepare the hearts and minds of all participants for this session.
2. Read through the entire study. Look up the Bible passages. Consider assigning passages in advance,

so participants can practice reading the passages aloud if they wish, especially for longer sections such as Genesis 16:1-13 and Daniel 3 (you will want to get your very best reader or a seasoned storyteller for that one).

3. Decide which questions you will focus on. You won't have time for everything, and that's OK. The Bible is like that—there's always another layer to consider. As always, be sensitive to those who may have reasons to be especially affected by the conversation or may simply wish to stay silent. However, don't allow any voices to dominate—including your own!

#### **HOLDING HAGAR**

In our study, you will find that Hagar's story is an intense one. It also intersects with current societal conversations about culture, political history and faith. Be on high alert to yield space and time to participants whose ancestors or family members come from a background affected by slavery. We need to hear such voices, just as God heard Hagar's voice.

Again, be aware of the need to yield space and time to participants who may be personally affected by the experience of refugees or who have been refugees themselves. Do make a point to educate yourself and others on the ELCA AMMPARO program and/or other refugee assistance programs, such as those coordinated by Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) or local Lutheran social service organizations. If you can squeeze in some time, the 3.5-minute video referenced in the study ("Guardian Angels: An introduction," <https://vimeo.com/157458987>) is on topic and will enrich your study immensely.

So does Jesus need angels? Do we? The answer to this question is yes—yes, Jesus certainly needed angels, and God sent them to him. The biblical

witness strongly suggests that angels do indeed still appear. Sometimes we ourselves might be those angels.

#### **CLOSING HYMN**

"On Eagle's Wings" (Evangelical Lutheran Worship 787, verses 1-4)

Since this hymn is particularly difficult to sing as a group (and it might not yet be safe to sing together in person), consider finding a recorded version of this much-loved hymn to share.

#### **ACTIVITY: SNACKS (OPTIONAL)**

Whether gathering in person or online, consider sending the recipe to participants in advance and asking them to prepare their own snack with what they have on hand.

#### **The Comfort of Angels Pasta Dish**

- 1 stick (8 T.) butter or margarine
- 8 oz. angel hair pasta
- 3 c. hot chicken stock
- 1 t. (or to taste) freshly ground pepper
- Juice of 3-4 lemons

Melt a stick of butter in a 2 ½ qt. (or larger) pan on your stovetop. Break up the angel hair pasta and stir it into the melted butter. Add chicken stock and pepper. Cover and let simmer on low for 10 minutes until the liquids are nearly gone. Finally, add lemon juice. Voilà—a comfort food classic! You can add other ingredients at the end, such as veggies or herbs, if you choose. There's something so basic, delicious and melt-in-your-mouth comforting about this simple recipe! 🌿