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I Send an Angel Before You Exodus 23:20-33

Fr. William Klock

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Friday night, just as we were getting ready for bed, we got a call from Alexandra, asking one of us to pick her up at work. The convertible Mustang she bought in December has a leak somewhere that we haven't had a chance to locate and, we've discovered, when it gets damp inside, the electrics go haywire. On Friday the dome lights wouldn't turn off. I decided to drive the car home so that we could get it out of the rain and into the garage. I could quickly see why Alexandra didn't want to drive it home. It was dark and pouring rain. The windows were fogged up from the damp and the dome lights wouldn't turn off. I couldn't help but think of this passage from Exodus 23 that's been in front of me all week. "Lord, I could use an angel leading the way home—or maybe a pillar of fire lighting the way." His answer to prayer was less spectacular, but no less welcome: by the time I was halfway out of the Kingfisher parking lot the issue had resolved and the dome lights went out.

Let's look at Exodus again. Chapter 23, verses 20 and 21. The Lord speaks to his people:

"Behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. Pay careful attention to him and obey his voice; do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression, for my name is in him."

This second half of Chapter 23 is something of an epilogue to the Book of the Covenant. The Lord has said, "I will be your God and you will be my

people." He's shown them what that looks like. Now he tells them what he's going to do. He's entered into a covenant with them and they with him. And now he makes them a covenant promise, which is followed up by an explanation of what the Lord expects of his people. The Lord will do his part and here's how Israel is to respond. The Lord says that he will send an "angel" to bring Israel into the land he has prepared and that the angel will guide them safely there.

From Mt. Sinai the angel will lead the people into Canaan. I think we forget this. When we think of "The Exodus" what's often at the forefront of our minds is the forty years of wandering in the wilderness. But, remember, that forty-year delay came as a result of Israel's rebellion. They were not permitted to enter the promised land and so the Lord led them in the wilderness until the rebellious generation that he had rescued from Egypt had died and then he led their children into the land. But at this point the rebellion hadn't yet happened. The Lord was preparing the people to enter sometime soon. And this angel would lead them. Who or what is the angel? That's a good question and the answers fall all over the map.

We've met this "angel of the Lord" before in the story of God's people. This angel walked before Abraham and his descendants. While the angel isn't mentioned specifically at Abraham's call to leave Ur, I suspect that this is who spoke to him. I suspect it was this angel who visited Abraham to tell him Sarah would bear a son. It was the angel of the Lord who stayed Abraham's hand as he was about to sacrifice Isaac. It was this angel who guided Abraham's servant to Rebekah. It was the angel who met the run-away Hagar in the wilderness. It was this angel who guided Jacob and, perhaps, with whom he wrestled that night at the Jabok. It was this angel who met Moses at the burning bush. And it was this angel who was there at the Red Sea, first leading the

people and then moving behind to guard them as Pharaoh's army approached.

The angel was present with the fire in the bush. The angel was present with the cloud and the flame that led Israel's way out of Egypt. But the angel is also distinct from these manifestations of God's presence. As the Lord's messenger, the angel is distinct from him as well, but at the same time speaks for the Lord, is received as the Lord, and is obeyed as the Lord. Look at verse 22:

"But if you carefully obey his voice and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries."

"Obey his voice" and "do all that I say". That the angel is identified as the Lord and at the same time as distinct from the Lord, is what led some of the Fathers, like Tertullian and Augustine, to identify him with the pre-incarnate Christ. I think, however, that the point is that the angel represents the presence of God with his people and will later be replaced by the ark of the covenant. The cloud will remain as a visible representation of the Lord's presence, but the character, if you will, invested with the Lord's authority, that which will go into battle before the people, for example, will be the ark—taking the place of the angel. In Ancient Near Eastern thought, what belonged to a god represented that god. So, for example, while everyone knew that an idol in a temple wasn't actually the god itself, but they treated it as if it was: feeding it, praying to it, even listening to it and obeying it. The cloud, the ark, and the angel all represent the Lord in a similar way. Through them he acts, he guides, he guards, he speaks and since the people know that it's him, they obey. And what the Lord speaks to them now is a promise: I will prepare the way before you and take you to the land I have prepared for you. And, in response, the people are expected to obey him.

Notice the key point here: The Lord is not merely with his people. No. The Lord goes before them. He leads them. The Lord doesn't get up and follow whenever Israel decides to move on. No. In Numbers 14 we see what happened when the Israelites moved first. They attacked the Amalekites and Canaanites without the ark leading the way. They lost the battle. It is the Lord who leads. He led them out of Egypt with the angel and the cloud ahead of the people. He will lead them across the Jordan and into Canaan with the cloud and with the ark going ahead. The Lord leads; his people follow.

Now, beginning in verse 23 the Lord gives a second promise and it, too, is followed with a command. This one's longer.

“When my angel goes before you and brings you to the Amorites and the Hittites and the Perizzites and the Canaanites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, and I blot them out, you shall not bow down to their gods nor serve them, nor do as they do, but you shall utterly overthrow them and break their pillars in pieces. You shall serve the LORD your God, and he will bless your bread and your water, and I will take sickness away from among you. None shall miscarry or be barren in your land; I will fulfill the number of your days. (Exodus 23:23-26)

The Lord, represented by his angel, will go before the people and bring them into this land. At present it's filled with all the wrong “ites”—the Hittites and Amorites and Perizzites—but the Lord will “blot them out”. The Lord will blot them out on behalf of the Israelites. The Lord will take care of removing the people currently in the land. What Israel needs to take care of is eliminating every trace of their idolatry. Israel is to serve the Lord and him alone. She is to tear down and to break in pieces the “pillars”—the monuments associated

with the worship of those pagan gods—and to leave none standing. The Canaanites prayed to these pagan gods for blessings and for fertility and for long life, but the Lord wants his people to look to him and him alone for these things. Every trace of the pagan gods is to be destroyed. This is the land that the Lord has set apart for himself and into which he is inviting his people. And when the nations look at Israel, the Lord wants them to see a microcosm of creation and humanity set to rights. That begins with a people wholly devoted to the Creator.

In verse 27 the Lord's promise continues:

I will send my terror before you and will throw into confusion all the people against whom you shall come, and I will make all your enemies turn their backs to you. And I will send hornets before you, which shall drive out the Hivites, the Canaanites, and the Hittites from before you. I will not drive them out from before you in one year, lest the land become desolate and the wild beasts multiply against you. Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you have increased and possess the land. And I will set your border from the Red Sea to the Sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the Euphrates, for I will give the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you shall drive them out before you. (Exodus 23:27-31)

How will the Lord drive the people from his land? He will send his terror before the Israelites. He will throw the people into confusion. He will cause the people to run in fear. In Hebrew it says that the Lord will send a hornet—singular—before them. Some commentators think this is a reference to a plague—like frogs or gnats or hail that the Lord visited on the Egyptians, he'll send a plague of hornets before the Israelites to drive out the Canaanites. But the meaning

of the word isn't clear. It's only used three times in the Old Testament—always in relation to the conquest of Canaan—and I think it's better seen as a parallel to “terror”. Arabic still, today, uses “hornet” to describe a dread inspired by holy war and that seems to be the sense here. The Israelites are marching on the land in the Lord's name and dread will fall on the Canaanites and the dread itself will drive them out. In other words, while the Israelites will be the Lord's instrument, they must never forget that it is he who does this. There is no better example than their first “battle” at Jericho. The Israelites carried the ark ahead of them, announcing that the Lord had come, but for their part, what the Israelites did was strategically pointless. They marched in circles around the city blowing trumpets. It's not hard to imagine the people of Jericho standing on the wall and laughing at them. Until the walls fell down. And whom did the people of Jericho fear? Not the Israelites so much as their God. The Israelites had done nothing. Their God had done it all. And so a plague of dread would spread through the land. Where the ark and the cloud went ahead, the Canaanites fled in fear.

Of course, the Lord won't do this all at once. The Israelites didn't have the means or the numbers to fill and subdue the land overnight. Were the Lord to drive off every last Canaanite before Israel arrived, the cities would rot, thorns would overcome the fields, and wild animals would overrun the land. But as the people increased in number and had the resources to improve on the land, the Lord would gradually drive the Canaanites from it.

One point that's interesting is the borders described by the Lord. What they describe is a land from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean and from Wadi el-Arish in the southwest to the Euphrates in the North. Now, the fact is that Israel never reached those borders—not in the north. At Israel's

height, the Orontes River in what's now Syria was the northern limit of her influence, if not her control. For a short time Solomon extended his reach all the way to the Euphrates, but it's not clear that he had any meaningful rule over the far north—especially not since we're told that Rezon, the king or ruler of Damascus up in that region, was a constant thorn in Solomon's side. Even that aside, Israel never drove out the natives in north and never tore down their pagan altars.

So why would the Lord promise Israel borders she would never have? I suspect for the same reason that he made the idealised promise back in verses 25 and 26—a promise that he would take sickness from them and that none would miscarry or be barren. That didn't happen either. The Lord certainly blessed the land and his people in it, but the promise seems like hyperbole. Why would the Lord do that?

Well, I think the Lord's purpose was to point his people to a fulfilment that lay beyond earthly kings like Solomon and earthly geography like the land of Israel. This is a promise that was never fully fulfilled in the Old Testament even under the great kings, David and Solomon. And as plentiful as the land may have been, flowing with milk and honey, the people still knew the effects of humanity's separation from the life of God. The ultimate rule of the Lord over the nations and an end of sickness and death were not something that would ever be accomplished by an earthly king or by a holy war. And so, hundreds of years later, the prophets could appeal to these idealised promises and point God's people to a future in which the Lord himself would come to conquer sin and death and to establish a kingdom that would encompass all of creation.

So these seemingly unfulfilled promises do not mean that God got it wrong or that he failed to do what he

said. These unfulfilled promises point to something bigger and better than the covenant established at Sinai, to a people bigger and better than the biological children of Abraham, and to a mediator far greater than any Moses or David. They point to the Messiah.

Then the final verses of the passage, 32-33, ominously foreshadow the failure of the people. They reiterate the importance that the Lord's people serve and worship him and him alone:

You shall make no covenant with them and their gods. They shall not dwell in your land, lest they make you sin against me; for if you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you.”

The Lord will purge the land of its pagan inhabitants, but it's up to Israel to purge the land of the remnants of their pagan worship. This land is the Lord's land. He's bringing Israel in as tenants, so to speak, that they might serve him. And woe to any of the Lord's people who bring other gods into the Lord's house.

As I began to look ahead at this passage a couple of weeks ago, what came immediately to mind was Jesus' cleansing of the temple. It helps that the Greek word meaning “drive out” is used both by Mark to describe Jesus' action with the whip and, in the Septuagint, the Lord's terror driving out the Canaanite. Jesus' cleansing of the temple was an acted-out prophecy that works on multiple levels. As he disrupted the business of the temple, he sent a message that the temple's days were numbered. A better temple was coming. But on another level, Jesus was re-enacting the Lord's purging of an unholy people from the sacred precincts of his land. It wasn't just the temple that had become a den of thieves. The Lord's people had made the whole land into a den of thieves and judgement was coming. Finally, the work that Israel had never fully accomplished would be done by

Jesus, the Lord himself come to embody and to renew his people.

Israel had a heart problem. The Lord called his people to hear and to obey, to love and to serve. He gave to his people every reason to trust and obey him. He rescued them from Egypt, he cared for them in the wilderness, he drove the Canaanites before them and gave them a land of plenty. He gave them cities to live in that they had not built and fields and vineyards to harvest that they had not planted. But Israel failed. Israel failed because she had the same heart problem that the rest of the human race has, the same heart problem that separates us from God and from his life-giving presence.

To address, to fix that problem once and for all, Jesus came to save and to judge. Brothers and Sisters, the angel of the Lord is still with God's people. I don't know if Tertullian and Augustine were right that the angel of the Lord was the pre-incarnate Christ, but the fact is that Jesus now fulfils the role of the angel for the people of God. He guides and he guards and we hear and obey, not because we're better than those who went before us, but because Jesus has dealt with the problem of our self-centred and rebellious hearts by pouring God's Spirit into us. He's made us the new temple. He's made us the new land. And we carry it with us as we go out into the world in his name with the good news that he is Lord.

Consider what that means. Some Christians like to say things like, “God is my co-pilot”. But does that describe the relationship between Israel and the Lord? The image the Scriptures give us is just the opposite. Co-pilots are just along for the ride, ready to take over if the pilot needs a break. When Israel flew the plane, it crashed—so to speak. Brothers and Sisters, the Lord is the pilot. He leads the way. I'm not even sure we can call ourselves the co-pilots. We're the passengers in the cabin, going where he takes us. It

might be more accurate to say that this is a military plane and we're the troops he's taking into battle. Of course, the analogy breaks down there, because unlike an airplane pilot who stays with the plane, our pilot will stay with us, will go ahead of us even as we leave the plane and go into battle.

And we can take comfort and have courage as we go into the battle, as we charge into the world with the gospel. When he died on the cross and rose from the grave, he conquered our greatest enemies: sin and death. Jesus is not weak. He isn't going to stand by us, powerless to act. He is already the victor who has conquered our greatest enemies.

Friends, that ought to give us comfort and courage. I know it's hard to grasp. I think it takes a lifetime of walking in faith for the full implications to sink in and to truly know what it means. But walk in faith we must. Listen as you walk. Steep yourselves in the Scriptures. We can never trust and obey if we don't, because it's in the Scriptures that Jesus, the word, speaks. And it's in the Scriptures that he reminds us of the Lord's faithfulness to do what he has promised. And he has filled us with his Spirit in fulfillment of those promises, so that our hearts are turned towards him. As he promised his people in the Old Testament, he promises to his people in the New: I go before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared.

Let's pray: Gracious Father, you go before your people as you have always done. Teach us to follow. Hold us back when we're tempted to try to take the lead. Keep our eyes always focused on Jesus that we might walk where he walks and hold onto our sure and certain hope of the life of his kingdom. Remind us to immerse ourselves in your word that we might hear you speak. And work in our heart by your Spirit that we might love

what you love and follow Jesus's leading eagerly and with joy and courage. We ask this in his name. Amen.