

An Angel and a Dog: God's Surprising Messengers in Tobit

Sixth in a Summer Sermon Series on *The Apocrypha*

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The book of *Tobit* is a study in Jewish life. It relates the fortunes of two families who have been exiled after the fall of Jerusalem in the 6th century BC. The tale is intended to entertain as well as to inspire faith in God and human effort. If I were to try to summarize the plot of *Tobit* in a sentence, I would say that “*Tobit* is a delightful story of the afflictions of a pious Israelite, Tobit, and the adventures of his dutiful son, Tobias, who makes a journey in the company of a dog and an angel and returns with a bride and the means to restore his father's health and wealth.” The author creates this story out of 3 well known folk tales but the spirit of the book comes from the Hebrew bible. There is irony. There is humor. But the heart of the story is about the constancy of God's loving care and concern for God's people and the faithfulness of God's people to this promise.

Early in the book we meet two Jewish families. First we meet Tobit and his family who have been exiled to Ninevah by the Assyrians, the enemy whom we met last week in the book of Judith. There in Ninevah, and despite his loyalty to God, Tobit is reduced to poverty and is afflicted with blindness.

Then we meet Sarah, who has been exiled to Media, another region of Assyrian rule. She, too, copes with tragedy. She has lost 7 husbands in a row, all killed on the occasion of their wedding night. Can you imagine? Who would ever want to try their luck with this ill fated woman?

The book of *Tobit* then weaves the fortunes of these two families into a romantic, engaging story which becomes a model for Jewish existence and faith in the midst of adversity. Having been captured by their enemies, the Jews were living through a difficult time, tempted constantly by the worldly vices and allurements of Hellenism and a culture far different from their Jewish laws and lifestyles. In our contemporary day and age, we are far from exempt from needing to hear a word from the scriptures that calls us to faithfulness and fidelity in a time when vices and allurements challenge our own fidelity to God and our discipleship with Jesus.

As I studied the book of *Tobit* this week, I was particularly struck by the prayers that are uttered by the various players in this story and decided to build this reflection around those prayers. It will be a way to tell the story but to tell it from the perspective of a faith journey. Although the characters in *Tobit* seem like little, insignificant people, - Tobit and Tobias and Sarah – they are truly God's giants because through prayer they communicate faithfulness as well as a sense of humor in the most painful situations. Tobit, Tobias and Sarah are actually more than God's afflicted people in Ninevah and Media. They are Israel. And for us, as Christian readers, they are you and me, reckoning with God's purpose and promises in everyday life.

Let's not begin with the prayers of Tobit and Sarah that are found in Chapter 3, because they are prayers that are uttered out of desperation. Tobit has lost not only his eyesight but also his fortune and he pleads with God to release him from his distress so that he might go to his eternal home. Sarah, who has lost 7 of her 7 husbands on her wedding nights also pleads with God for death. She, too, asks for release from the earth that she might no longer have to live in disgrace as a widow. God, we learn, hears the prayers of both Tobit and Sarah and sends the angel Raphael to help and heal both of them. So, we learn early on that Tobit's blindness will be cured and that Sarah will be given in marriage to Tobias, son of Tobit, and will be set free from the wicked demon that has claimed the lives of her former husbands. So there's no suspense in this story. We know the end of the tale. Yet, like Shakespeare's tragedies and other great fiction, the story of Tobit can be enjoyed time and again, even though the outcome is foretold.

Let's turn to Tobit's prayer for his son Tobias. Tobit prays over his son before sending him on a journey to collect money that he has left in trust with a relative in Media. In the prayer he exhorts his son to live uprightly and generously, especially giving alms to those who are poor. Let's turn to Chapter 4, verses 5 – 11 in the book of *Tobit*.

5 'Revere the Lord all your days, my son, and refuse to sin or to transgress his commandments. Live uprightly all the days of your life, and do not walk in the ways of wrongdoing; ⁶for those who act in accordance with truth will prosper in all their activities. To all those who practise righteousness ⁷give alms from your possessions, and do not let your eye begrudge the gift when you make it. Do not turn your face away from anyone who is poor, and the face of God will not be turned away from you. ⁸If you have many possessions, make your gift from them in proportion; if few, do not be afraid to give according to the little you have. ⁹So you will be laying up a good treasure for yourself against the day of necessity. ¹⁰For almsgiving delivers from death and keeps you from going into the Darkness. ¹¹Indeed, almsgiving, for all who practise it, is an excellent offering in the presence of the Most High.

What wisdom do you find in Tobit's prayer for his son? Would you offer such a prayer for your child? grandchild? niece or nephew? a child at Holy Trinity?

One of the most important themes throughout *Tobit* is almsgiving. The word appears more often in *Tobit* than in any book of the Old Testament. I believe that I counted 22 times that almsgiving is noted. What is almsgiving? What does Jesus say about almsgiving?

Tobit introduces the idea of proportional giving. We give according to what we have. If we live on a fixed income, then we give out of that amount. If we have a sizable income, then we give out of that amount. Everyone cannot give the same amount but everyone can give according to what they have. Remember last year's formula that was introduced during our Stewardship Campaign? 10. 10. 80. Give away 10%. Save 10%. Live on 80% of your income. The percentage would be the same for everyone but proportionally, the amount would differ according to your income.

At the end of this prayer, Tobit utters a series of wise sayings so that his son may prosper. He encourages fair treatment of others and tells him not to do to others what you would hate being done to you. He tells him to avoid fornication and drunkenness and to provide ample food and

clothing for the needy. Above all, he reminds him to bless God, seeking God's wisdom at all times.

Tobit and his wife Anna bid their only child, Tobias, a safe journey. Tobias' dog sets out on the journey with him. In my survey of scripture, it is the only positive reference to a dog. In the bible, the dog is primarily an unclean animal and a scavenger, often an object of contempt and hostility. Here, Tobias' dog becomes a charming detail, adding fuzzy warmth to the story.

Tobias' sets off on a dangerous journey for the sake of his father's welfare. Like other apocryphal figures that we have met this summer – Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who risked their very lives in their acts of faithfulness to the God of Israel, and Judith, whose warrior disguise put her at total risk in the enemy camp of Holofernes, Tobias risks the dangers of the journey for the sake of his father's health and welfare. Does not Jesus call on us, as his disciples, to do the same? He invites us to take up the cross, to intentionally choose ministries that place demands on our lives for his sake.

Now in addition to the dog, Tobias' also is accompanied by the angel Raphael. Many times this summer we have met angels in the Apocrypha. They are God's messengers that companion God's people, protecting them and encouraging them in their mission. Again, I invite you to ponder the angels in your life – those friends, those family members, those church people who accompany you on your faith journey, making abundant life possible.

Now it is the angel Raphael that has the remedies both for Sarah's demon and for Tobit's blindness.

Let's turn to chapter 6.16 – 17 and read the advice that Raphael gives to Tobias.

16 But Raphael said to him, 'Do you not remember your father's orders when he commanded you to take a wife from your father's house? Now listen to me, brother, and say no more about this demon. Take her. I know that this very night she will be given to you in marriage.¹⁷ When you enter the bridal chamber, take some of the fish's liver and heart, and put them on the embers of the incense. An odour will be given off;¹⁸ the demon will smell it and flee, and will never be seen near her any more. Now when you are about to go to bed with her, both of you must first stand up and pray, imploring the Lord of heaven that mercy and safety may be granted to you. Do not be afraid, for she was set apart for you before the world was made. You will save her, and she will go with you. I presume that you will have children by her, and they will be as brothers to you. Now say no more!' When Tobias heard the words of Raphael and learned that she was his kinswoman, related through his father's lineage, he loved her very much, and his heart was drawn to her.

The line that strikes me in these instructions given to Tobias by the angel Raphael is this: "Now when you are about to go to bed with her, both of you must first stand up and pray, imploring the Lord of heaven that mercy and safety may be granted to you." What an important model of prayer. Do we always remember to pray before going to bed for the night? How would our lives differ if we made time throughout the day to turn to God in prayer? Arising in the morning and bedding down at night we give ourselves to God. Simply asking God for mercy and safety is sufficient for a life of faith. From that, God's wisdom will guide us in all that we do.

Now Tobias takes Raphael's instructions seriously and following the marriage to Sarah he invites Sarah to pray with him. His prayer is found in Chapter 8: 4 -8. Let's read the prayer that is on their lips.

⁴ When the parents had gone out and shut the door of the room, Tobias got out of bed and said to Sarah, 'Sister, get up, and let us pray and implore our Lord that he grant us mercy and safety.'

⁵ So she got up, and they began to pray and implore that they might be kept safe. Tobias began by saying,

'Blessed are you, O God of our ancestors,
and blessed is your name in all generations for ever.

Let the heavens and the whole creation bless you for ever.

⁶ You made Adam, and for him you made his wife Eve
as a helper and support.

From the two of them the human race has sprung.
You said, "It is not good that the man should be alone;
let us make a helper for him like himself."

⁷ I now am taking this kinswoman of mine,
not because of lust,
but with sincerity.

Grant that she and I may find mercy
and that we may grow old together.'

⁸ And they both said, 'Amen, Amen.' ⁹ Then they went to sleep for the night.

Grant that we might find mercy and grow old together. What a beautiful prayer for any who are partnered. "Because God so loved us, we ought to love one another" we are instructed in 1 John. And we have learned over time that love knows no bounds. Race, class, sexual orientation, cultural differences are no barriers for love. How wise is Tobias to know that his love is not one of lust but one of sincerity. Oh that partners might pray together every night, "God, may we know your mercy and grow old together."

Following the wedding night, of course everyone in Sarah's family expects to find the groom dead! In fact they have dug a grave for Tobias and send one of the maids in to see if he is dead. They are pleasantly surprised to learn that Tobias is alive and that nothing seems to be wrong! Sarah's parents prayer is found in Chapter 8 verses 15 – 17.

¹⁵ So they blessed the God of heaven, and Raguel said,
'Blessed are you, O God, with every pure blessing;
let all your chosen ones bless you.

Let them bless you for ever.

¹⁶ Blessed are you because you have made me glad.
It has not turned out as I expected,
but you have dealt with us according to your great mercy.

¹⁷ Blessed are you because you had compassion
on two only children.

Be merciful to them, O Master, and keep them safe;

bring their lives to fulfilment
in happiness and mercy.'

This prayer reminds us, as God's faithful people, that we turn to God in prayer when our lives are blessed. We offer prayers of thanksgiving to the One who provides for us. Can you think of a time or an experience in your life when you gave God thanks?

After the birth of each of our 3 children, I can remember offering God thanks for the gift of new life and for the well being of these newborn babes.

Ultimately, Tobias and Sarah arrive back in Ninevah and with the angel Raphael's remedy he applies the medicine to his fathers eyes. Tobit is able to see once again and immediately turns to God with a prayer of thanksgiving. Let's read Tobit's prayer in Chapter 11 verses 13 – 15.

¹³Next, with both his hands he peeled off the white films from the corners of his eyes. Then Tobit saw his son and threw his arms around him, ¹⁴and he wept and said to him, 'I see you, my son, the light of my eyes!' Then he said,
'Blessed be God,
and blessed be his great name,
and blessed be all his holy angels.
May his holy name be blessed
throughout all the ages.

¹⁵Though he afflicted me,
he has had mercy upon me.
Now I see my son Tobias!'

The point of the book of *Tobit* is that if we are faithful, God is faithful. This does not mean that tragedy and disaster will not visit us, but it does mean that God will always be with us and will send God's angels, God's messengers as signs of God's intentions for healing and wholeness. To be faithful to God might also mean that the choices we make might radically alter our life and lifestyle and even cause us conflict and pain. It means that for the sake of Jesus Christ and the gospel the journey will be bold and risk-filled for Jesus and if we are faithful the journey will be joy-filled.

Like Tobit we will bless God and sing God's praises with these words: "Blessed be God who lives forever! If you turn to God with all your heart and with all your soul and do what is true before God, then God will turn to you. God's face will no longer be hidden! Blessed be God! and the blessed will bless God's holy name forever and ever!" (selected verses from Chapter 13)

Amen and Amen.