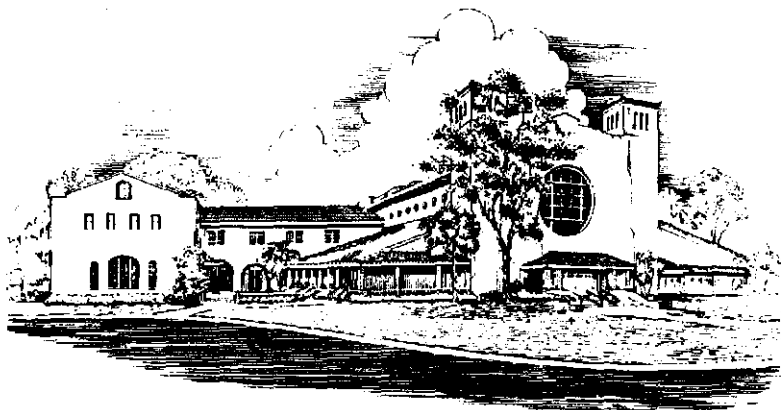


# First Church Pulpit

**"TWELVE LEGIONS OF ANGELS  
ARE WAITING FOR YOUR CALL..."**

**Text:** "Do you think I cannot appeal to my Father, and  
he will at once send me more than twelve legions  
of angels."  
— (Matthew 26:53)



## FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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It must be the little boy in me who loves adventures so. I grew up on a diet of thrillers: the Enright Theatre Saturday morning motion picture shows of Superman and Captain Marvel, Batman and Robin, and Dick Tracy ever arriving in the nick of time to rescue Sweet Mary from the certain jaws of death; on "Out of the past come the thundering hoofbeats of the great horse Silver", and the Lone Ranger is there to rescue another hapless widow, whose farm is about to be foreclosed by the evil banker Mr. Stedman, whose henchmen have driven off her adoring husband to start out anew somewhere to the South beyond the mountains....

It must be that background which equipped me years and years ago to recognize the deep treasure of this marvelous and irreplaceable little verse, the 52nd Verse of Chapter 26 in Matthew.

It comes at the moment when the Chief Priests have arrived with their thugs. They have come to arrest Jesus, in the Garden of Gethsemane. Judas Iscariot, one of his closest friends, has just betrayed him for thirty pieces of silver. Simon Peter, in a rash outburst of manly bravado had taken out his sword, and struck the ear off the slave of the High Priest. It is John who tells us it was Peter, and the slave of the High Priest was named Malchus. And John also adds the touching reminder that Jesus healed the man. But in Matthew, Jesus rebuked Peter, and said: "If you live by the sword, you will die by the sword."

Then comes my verse. Jesus asks: "Do you not think that I can appeal to my Father and He would send me twelve legions of angels?" Now, twelve legions are a lot of angels. A Roman Legion had a minimum of six thousand men. That would be seventy-two thousand plus angels. What an army they would be! For one thing, they are invisible. They could come and go at will. For another, angels are invincible. Nothing you can do will ever harm an angel. Only God can touch them. They have the strength to strengthen people. With the point of a finger, "Poof!", all the thugs of the High Priest would have been gone.

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It was Jesus's way of saying: "Simon, I appreciate your courage, but let us not be foolish. We are not fighting these thugs and the powers of the world. Our real enemies are the principalities and the powers, death and self-destruction, and... the burden of Sin. We could wipe out this band of vagabonds easily, but the eternal issue would still be unresolved. It is a pity to the little boy in me, that the twelve legions of angels never came. I would have loved to read a story of how Jesus won the battle.... But it was not to be.

There are three assumptions, if you think about it, in the little verse.

It says, first of all, that there are angels up there, waiting for your call. Do you believe it? Seventy thousand angels, at least, are waiting for you to ask for them to come to help you. Whatever be your

need, illness, or loneliness, or worry for one you love, or worry for yourself, or problems you cannot handle, the words of Jesus are based on the assumption that God has His angels waiting just for you to ask Him.

The second assumption, of course, is that God could send them, if He wanted to. That He could, somehow, break the boundaries between the supernatural and the natural; that He could intrude upon the world with His everlasting power. Thirdly, it says that God would have sent them if Jesus had only asked.

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Tolstoi spent a lot of time and trouble in his novels, asking over and over again if you would rather succeed in a cause that will ultimately fail, or fail in a cause that will ultimately succeed. Would you rather find victory and success, fame and fortune here and now? Or would you be willing, as He was, to devote yourself to give everything, knowing that while you will die, the cause will live?

That is the question each and every one of us has to ask almost every day throughout our lives. Am I looking for victory now for me and mine, or am I asking God to take up my life in something that transcends me and mine? It is a heavy question, to be sure, but it is easily answered, if you follow Jesus.

I don't know about you, but when I grew up in the 1940's and early 50's in the

neighborhood of Garfield, bounded by Penn Avenue and Schenley and the meandering boundaries of Allegheny Cemetery North Negley, amongst my friends there were some absolutely inviolable rules for what acceptable behavior would be. While they were never emblazoned in stone, like the Ten Commandments, they had every bit as much claim upon us. You simply could not violate them, or you would be outlawed forever from the gang.

Like for example it was a heinous sin in the canons of our little community to tattle on another to the teacher. I mean, you just were not permitted ever to tell on anyone. One day there was a little red-headed boy, who emptied the wastebasket into the desk drawers of the teacher. And Henry Scullo actually told who had done it!.... I tell you, if Henry walked up to me at the end of this service, the first thing I would think about, as I always do, is that he is a cheat and a tattletale. I did not speak to him ever again, and I would not willingly speak to him now.

There were other traitorous acts, of course, punishable by exile: like failing to share your money with the gang. There was Ernie Davidson (We all had jobs back then, paper routes, and caddying, and all the rest), and would you like to know what Ernie did? He would take his pay home, and put half of it in his bank, and spend the other half on Ernie. The rest of us were broke all the time, as we still are, because we'd spend our money on everybody else. We even would collect early on my paper route to get some money, so we could

have some fun that night.... I want to tell you. If Ernie Davidson came by my house this afternoon, I would not let him in. And when he walked away, you can be sure I would hiss the name we always called him from that day on: "Cheaps".

And, you were not allowed to criticize anyone in your crowd. I mean, parents criticize, and preachers, and cops, and storekeepers, beating everybody down, but... truth might be important... but never were you permitted to criticize a friend. We were to build each other up, never hurt the self-feelings of another.

I want to tell you, if Dicky Samuelson were to greet me this afternoon (I surely hope he doesn't, if he is listening), the first thing that would come to my mind would be an evening in 1947 or '48, when we were assaulted by the gang on Broad Street, and Dicky ran home to his mother. He was absolutely worthless after that. I used to cross the street, so that I would not have to look him in the eye. Now, to maintain my ministerial image, I'd love to tell you that I am sorry that I feel that way... but I am really not. I never gave him quite enough. Loyalty to your friends is the number one: My team, my army, my navy, my nation....

So, if you feel as I do, or even partly that, you might have guessed how deeply I feel about this passage and the twelve legions of angels, and of the behavior of the disciples who were his closest friends the night he was arrested in the garden. Can you imagine? He took three of them:

Peter, James and John, off with him for a little bit, while he went on to pray for guidance. He said: "Will you wait and watch for one hour, I'll be back." When he came back, they were asleep. He went away again, and he came back a second time, and a third... and all three times they fell asleep, when they were supposed to be guarding him. My heavens, that seems absolutely unforgivable.

And, Simon Peter, the leader of them all, denied him, rather than go to suffer with him. The Romans you can understand. It was their job to crucify infidels, right? It was assigned in the manual and the rubrics of their army. When you are judged guilty, it is all right to execute. A burden... but I can understand the Romans. And, you can understand the crowds, right? Crowds are fickle. They go with whatever is happening at the moment. Like Napoleon was riding into a little town he had conquered in Switzerland one day, and one of his aides said as the crowd cheered: "Isn't it wonderful, General, how they cheer for you! Doesn't that make you feel proud?" Napoleon said: "No. They would cheer just as loudly, if I were heading for the gallows."

Caiaphas you can understand also... I mean, after all, he is the High Priest, and he has a budget to raise for the Temple. This little scalawag from Galilee was ruining his pitch. I mean, he was upstaging the chief priest! Right? You can understand how Caiaphas felt threatened by it. He could not allow the

leading Jewish priest of the day to be made a laughing-stock by some despicable itinerant evangelist, who pretended to heal people, and raise them from the dead.... Can you imagine? I can understand Caiaphas. Jesus was the enemy!

But his friends, and his family.... I cannot understand them.... How could they be so selfish as to leave him, when he needed them? It is a good thing I am not God, for I never would forgive them. Not for "piking out", as we used to call it, when he was all alone. Well, thank God I am not God. And I am not Jesus, either. The Bible says: "My ways are not your ways", said the Lord. Jesus forgave them. He said: "It's all right, I understand. I am human, too." We say, "First time it's the dog's fault, and after that, it never happens again." We take a risk one time; never a second time. Jesus said: "You must take the risk seventy times seven times, and seventy-seven times that."

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You know, Jesus had a boyhood, too, even though the Bible tells us precious little of it. All we know is that one scene in the Temple, when he caused his parents trouble by staying behind, and when asked why he did it, he said: "I was about my Father's business." Self-righteously religious -- it's there to prove that he was holy, which he was. But there are lots of other stories of his childhood, some in apocryphal records, and some you have to imagine. There are scenes with his playmates, where he uses his power to

correct the things he wants to. They are not in the Bible.

And this is not in the Scripture, either; but I can envision what might have happened as he learned about His Power; as he began to feel deep inside that it was only leading to the Cross. That is what's going on all the way back at the temptation. "What kind of a Messiah will I be?" And one day the depressing thought occurred to him: "This is not heading anywhere. I am going to die." And can you imagine this little image cropping up.... "Oh, no, God will never allow it to happen. I mean, He will save me, somehow! He'll send some angels, right? He will not allow His Son to die!" (I should tell you to be quite honest, there are many commentators, students of the Bible, who say this verse does not really belong in Matthew. It probably does not. It might have been added by some copyist.... That's all right. They copied Scriptures by hand in Greek, and it was hard to keep concentration to a whole long scroll.

If that is true, then the question becomes: Why was it there in Jesus's words, or why did someone add it? I think the answer is the same. It is certainly there to reassure us, and to tell us these three things, little things, and then we are done.

1. First, the words of Jesus, or the added words, are there to tell us that Jesus did not die because he was weak and they were strong. Hmmm.... It is a way of saying that he could have stopped it all

right then. Like, when he was on the cross, they said: "Why don't you come down? If you are the man you say you are, surely you could hop down on the ground!" (Oh, I would have loved it if he had. That would have made the headlines: "Condemned man jumps down from cross!") If he had, the eternal issue of your life and death (and mine), would still be unresolved. It's a way of saying: At the moment of our weakness, we are the strongest we will ever be. That when we know we need to trust in God, and cannot do it on our own; that is the moment we are the strongest, even though the world would call it "weak." That is the time the Power of God and all His angels are waiting for your call.

2. Secondly, to have power and choose not to use it is an awesome burden. I know it with parents and with children. For a long time, parents have tremendous power over children, but to watch a parent have the power and refuse to use it is a mighty thing. To allow the child to grow, and make mistakes, and bump back and forth until he gets there. It's a husband who allows his wife to be herself, and not an image of the wife he thinks she should be.... It's a friend who says: "I'll take you as you are. I could march away; I could make you feel small, but I won't, because I am your friend." It is the pastor saying: "I have my way; you have yours. Let's see if we can meet somewhere in between. You don't have to be like me. When you get to Heaven's door, no one is going to say: "Why were you not like Cromie?" They are going to ask: "Why were you not true to you?" Right?

3. Third and last: You and I don't need more power; not to overcome the world, not to overcome our illnesses, not to overcome our loneliness. We don't need more prestige and power; we don't need more of the treasures of the earth. I tell you, they are not worth a nickel when it comes to what matters most.

We need more love, more kindness, more patience, more peace, more trust, more prayer. Of this you can be certain. Think about it in reference to your present problem: Twelve legions of angels are waiting there to help you. All you have to do is ask. They might not give you what you seek, but they will give you what you need. And what more could you want? For now, and evermore. Amen.