

RED HEADED ANGELS

A SERMON FOR EXTRAORDINARY TIME
SUNDAY, MAY 31, 2015

First Presbyterian Church

Marianna, Florida

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Hebrews 13:1-2; 5b-6

Someone once asked me if there were many red-heads mentioned in the Bible. Or maybe any. The answer is that there are some. And maybe more than we realize.

In the art of the Middle Ages, Adam and Eve are often depicted with red hair, though there is no scriptural evidence that they were red-headed. Cain, their son who killed his brother Abel, is also depicted as a red-head, and referred to as such in some of the non-scriptural works from ancient days. So are King Ahab and Jezebel referred to and depicted.

So is King David, and there is reason to believe that David was indeed a red-head. He is described as "ruddy" in more than one scriptural reference, and a legend persists that Samuel had reservations about anointing him as the future king of Israel because of his red hair.

Esau, the twin brother of Jacob for sure was a red head, described as being both red haired and very hairy even from birth. His descendents were referred to as the Edomites, coming from the Hebrew word for "red". That Hebrew word may even be the root-word behind the name of Adam, reinforcing the idea that the first man created was a red-head.

Amongst New Testament characters, there are fewer red-heads to choose from.

In the stained glass windows of the great cathedrals of Europe, as well as in paintings by Leonardo DaVinci and Michaelangelo, Mary Magdalene is shown as a red head.

Robert Graves, in a rather controversial and maybe even heretical book *King Jesus*, published in 1946, portrayed Jesus as having red hair.

In many works of art, there are red-haired angels, and Andrew Greeley, a Roman Catholic priest, has presented the archangel Gabriel as a beautiful red-haired woman in more than one of his novels which are really parables.

Thus, red heads in scripture, and red heads in religious art and literature, have been around a long time and continue to increase.

It has been more than a decade since the first article appeared in print telling us that red heads were headed for extinction. The issue really gained publicity

when it was lifted up in *National Geographic*. You know, anything printed in *National Geographic* has to be true, doesn't it?

Well, the articles stated that within a hundred years, maybe as few as fifty, there would be no more red-haired babies. The reason stated was based on sound genetic theory, and upon the increased cultural diversity in the world in which we live.

I learned long ago that red hair is a recessive gene. That means that both parents have to have the gene in order to have a red-headed baby. I've also discovered that the gene can lie dormant, passed on from generation to generation without being expressed, until the right gene match comes from a new bride or groom with the red-hair gene.

Blue eyes, blond hair, maybe even left-handedness, are genes that behave much the same way.

But someone figured out that less than 2% of the world's population was red-headed and that only about 10% had the red-headed gene. Thus, with more and more intermarriage between racial ethnic groups where the red-haired gene is absent, it stood to reason that red-heads would one day be extinct.

But God doesn't always stand to reason. God doesn't always buy our theories. Sometimes God sends us signs as to who really is in control of the universe.

Within weeks after I first heard that red-heads were going to be extinct, a young couple in the Arcadia church had a red-headed baby. Neither one of them was red-haired, though the husband's grandmother and twin brother were.

Then the young woman who was directing our preschool at the time had a little girl, with auburn locks. Those two little girls looked so much alike that they could be twins! I think one mama even picked up the wrong baby in the nursery one time when they were both there! Then the granddaughter of a dear friend, out in Texas, had a little red headed boy named Andrew. And all of a sudden, I began to see red headed babies every where I went.

That summer, Polly and I traveled to Minnesota and Wisconsin for a memorial service. At the Minneapolis/St. Paul Airport, there was a beautiful red-haired little girl, maybe eighteen months old, boarding the same plane we were flying on. She and her mother and older brother were about two rows in front of us. As Polly and I were being seated, the little doll stood up, looked over the seat back, and gave me a smile, a giggle, and a wave. There was instant recognition in her eyes, a special sparkle.

A month or so later, I was in the airport in Nashville, Tennessee, picking up our son, Kris. As I was waiting in the baggage claim area, there was a young

mother, with two boys, picking up their suitcases. All of a sudden, the smaller boy, probably just entering that stage known as the terrible twos, broke loose from his brother, and came streaking across the lobby to where I was sitting. He slid to a stop, took a deep bow, doffing his oversized baseball cap, to reveal a mop of carrot colored curls. With a smile, a giggle, and a wave, he spun on his heels and ran back to his brother. Again, there was a special sparkle, a special gleam in his big brown eyes. He and I shared a secret, but what was it?

Well, by this time, I was beginning to get the message. Something special is going on here! I looked around, and I saw in our church, in our community, in our world, a disproportionate number of red headed children. More than 2%. Maybe more than 10%. Maybe not so many, but in all shades of red, from strawberry blond through carrot and orange to auburn, with blue eyes and green eyes and even brown eyes!

When we arrived in Marianna, the very first time I took Polly out to eat, we went to the Mexican restaurant out by Wal-Mart. There was a big family seated at the table next to us. And on the end, in a high chair, was this cute little red-headed boy, who smiled and giggled and waved.

Among the young ministers in our Presbytery, there is a wonderful couple, Ben and Hailey. Ben is as red-haired, fair-skinned as a human being can be. Hailey is of Hawaiian and Italian ancestry, and has dark hair and flashing dark eyes. There is no way those two can have a red-haired fair skinned baby, right? Don't tell their toddler, Asher that! He looks like a clone of his father!

Polly and I were having dinner at Panama City Beach recently. A young couple came and sat at the table next to us. Their little boy was strapped in the high chair when he turned, looked at me, clapped his hands, and gave me a "thumbs up". Throughout the meal, I'd get a smile, a wink, a clap, a thumbs up, from that little red headed angel.

They are everywhere!

One struck me in particular: I was having some tests run at the hospital. And, frankly, I was concerned. Something wasn't right, and I was having tests run to see if I had a tumor, cancer, something bad wrong.

The morning of my tests, there was a young couple, with a red-haired little girl, going through the stations at the hospital with me. Both mother and father were dark haired, dark skinned, dark eyed. Honestly, I thought they might be Hispanic, or even Arabic, they were so dark. Yet they had this beautiful red headed baby, with sparkling blue eyes, and fair skin.

After the tests at the hospital, I was starving to death, so I headed out to get something to eat, and wound up turning in at one of the restaurants where I

never eat. I mean, ever. I think that was the only time in my years in Arcadia that I had breakfast by myself in that place.

Imagine my surprise when just a minute after I'd sat down and placed my order, the dark couple with the red-headed baby came in and sat at a table near me.

The little girl stood up in her chair, looked over its back at me, waved, smiled, giggled, and then turned around and sat down. Throughout the meal, every few minutes, she would do the same thing. When I got up to leave, she reached out to me as I passed their table. Picking her up, I asked her parents, "Where did you get this beautiful red-headed angel?"

They laughed, and said that no one in their families had ever had red hair, and they did indeed consider her an angel, a gift from God, because they weren't supposed to have any children, and here she was!

In that moment, I got the message from God, and I knew my test results would be fine, and so would that marvelous baby's. God put us together so I could get a message.

Angels are messengers from God. That's what they are. Angels bring us a message from God.

I'm not even going to try to name all those red-headed angels I have encountered. They are waitresses, nurses, clerks, law enforcement officers. But each one of them is an angel, a messenger from God. Each one of us brings us a message that says that God is at work in the world. That God hasn't turned His back on us. That God cares. That God loves us. That God is still sending His angels among us with a message of love and concern and hope and joy.

Every time I see a red headed child, I know that I'm looking at a sign that God is still in the world, overcoming the world, overcoming the odds.

The God who loved the world so much that He gave His only begotten son, that whosoever believes in Him might not perish, but have eternal life, is sending His love into the world not just in red-headed babies, but in all the children that bless our lives. But sometimes, He has to wave a flag of red hair to get my attention.

Will red heads be extinct in fifty years? A hundred? Not as long as God keeps sending His red headed angels to remind us of His loving concern for us.

Now I want to be perfectly clear: I don't believe every red-head is an angel. Nor do I believe that every angel is red headed

But I know in my heart of hearts that when one old worn out preacher needed a sign, a reminder, of God's love and God's concern, God sent His angels, and they had red hair.

Let us pray.

O Lord, help us to see the angels that you send us. Help us to receive your messages of love and care and hope that you send us every day. In the name of Jesus Christ who saves us we pray. Amen.