

Angels Come At Christmas

Luke 1.5-15a, 26-38, 2.8-14

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December 21, 2003 — 4th Sunday of Advent

Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

Luke 1.5-15a (NRSV)

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years. Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.”

Luke 1.26-38 (NRSV)

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.” Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

Luke 2.8-14 (NRSV)

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the

city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

Introduction

Christmas always has angels. Maybe its the angel atop the Christmas tree or perhaps the little cherub angels around the crèche. Maybe the little angels that surprise and delight are the ones that miss their lines in church Christmas pageants. Christmas always has angels.

But these days we don't need to wait for Christmas to see angels. Bookstores have shelves of books about angels. According to Amazon.com, there are 6,798 books with the word angel in the title. Angels also star today in television shows and movies. People go on talk shows and tell about close encounters of the angelic kind. We like angels today. I don't remember them being so fashionable when I was a kid but angels are certainly popular now. So let's reflect for a moment about angels who come at Christmas.

ONE: Three kinds of angels

1. The Angel of Promise

In the three texts we encountered three kinds of angels. First, the Angel of Promise. The priest Zechariah had the high honor one day of offering the incense at the central altar in the Temple, while the rest waited in the courtyard. But the real story is that Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were very old. For years they prayed for a child but long ago gave up hope. Then suddenly while praying for the nation, out of the corner of his eye Zechariah sees an angel along side the altar.

No one else was suppose to be there with him so he was greatly startled. But the angel said, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John.”

Standing there in his old age, Zechariah was just like the nation Israel. For seven centuries great prophets like Isaiah and Micah had proclaimed a hope that some day God would send his Messiah. But with so much time gone by, hope was gone. Zechariah was hopeless and his people were hopeless too.

But the Angel of Promise announced something wonderful: “Your prayer has been heard.” God may seem absent. Time goes on and we may feel that God no longer listens or cares. But the angel announces the promise: “your prayer has been heard.”

We need to hear that. Some of us have prayed and waited long, perhaps giving up, wondering if God any longer hears or answers. But don't give up, my friend. Angels come at Christmas.

2. The Angel of Power

The second angel is the Angel of Power. Six months have passed. The scene is a backwater village named Nazareth. It was of no account whatsoever but in Nazareth there lived a peasant girl named Mary engaged to a carpenter named Joseph.

Of all the places to not expect an angel, Nazareth would be the place. And no one would expect an angel to talk to a fourteen-year-old girl in Podunksville — I mean Nazareth. But there in a no-place the angel tells a nobody that she will be the mother of the Messiah.

Mary was also afraid. *And* skeptical. She knew she wasn't important. She knew she lived in an unimportant place. She knew she was very young. But she wasn't stupid. "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel gave some very fuzzy explanation about the Spirit but then added these golden words: "For nothing will be impossible with God."

That's the only real explanation given in the Bible for the manner of Jesus' birth or anything else about him. The power of God is how Jesus was born. Scientifically this can never be proved or explained, but by the power that's able to do all things, a child was born to a peasant girl and we still worship that child as Lord and King. For nothing will be impossible with God. Angels come at Christmas.

3. The Angel of Peace

Nine months later we meet the third Christmas angel, the Angel of Peace. It's a rocky hillside outside a village called Bethlehem. Some shepherds are taking care of their sheep one night.

We need to remember that shepherds were illiterate. Socially they were on the lowest rung of society's ladder. For the most part, shepherds were quite irreligious. Who has time to go to church — synagogue — when you've got to take care of sheep?

But a bright light shines on these illiterate, socially outcast, irreligious shepherds and out of the light an angelic messenger says, "Don't be afraid! I have good news for you, which will make everyone happy. This very day in King David's hometown a Savior was born for you. He is Christ the Lord." (Contemporary English Version)

The most important words here are "for you." *FOR YOU* — smelly, irreligious, non-standing-in-society shepherds. *FOR YOU* — a savior has been born. And if a savior has been born for shepherds, then certainly a savior has been born for you, my friend. And me.

A savior means that we're safe in life and in eternity. Nothing can shake us out of God's grasp. Christ is our savior and that means there is peace between God and people. Angels come at Christmas.

The first Angel of Promise says God hears our prayers. The second Angel of Power says nothing is impossible with God. The third Angel of Peace says God cares for us no matter who or what we are. Angels come at Christmas.

TWO: So what?

Okay, so what? Maybe the Scrooge in us, maybe the fatigue of getting ready for Christmas makes us wonder what this all means. Angels come at Christmas. So what?

I think the best answer is a story that a friend of mine sent a year or two ago. A little boy named Bobby was getting cold sitting out in his back yard in the snow. Bobby wasn't wearing boots; he didn't like them and anyway he didn't own any. He had been outside for an hour already — thinking. But try as he might, he could not think of a Christmas gift for his mother. "This is useless," he said to himself. "Even if I do come up with an idea, I don't have any money."

Ever since his father had died three years ago, Bobby's family had struggled. His mother worked hard but there just was never enough. The small wages she earned working nights at the hospital only stretched so far.

Bobby had three sisters, two older and one younger. They ran the household in their mother's absence. All three sisters had already made beautiful gifts for their mother. But Bobby couldn't do that. *It's just not fair*, he thought. *Here it is Christmas Eve already and I've got nothing*. It wasn't easy being six, especially without a father.

So Bobby was miserable and feeling very sorry for himself. But he lived in a town where a few blocks away there was a street with many stores. So he walked to where the shops and stores were, hoping for ... he didn't know what. He looked in each decorated window but everything seemed so beautiful and so expensive.

He was just turning home, when he looked down and spotted something shiny on the icy sidewalk. It was a brand new dime. Never before had anyone felt so wealthy as Bobby felt at that moment.

His happiness soon passed, however, when store after store told him he could buy nothing with a dime. The last store was a flower shop and he stopped there to ask if he could buy one flower for his mother's Christmas gift. The shop owner looked at Bobby and his ten cents. Then he put his hand on Bobby's shoulder and said to him, "You just wait here and I'll see what I can do for you."

Before long all the other customers in the shop had left and Bobby began to feel alone and afraid. He also remembered how miserable he was. But the shop owner finally came back and set on the counter twelve long-stem, red roses, with leaves of green and tiny white flowers all tied together with a big silver bow. The florist gently placed the roses into a long white box and said, "That will be ten cents, young man," reaching out his hand for the dime.

Bobby hesitated and then blurted out, "Don't they cost more?"

The shop owner replied, "Oh, I just happened to have some roses on sale today for ten cents a dozen. Would you like them?"

This time Bobby did not hesitate. The shopkeeper placed the long box into his hands, opened the door for him, and said, "Merry Christmas, young man." Off Bobby ran with his great gift.

Back in the store the shopkeeper's wife had heard most of what had gone on. So she asked her husband about it. As he stared out the window, blinking back a few tears from his own eyes, he replied, "A strange thing happened to me this morning. While I was setting up things to open the shop, I thought I heard a voice telling me to set aside a dozen of my best roses for a special gift. I wasn't sure at the time whether I had lost my mind or what, but I set them aside anyway. When I saw that little boy tonight, I knew who that voice was, and I put together a dozen of my very best roses."

Conclusion

An overly sentimental story? Sure. A true story? I'm not sure. But I believe it's true even if it didn't happen. I also believe there were some angels hovering around the edge of that story.

You say, "But the angels in the Bible were more real, more visible, more believable."

Maybe. But this much is for certain. It takes a tender heart, a childlike heart to be open to all the ways God's messengers come to us. We can harrumph about Christmas sentimentality if we like. You've heard me do that. Sometimes we need to do that. But we can also open our hearts to how God would speak to us today. It may be just when we've lost all hope and least expect it.

Let's let the angels get in this Christmas, shall we? For if we open our hearts and minds, they will be God's messengers to our souls. The Angel of Promise — God hears our prayers. The Angel of Power — with God nothing shall be impossible. And the Angel of Peace — *for you* a Savior is born. Angels do come at Christmas. Thanks be to God.