

Christmas Eve December 24, 2012

The National Presbyterian Church

Touched By an Angel?

Matthew 1:18-24; Isaiah 6:1-8

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There are three passages of scripture in which, when telling the Christmas story, describe the presence of angels.

1. We heard one of those passages read from Matthew's gospel. An angel appears to Joseph in a dream and says to Joseph, *"God is up to something with Mary. Don't get in the way. Don't mess it up. Let it be."*
2. Then we turn to Luke's gospel where we have an angel coming to Mary and saying, she's going to have a child and this child will be the son of the Most High! *"Greetings favored one, the Lord is with you. You will conceive in your womb and bear a son and you'll name him Jesus."* (Luke 1:28).

3. And then in the second chapter of Luke's gospel we find yet more angels, who come this time to some shepherds, watching sheep in the fields outside of Bethlehem. Luke tells us that

"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 shown around them and they were terrified. But the angel said to them don't be afraid for see I am bringing you good news of great joy to all the people to you is born this day in the city of David a savior who is the Messiah, the Lord. And this will be a sign for you. You will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." (Luke 2:8-12).

And in this description is an implicit invitation, perhaps even a summons, for those shepherds: "You need to go and see this for yourself. Something has happened and you can and you need to see it."

Now I have to admit to you that *I've never seen an angel or at least I've never seen an angel that I knew to be an angel.* Maybe I've seen an angel and didn't recognize it as an angel. But I've never seen an angel who is pictured as the angels we generally picture. Though I have from time to

time experienced a force so divine, so other worldly, so personal, that maybe it was an angel. Just maybe... an angel. *On the other hand I have a friend* who is a member of the first congregation I served who said he experienced an angel and he told me the story and I believe that he really did – no shadow of doubt about it.

My first congregation was in the northern part of Canada in an iron ore mining town and in this community the men didn't generally go to church. They were tough. They thought church was for women and children. So there were only a handful of men in the congregation, and my friend Ben was one of those men. He was known in the community as a Christian. Not because he was flashy, not because he kept talking about God, but because he lived out his life as a Christian. And people knew him not only as kind and as loving, but as a person of enormous integrity whose integrity could never be questioned. As I came to know Ben, I asked him about his life, and he shared with me a story that I think he shared with very, very few people. He kept his inner life pretty much to himself. But this story explained to me the depth of his Christian commitment.

He said that when he was a teenager growing up on the island of Newfoundland (he grew up in a fishing village, what they call an "outport"), he was with some of his teenage friends in a car one night and they drove down to the pier. They drove onto the pier, and tragically, accidentally, couldn't stop. Three of his friends died as the car went into the ocean that night. He said he escaped from the car – which, obviously, he did. But, what you need to keep in mind as you hear this is a picture of the car, any car, in the ocean. There's water on the outside, there's air on the inside. You cannot push the doors open in a situation like that; it's not physically possible. But, he said, someone was there who helped. A hand came, pulled the door open, and he escaped from the car. Alive!

And, he said, from that moment on he knew God's hand was upon him and he had to respond in some way with his life. He didn't feel a call to the ministry; it wasn't as if he had to give up everything, leave everything and become a minister. But he did decide that within his life, whatever he did, he would do it for the glory of God. And he did! He didn't have much education but he rose through the ranks in the mine and became the superintendent of the department where he worked. And his life changed other people – including the men in the community, some of whom

began coming with their families to the small church. They trusted him. They knew what he said and lived was real.

Now there are some people who hear stories like that and say, "Well you know, you can't really trust these stories. People especially that don't have much education can make up this or that." So I have another story for you and this is from somebody whose credentials in terms of education, academics, are impeccable. This is a person who was a Rhodes Scholar. He taught English at Duke University all his career for some 40 or 50 years until he died last year. His name is Reynolds Price and some of you may have read some of his books. In 1984 Reynolds Price was diagnosed with cancer – a malignant tumor in his spine. He went through all the ordeals you go through to cure such cancer and the cancer was cured, but he was paralyzed for the rest of his life. He came face-to-face with the problem of "God and suffering," as many people in our world are doing these days with the recent shooting in Connecticut. But for him it was close, real, personal: not merely an academic problem. It was real in his life. His life had been changed forever by this cancer. Even though the cancer was conquered, the paralysis remained.

He wrote about this in a small book called *Letter To A Man In the Fire* (and I recommend it to you) with the poignant subtitle, *Does God Exist And Does He Care?* And at one point in this book he writes this:

In the years of my own confrontation with cancer with loss and chronic pain; [DR: that is, in those periods of his life when everything seemed to be going wrong and when God might normally seem as far away as possible], I experienced fairly steadily the sense of being witnessed and accompanied almost always by what seemed to be God, or a full-fledged messenger of God, at an almost invariably silent distance, though some of those messengers were human beings of extraordinary foresight and practical help. And with that companionship I was ultimately led back into a new and transformed life and work.

A life transformed! Like my friend Ben's! Impacting many, many other people. Because of an angel?!

Now I'll admit it's rather subtle; it lies within this sense he had of not being alone – that some being was close – not too close, but there with him, traveling on that journey with him. And that traveling partner made a difference in his life. He calls these beings "messengers." You may or may not know this but 'messenger' in Greek is the word angelos. And angelos is of course the word from which we get our word

'angel'. So let me read you what he wrote again and I'll take out the word messenger and replace it with the word 'angel'.

In the years of my own confrontation with cancer, loss and chronic pain at the moment when I would have least expected it I experienced fairly steadily the sense of being witnessed and accompanied almost always by what seemed to be God, or a full-fledged angel of God, at an almost invariably silent distance, though some of those angels were human beings of extraordinary foresight and practical help. And with that companionship I was changed. I was ultimately led back into a new and transformed life and work.

This sense – this sense of being accompanied and being watched and being helped, sometimes by someone unseen, sometimes by someone seen, sometimes just by a person with the right skill at the right time at the right place – provides an uncanny parallel to the activity and work and presence of angels as we find them described throughout the pages of the Bible.

- Over 300 times in the Bible God is called by the name “Lord of Hosts.” Now I suspect that most of you have heard that name, God described in those terms. God is the “Lord of Hosts”! It’s one of those holy-sounding titles that might come out of your mouth if you want to say something about the enormous power of God! But it’s not just an accidental phrase or title. Quite literally it’s a title that says that “God is the commander of the armies (the hosts) of angels who are in heaven.” Over 300 times this is the title given to God: The Lord, the master, the commander of hosts, the hosts of the angels in Heaven.
- And another 300 times in scripture angels are explicitly mentioned. Sometimes they come to guide. Sometimes they come to guard. Sometimes they come to protect (this is why we speak of ‘guardian angels’). Sometimes they come to set free. Sometimes they come to make a profound announcement that changes things and changes people. Sometimes they come (most frequently) to call people into God’s service, into God’s presence and then to serve God – to give meaning and purpose to their lives in a particular way. Sometimes they appear with wings (though not all the time by any stretch of the imagination;

In the passage of scripture where the wings are most prominent, Isaiah Chapter 6, I hate to tell you that there aren’t two wings per angel, but six wings!! The story is of the call of

Isaiah to serve God as a prophet, and he's surrounded by angels and they have six wings, and they're fluttering everywhere, and he's overwhelmed by this and falls down on his face and says 'I'm a man who is unclean and I live in the midst of a people who are unclean.' And one of the angels comes to him and cleans his mouth, as it were, and says 'But you're still the one whom I want to serve me!'

So sometimes the angels have wings. Sometimes they don't. Sometimes they have no form at all. They're just like fire or light, like the angel in the bush that was burning when Moses was called by God to deliver the slaves out of slavery in Egypt – the people of God (Exodus 3). Moses meets God in a burning bush; there in the bush there is this fire, but the bush was not consumed. And we're told that the fire is an angel of God.

And then there are times in the scripture when it's not fire and it's not light and it's not wings. It's just another human being, just another ordinary human being. Abraham meets some ordinary human beings and it's only after the discussion has taken place that he realizes that this human being, these human beings are angels (Genesis 19). And the same is true with Samson's parents, same kind of scenario. A 'man of God' comes into their lives, tells them of the impending birth and then they realize that this man is a messenger, an angel of the living God (Judges, Chapter 13).

In both cases there is a desire to show hospitality to these men, which explains the words in the new Testament Letter to the Hebrews that says that we are 'not to neglect to show hospitality to strangers for by so doing some have entertained angels unaware' (Hebrews 13:2). *As if the early Christians knew well that angels could come in all kinds of different forms. Not just flying high, not just with wings, but all kinds of messengers sent by God, whether we know it or not, to guide us, protect us, speak to us, call us, move us forward in our life with God, change us, and bring us into a world that we, perhaps, before hand could not have conceived of.*

I don't know if you remember the story line of the movie Titanic – how rich girl Rose meets poor boy Jack. Jack in many ways was like an angel. Now if you remember the story, of course you also know that in many ways Jack was not like an angel!! But in some ways Jack *was* like an angel... in that he comes to Rose's life -- well, out of the blue. Just out of the blue, *at a time when she is in need, at a time when she is trapped.*

- She's caught in the world of her childhood and she can't quite grow up.
- She's caught in a world of luxury in which we might be envious, but she feels that it's hemming her in.
- She's controlled by people who are too strong for her, whose voices and wishes she cannot take on or challenge.

And she feels trapped in this world, unable to escape . . . until Jack comes along out of the blue, coming from an entirely different world; he comes from a different class; he comes from a different background.

And he shows her a different life that she couldn't have imagined — not only emotionally, not only socially, but quite literally. He takes her into the bowels of the Titanic as it's sailing towards its doom. He takes her to people she's never met before. He shows her a life, things going on, that she couldn't have conceived of. And it changes her forever.

And just as quickly as he comes, of course, he goes, he disappears. He doesn't make it. He drowns. She survives but he is gone, but only after, like an angel, he has led her to safety; and only after he has opened her eyes and captured her will.

In the movie, towards the end Rose, now an old woman, has been sharing this story with people who are looking for the Titanic on the ocean floor. And one of these is a person by the name of Lewis Bodine; and Lewis says "We never found anything on Jack. There's no record of him at all" (They doubt that Jack really exists. But then Rose replies — older Rose now)

"No there wouldn't be, would there. And I've never spoken of him until now, not to anyone. A woman's heart is a deep ocean of secrets, that now you know there was a man named Jack Dawson and that he saved me in every way that a person can be saved. I don't even have a picture of him. He exists now only in my memory."

But he was real!! And so too are the angels, the ones who came to Joseph and Mary and the shepherds — came with a very, very specific and powerful message that changed not only their lives but the course of human history, in a way that they could never have even imagined.

They came and said that a 'savior' has been born. He's entering the world. The 'Son of God' is coming and is on his way. The 'king of kings' will be here, and has come.

All of these titles would have been familiar to Joseph and to Mary and to the shepherds, the ones who saw the angels. Not just because they were religious titles but because they were in fact

secular titles, common in everyday language. All of these titles were titles that the emperors of Rome had taken for themselves.

- They were the ones who claimed to be the ‘savior’ of the world.
- If you find ancient Roman coins they claim that Caesar the emperor Augustus is the ‘divine son of God’.
- They claim that they are the kings to whom you all must listen. Trust us, obey us, follow us. We are the ones who will save you.

And what the angels were saying when they came to the shepherds and to Mary and to Joseph was that, dominant as that form of the world was, with the power and influence of Rome absolutely everywhere, the truth lay elsewhere!

What promises to save you is not what will save you! There is another Savior coming into this world and, unlikely as it seems, it is to him you must pay attention. He may not look like much but he has power that even the power of Rome does not have. You must watch for him and listen to him. He alone can sort out the mess your lives are in through your own choice or the choices of others the power of sin.

So the angels came and they made that announcement to Mary and to Joseph and to the shepherds. And they told them what their job was in response to this message.

- To the shepherds: *Go and find him!!* Now you know, go and find him.
- To Mary: *Carry him!!* Bear him into this world that others may know him.
- And to Joseph: (the one perhaps I like the best). *Don’t mess it up!!* What’s happening to Mary is not your plan nor is it hers. But allow it to be. Support her so that this baby can come into the world and be known as the Savior of all.

As I said a few moments ago, I’ve never seen an angel or at least I’m not aware that I’ve seen one; though knowing that angels can come in all kinds of forms, perhaps I’ve seen one and I don’t really know it. But I am convinced that God sends them in all kinds of different ways to people like you and me who are in need, and especially to people who are in need of a savior. I’m convinced that the message that the angels gave to those people, to the shepherds, to Mary and to Joseph, are messages that angels still want to give to people like you and me today. They summon us to have lives that are changed, and filled with divine

purpose, as was Reynolds Price's life, and my friend Ben's life (and Rose's!). The best way to allow for this change to happen, though, is not by sitting around hoping to see an angel, but by starting with what we already know -- the words that the Christmas angels shared with the shepherds, with Mary and Joseph.

- The words to the shepherds: Go! Some of you have sought for this child in days gone by but perhaps in recent years you haven't taken your faith that seriously, and now is the night when you need to find that child again. Those angels or perhaps another angel is saying to you "Go, use your heart and your mind to find him again and bow down and worship him and in so doing you will find life." Perhaps that's the message for you tonight as it was for them.
- Or maybe the message for you is the message of the angels to Mary and to Joseph. Our job like theirs is to carry this Jesus into the world that others may know Him and others may see Him. Don't mess up. Don't get in the way. Allow God to do that through you.

Perhaps there are things in our lives this night, that it's time just to get rid of, to change. They are stumbling blocks, hiding the life and light of Christ from others, when God wants us to be Christ-bearers like Mary, bringing this Christ into the world. Maybe those angels (or some other) are speaking to you with that challenge as well.

Whatever their message they want to get your attention and mine. And they want to do for our lives what they did for them. Their lives were changed forever, for good, as was the life of my friend Ben and as was the life of Reynolds Price. Listen to his words again:

'In the years with my own confrontation with cancer, with the loss and chronic pain, and the time and the moment when it was least expected,' he says, 'I experienced fairly the sense of being witnessed and accompanied almost always by what seemed to be God or a full-fledged messenger of God at an almost invariably silent distance though some of those messengers were human beings of extraordinary foresight and practical help. And with that companionship I was ultimately led back into a new and transformed life and work.'

So may it be with you and me this night, as well.