

December 11, 2022 Christmas Angels Luke 1:26-38

Last weekend we decorated our Christmas Tree. It's not a real tree. When Matthew and Rebekah were children, they both suffered from a great number of ear infections. When allergy tests were done, trees were high on the list of things to which they were reacting. Tree mould was high on the list of moulds they reacted to, as well. So the evergreen real thing was replaced by a replica and we have been using plastic and metal trees ever since. After the lights and the other decorations have been hung...the Christmas angel is placed at the top of the tree. It is usually during a cup of coffee not long after that, that I am asked to adjust the angel so that it stands upright and faces the family chairs correctly.

My parents always placed a star or a decorative spike at the top of the tree. To their credit they saw those ornaments as representing the same thing as an angel, an act of the Almighty, which they perceived as part of the Christmas story. The light that touches the earth from on high. But there is no question, the angel is a specific symbol, and one to which the Scriptures refer time and time again. In the story of the birth of Jesus they play their part. And it is a prominent role. The messengers of God. They announce, they give guidance, and they insist who Jesus really is. From the first appearance of them in the Gospels they identify who the players are and whose will they are in fact serving. Their praise is always given to God.

Gabriel was busy that first Christmas. He is the messenger who meets Zechariah in the temple. Zechariah was the husband of Elizabeth. They were old and beyond the years of child bearing. Zechariah was chosen by lot to burn the incense during worship in the temple. Gabriel met him and announced that he and Elizabeth were going to have a son in spite of the limitations of their age. Zechariah was afraid. Gabriel told him to be not afraid and shared the prophecy that John the Baptist would fulfill. A fore runner in the spirit of Elijah, who would be great in the service of the Almighty. Because Zechariah found it hard to believe and asked so many questions, stressing the limitations of his age, Gabriel silenced him until John was born.

And it is Gabriel that visits Mary and announces that she has been chosen to bare the baby Jesus into the world. It is interesting. Mary has lots of questions but in many ways she is more respectful of Gabriel than Zechariah was. There is no question she is afraid...and she has good reason. Her culture has little patience with young women who get pregnant who are not married. But Mary is submissive. And as you know, submission is something all people who believe wrestle with. She accepts the will of God and copes with everything from the rejection of Joseph, to the death on the cross of her son. It is no wonder that she was revered by the early church, to say nothing of the source of many of the details which we have come to treasure about the birth of Jesus in the Gospels. Both Matthew and Luke depended on her testimony in the assembly of their accounts. And likewise it is no wonder that one of the

themes of Luke's Gospel is a heightened sense of the value of women, and Jesus ministry to them.

We all take for granted the shepherds who attend the stable in Bethlehem to see the miracle child that has been born to redeem. And while it is true they made the choice to go and see the infant Jesus, it also has to be acknowledged that they did so because the angel gave them the news and the details as to where the baby and his parents could be found. Luke does not identify this angel by name. If it had been Gabriel I am certain Luke would have said so. And then there is the heavenly host who do their rendition of the original hallelujah chorus. "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men with whom his favour rests." The heavenly messengers of God were busy on that first night of Jesus birth. But the fact is their work did not end there.

Jesus was born into a Jewish family that took faith in the God who saves seriously. One cannot leave the subject of the work of angels without remembering that Joseph needed an attitude adjustment. Actually a faith adjustment. Something that resembles the scene in which Peter would tell the Lord God he had never eaten food that the Scriptures said were unclean. Remember the rebuke? "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." (Acts 10:15) Joseph learns from an angel that Mary has been truthful in her words, and faithful in her relationship with him. He marries her and takes her with him to Bethlehem. It is inconceivable to him that they should be separated for even a day. And as a result he gets to attend

the birth of the Son whom he names Jesus. According to the direction of the angel.

And then there is the angel that appeared in a dream to the Magi and sent them home by another route specifically warning them not to return and report to Herod as they had promised to do. And then there is the angel that appeared to Joseph in another dream to tell him to take Mary and the child (at least 2 years old at this point) and go into Egypt so that Herod will not be able to kill HIM. And then the 3rd experience of Joseph with the angel who comes in the midst of dreams, that tells him it is safe to return to Israel. Joseph takes the family to Nazareth, which is where Jesus is raised.

And it does not end there. When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness following his baptism at the hands of John the Baptist, HE dismissed Satan, and angels came and attended to him. Here is the point. Do not let anyone tell you that the angel thing is a just a “one of” experience in the story of Jesus.

There is a movie called The City of Angels. It is actually the story of an angel falling love with a woman who happens to be a heart surgeon. But there are two lines in the movie that I find important. The first is something the angel Seth says. “They don’t believe in us anymore.” His friend and brother in the heavenly service Cassiel replies, “They don’t have to.” That the angels of God do their work, is not dependent in the slightest measure on whether we believe in them or not. They do what they do. They touch lives as directed by the grace

of the God who is Almighty, whose power is likewise not diminished by whether or not we believe in HIM.

What is important is to remember that the Scriptures speak of a realm of spiritual reality that we do participate in, and are touched by. If things do not happen by chance, and they do not, our lives are not only impacted by the Holy Spirit of God, but also by HIS angels. They are not the Walt Disney division of “make believe.” They are part of the reality of interaction between our world and the next, between the kingdoms of earth, and the Kingdom of God. There are 296 mentions of angels in the Bible, occurring in both the Old and New Testaments. They figure greatly in the story of Jesus birth. They are messengers of God. They announce, they pronounce, and they reveal. They are not imaginary, or part of superstition. They are the sometimes seen, sometimes unseen servants of God. And that is why we place angels on our Christmas trees. It is one more act whereby we state without using the words, that we are among those who believe in the God to which the Bible testifies. We often entertain them without knowing we are in their presence.

This morning I read to you the story in which the angel Gabriel revealed to Mary that she would be mother to Jesus. That story does something we do not often think about. It reminds us that we are not holy, or called to do a number of things as followers of Jesus. First and foremost we are called to believe and to follow HE who was born in Bethlehem. And may the angels attend us as we go about our lives. Amen

Let us pray;

Lord lead us by means of your Holy Spirit. Teach us by means of the Scriptures. Attend us and watch over us. We thank you for the ministry of angels who have kept us safe in the midst of genuine danger. We praise YOUR name. Amen