

An Angel of the Lord Came Unto Them

Gospel of Luke 2:1-20

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And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.

Gospel of Luke 2:8-20

And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

An angel of the Lord came upon them bringing tidings of great joy to ALL people! How great is that?! No wonder the birth narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke are among the most well known, best loved, frequently enacted and honored stories in the entire Christian Testament. They are also the least trusted by scholars as authentic. Although for years they were summarily dismissed by the academic community as mere myth, they have always been the most accessible part of the Jesus story for the vast majority of Christians. Every year we flock to Bethlehem to await with joyous expectancy the birth of our new hope. Not as many of us follow on to Nazareth, Capernaum and Jericho. Fewer still follow into the solitude of the Galilean hills and on to Jerusalem. And up to Golgotha...almost none. For each stage of the journey becomes more and more difficult, more and more uncomfortable. Each stage casts a new uneasy shadow on our light of joyous expectancy; the light that is lit right here. But when that beautiful baby is born to a couple of ordinary, yet extraordinarily willing country folk in the bucolic burg of Bethlehem....we are all right there!

In addition to Matthew and Luke, the birth of Jesus is told in several non-canonical gospels. Each of these accounts has a few common elements. They all tell the birth of the baby Jesus. They all agree that Mary and Joseph were his earthly parents. They all agree that Mary was chaste and Joseph was old.

They all subordinate Mary and feature Joseph, to the extent that either are the focus. And, they all rely on the critical appearance of “an angel of the Lord” to both comfort and convince our wholly human heroines.

The *angel of the Lord* is the only common element besides Jesus and Joseph and Mary in both the canonical versions of the story and the primary non-canonical birth narratives.¹

Now, angels are pretty prominently featured in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Testament alike. Their existence and frequent intervention is pretty much presented as fact throughout the scriptures as a whole. From Genesis to Revelation, “angels” appear in the Holy Bible nearly 250 times.² Angels are a key part of Jesus’ journey. They minister to him in the wilderness, they comfort him in the Garden of Gethsemane, and they guard and announce his empty tomb after his death. Angels are among the most prevalent characters in the entire Bible.

But a so-called “*angel of the Lord*” is much more rare. This exact phrase appears only 11 times in the Christian Testament; 4 occurrences are in Acts and 7 are in the Gospels. Five of those are in the birth narratives of Jesus in Luke and Matthew, the 6th is in the birth narrative of John the Baptist in Luke, and the 7th is at the very end of Matthew when an *angel of the Lord* rolls back the stone on Jesus’ empty tomb. Aside from the use of this phrase in Acts, an *angel of the Lord* appears almost exclusively to announce and facilitate a miraculously conceived new life: John the Baptist born of the barren elderly Elizabeth, Jesus born of the virgin Mary, and life everlasting born of the empty tomb. The appearance of an *angel of the Lord* is a sure sign that human beings are going to be asked to cope with something that they are not in a million years expecting.

But what are we to make of this *angel of the Lord* who seems to facilitate the capacity and agency of the humans who are summarily summoned to stretch their visions of themselves and their place in the world around them beyond their wildest imaginations....mere mortals who are seemingly randomly required to suspend the norms and protocols of our cultural and social standing and hand over our own senses of meaning and belonging to some mysterious higher power and greater good. One thing is for sure, it is hard to see how the birth of Jesus could have been orchestrated without an *angel of the Lord* to supercede the power of peer pressure and social norms. It is hard to imagine that our ordinary Mary and our regular Joe would or could have been such willing and able agents of God’s work in this world. For it was an *angel of the Lord* who calmed Mary as she nearly rejected her Holy charge. And it was an *angel of the Lord* who soothed and rendered the mind of Joseph when he was prepared to quietly

¹ Non-canonical narratives include the Infancy Gospel of James, the Infancy Gospel of pseudo- Matthew, and the Latin Infancy Gospel.

² Exactly 237 times: 138 in the Hebrew Scriptures and 99 in the Christian Testament - 56 of which are in the Book of Revelation.

dismiss her for her impropriety, as we heard in Sunday's Gospel reading. Just when the human expectation has been stretched to its very outer limit, *an angel of the Lord* seems to resize the realm.

What are we to make of this *angel of the Lord*? And how will we know if *we* meet her...him...it? What form did/does she/he/it assume? Do we envision a curly headed cherubim with rosy cheeks and dandy wings fluttering down from the clouds? Is she/he/it visible or only audible? Is he/she/it a shadowy essence like some ghost of Christmas yet-to-come in an ancient precursor to the Dickens classic? Is the *angel of the Lord* just a dramatic literary device? Is this the element of the story that places this outrageously radical event *beyond* our reach or realm of experience.....Or is it the element of this story that offers us...you and me....2000 years hence...a *connection*...a common bond....a point of relevance and relationship that plugs our very personal experience into the Jesus story from the get-go in a very familiar way? Does the angel of the Lord make the birth of Jesus too far out to believe or too close to dismiss?

In C.S. Lewis' popular classic from Narnia, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, he offers us a powerful and disquieting metaphor of a child playing with a stuffed toy lion. Lewis imagines how terrified and alone the child would become if the lion were suddenly to spring to life. I mean really to life! Overwhelmingly powerfully to life! And he suggests that we might be equally panicked and traumatized if Jesus Christ were suddenly to spring into our lives...that is, in the absolutely human sense. It is fine to see Jesus in the face of our neighbor...even in the face of our enemy...but it would be too intense to bear if Jesus actually appeared to us in the flesh, not as a concept or a belief, but as a tangible reality. It would require a change in our lives so dramatic and so drastic that we simply could not cope....without some help. It would demand a lifestyle change so radical and so revolutionary that we would likely perish under its weight.....without some help. Most of us, Lewis thought, "want no living Christ." What we want, he surmised, is a Christ conveniently contained, enshrined, embalmed even, in theology and ritual.

But that, I think, is where the *angel of the Lord* comes in. When we are about to encounter the awesome flesh of the living Christ in our fragile lives, it is the angel of the Lord that grounds our hearts and lifts our wings. I would wager to say that most of us here this morning have, like Mary and Joseph, faced the terror of the living Christ at one point or another in our ordinary lives. That is to say, somewhere along the line we have been asked to make a decision...accept a decision...agree to a calling....follow a path...bear a burden that flies in the face of our every expectation for ourselves and our place in this world. And somewhere between our horror at the realization of what we are being asked to handle and our consent to handle it ...*an angel of the Lord* appears and taps us on our shoulder, settles in the pit of our stomach, descends upon our palpable angst in such a way that the wholly unimaginable suddenly, immediately, instantly and without explanation becomes not only possible, but possibly absolutely

imperative. It is the *angel of the Lord* that opens our hearts and minds to our participation in the life that God has envisioned for us. Like Mary. Like Joseph. Like the ordinary shepherds who stand in fear and trembling on that hill in Bethlehem, we can be sure that an angel of the Lord will guide us through the precious mystery that is beyond all understanding.

And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

This, I think, is where *we* come into the Christmas story. *This is the way in which our birth in Jesus the Messiah takes place...*In the midst of our ordinary everyday Mary and Joseph lives, each of us has or will be confronted by a call that is so radical, so beyond our expectation that we cannot imagine how we will cope...and then, from the rubble of our fallen hopes and dreams and human expectations an *angel of the Lord* appears and delivers this crystal clear message:

You are not alone.

You are not in charge.

You are not insignificant.

And we cannot help but hear, as did Mary and Joseph, that we have been chosen especially, particularly, specifically by God to be God's own bearers, to rejoice in the unspeakably rich new life that awaits nothing more than our consent. This terrifying news, that we are to personally be the bearers of God, is, I think, the joyous expectancy that illuminates our hopes and dreams, and dances within and among us this and every Christmas morning. So fear not. Behold it is our own birth as bearers of God that we celebrate this day. We are the tidings of great joy that are here for all people!

So let us embrace our new birth, go forth with joyous expectancy, and remember always the message of our *angel of the Lord* who makes it known in no uncertain terms that:

We are not alone.

We are not in charge.

We are not insignificant.

Amen.

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