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Angels Among Us: Make Ready a People

Intro to Worship

Every year as we approach this first Sunday in advent, we begin the journey of preparing our hearts and homes for Christmas. This season holds so much wonder, so much joy, as long as we slow down long enough to let it all in. Year after year, we turn to the same stories, the same songs, not because we've forgotten them, and not even simply because we're nostalgic, but because we need these reminders that fear and darkness does not have the last word!

In the midst of times of trouble and confusion, our Christmas stories often turn to angels, God's winged messengers sent to share Hope, Peace, Joy, Love, and the promise of new Life. And the truth is, we can never hear these messages enough. Over the next few weeks, we will look at the stories of these angelic visits to Zechariah, Mary, Joseph and the Shepherds, and we will contemplate how we may live as "angels among us", at what messages we can offer that will fly in the face of a culture of fear and bring more hope, more peace, more joy, and more love to the world.

Luke 1:5-25, 57-80 --- (Luke 1: 11-20, 57-64)

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. He must never drink wine or

strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur." Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. When his time of service was ended, he went to his home. After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people."

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John." They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name." Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will this child become?" For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

Ring Bell

Every time a bell rings, an angel gets its wings... Even if you haven't seen *It's a Wonderful Life*, you have probably heard this line.

Angels are one of the images that surround us in the Christmas season. Collectible and decorative angel figurines line store shelves. Angel characters appear in television shows, novels, and movies. Some set angels up with their nativity scenes, or place angels at the top of their Christmas trees. As we read the Christmas story in scripture, we imagine them soaring in the skies over the manger, filling the air with song as they proclaim the good news of Jesus's birth to the shepherds. We hear their reassuring words "Do not be afraid" spoken not only to those in our scriptures, but to us as well. When we face times of challenge, we often hope for God to send angels – guardian angels – around us to protect and give us peace.

And that's exactly the role of Clarence Odbody, Angel Second Class, in *It's a Wonderful Life*, who shows up just in time as George Bailey was standing in the snow, on that bridge in Bedford Falls, thinking about ending it all. Life hadn't quite turned out the way George thought it would. Now that the Building and Loan was flat broke, it seemed like he was up against an impossible situation with no way out. George needed someone to shine light into this deep darkness and offer hope where he couldn't see it himself. Clarence "earns his wings" by showing Bailey the positive influence he has had on the lives of his friends and neighbors; giving him hope when he feels hopeless.

Most of us could not say we've seen angels – at least not in the supernatural sense, but we imagine them bringing comfort and hope. We imagine angels as bearers of God's presence and strength, helping us through the dark times in life, granting us hope and peace in the darkness, and offering the light of joy and love to guide our way back to life. The word angel comes from the Greek word *angelos*, which means "messenger". Sharing a message from God is the primary role of angels in both the Old and New Testaments.

Biblical angels are certainly interesting creatures. Gabriel, whose name in Hebrew means "God is my warrior," is one of only two named angels in the Old Testament, the other being Michael. Gabriel is "sent to Daniel to explain a vision of 'the time appointed for the end' (8:15-26) and later to reveal the hidden meaning of [prophetic words] (9:20-27)."[1] Whereas most messengers from God in the Old Testament are unnamed, and sometimes it's even a little unclear whether they're of human or heavenly origin, Gabriel's angelic credentials are impressive. Which perhaps explains one of the funnier elements in the story you just heard from Luke's gospel. When Zechariah questions the message Gabriel delivers, saying "How will I know this is so?" the angel replies "I am Gabriel." (Luke 1:19) As if to say: are you seriously going to question me? Do you not understand who I am?

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Because it's important to understand why the angel Gabriel was sent to Zechariah in the first place. Both Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth themselves have impeccable credentials, being from priestly families. And we're told both are "righteous" and "blameless" before God. (Luke 1:6) Unfortunately, being blameless and upright doesn't necessarily mean everything turns out exactly as you might hope. The lives of good people, too, can be touched by disappointment and tragedy, and in the case of Elizabeth and Zechariah, their greatest disappointment was not being able to conceive a

child. They have waited, and waited, and waited, longing for a gift from God that simply would not come.

Then one day, while Zechariah is going about his regular duties as a priest in the temple, suddenly there is Gabriel standing in front of him, next to the altar. The text says Zechariah “was terrified, and fear overwhelmed him.” And the angel said to him “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard.” (Luke 1:12-13)

Amy McCullough, United Methodist pastor and adjunct professor at Wesley Theology Seminary suggests that while plenty discouraged, the couple hadn't actually been hopeless. Their hope had just, over the years, morphed into a sort of hoping against hope:

"By the time we meet Zechariah and Elizabeth, they have stopped believing a baby will join their family. The years have gone by, the gray hairs have sprouted, their bodies have wrinkled, and the child hasn't come. But I'm not sure they've stopped hoping for a baby. Gabriel's words tell us that they have prayed for a child, just like one might pray for the deepest desire of their heart... Past experience might suggest it is worthless to pray for such things, but your heart cries out nonetheless, hoping past hope that this year something might be different. The cry holds a flicker of faith in God's power to revive, the hope that never truly, fully dies." [2]

And now Zechariah is told that his prayer has been heard. I can't explain why every couple hoping for a baby doesn't get the same answer; I dearly wish they did. But in God's response to Elizabeth and Zechariah we at least see that God's spirit can be at work in parts of our lives over which we've given up hope.

Barrenness? Hopelessness? Emptiness? From a human perspective, it's hard to see the promise in such places. But for God, these situations seem to invite intervention. And that is good news for us still today! There are a multitude of places in our lives and world today that seem hopeless, that we fear our prayers may never be answered, where we need hope to shine brightly! And too often, we find ourselves waiting for someone or something else to act, instead of standing up and taking action ourselves.

As Rhonda Britten describes it in her book *Fearless Living*, “when we passively wait, we are living in fear.” When we wait for circumstances outside of ourselves to change in order to feel hope, peace, joy or love or to live our lives fully, we rob ourselves of the chance to have those things right now. But when we take time to experience and share hope, peace, joy, and love, we are living fully into who God calls us to be because we have the power to make a difference—to help shift circumstances—rather than live in fear of them. The “waiting” in Advent, then, cannot be a passive waiting—the kind of waiting that believes that God doesn't need us in order to make the world a safer, better place for all people. The angels in our scriptures invite participation in the story. The message is “God is doing thus-and-such” and “you are a part of it.” DO NOT BE AFRAID... God needs you. Whether you believe it or not, one person can, and does, make a difference no matter how insignificant our contribution seems.

In this advent season, God is calling us to become a people ready to be messengers of hope through our words and actions. Each time you hear a bell ring, I invite you to hear it

as a reminder of YOUR call to be God's angels among us... flying in the face of the fear that permeates our world today, to bear the good news of hope, peace, joy, and love to all who need to hear it. May it be so! *Ring bell...*