

## LISTEN FOR THE ANGELS

*2:1 And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. 2:2 (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) 2:3 And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. 2:4 And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) 2:5 To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. 2:6 And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. 2:7 And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. 2:8 And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 2:9 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. 2:10 And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. 2:11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. 2:12 And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. 2:13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, 2:14 Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. 2:15 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. 2:16 And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. 2:17 And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. 2:18 And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. 2:19 But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. 2:20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.*

(Luke 2:1-20, KJV)

Angels fill the Christmas story from beginning to end. In the Bible we read of the angel's appearance to Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds. Today we see decorative angels in yards and on the tops of Christmas trees. And we sing about angels in some of our favorite Christmas carols. "Angels we have heard on high sweetly singing o'er the plains... Angels, from the realms of glory, wing your flight o'er all the earth... Hark! The herald angels sing, glory to the newborn King."

The word angel comes from the Greek word *angelos*, which means, "messenger" (*The Harper Collins Bible Dictionary*, Paul Achtemeier, editor, New York: Harper Collins, 1996, p. 33). In the Christmas story angels brought a message, good news that God was up to something, and that there was nothing to fear. The angels brought their unexpected good news to all kinds of people. They brought it to women and men. They brought it to shepherds and carpenters. They brought it to people in homes and workshops and pastures.

When was the last time you saw or heard an angel? This morning, while listening to the Christmas story and hearing Christmas carols, I saw an angel. The ancient words and carols came by way of the car radio, the BBC, and NPR. The angel I saw had the round cheeks of a child, a full head of hair, bare feet, a sturdy pair of wings, and stood atop a cemetery gravestone. It was a strange juxtaposition hearing the cheerful Christmas carols and the joyous words from the Bible describing Christ's birth while sitting in my car on the morning of Christmas Eve in a cemetery of all places. I conducted a funeral for a kind family this morning and I arrived at the cemetery a little early, so I listened to a Service of Lessons and Carols recorded by the BBC and broadcast on NPR.

When asked to do the funeral on Christmas Eve day I thought it might feel especially sad. However, as I listened to the old familiar Christmas story and carols my ears heard them in a new way. Surrounded by the graves of soldiers and children, the elderly and the middle aged I heard God's angel speak holy words to Mary, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." I heard God's angel speak holy words to Joseph, "Do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit." Best of all, I heard God's angel speak holy words to the shepherds, "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 Savior, which is Christ the Lord." And then, sitting there surrounded by tombstones, I heard the heavenly host sing, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will to all people."

The Reverend Agnes Norfleet, a Presbyterian minister in Georgia, had a similar experience when a family asked her to read the Christmas story from Luke 2 during a graveside service. Rev. Norfleet wrote, "I felt [a light shine] on the inside while the miracle of this extraordinary birth

resonated under clouds of drizzling rain and a family's grief... This was precisely what Jesus came into – the very human daily rounds of life and death, of families who lose loved ones, of gray days in beautiful places, of heart felt gratitude for lives long lived, and hushed tones of grief and memories. God has come in the most unexpected way—into our lives where babies are born and we grow old and die, where people we love get sick, where marriages struggle, and family life is never perfect, where wars are fought and soldiers die and we cling desperately to promises of peace. It is precisely because we know that Jesus came into all of this once, that we live in joyful anticipation, alert to God's unexpected [presence]... For, when Mary wrapped baby Jesus up in bands of cloth—a light went on in the world—to show how God was wrapping God's holy self around all of us and all of humankind. And so this [Christmas] season, let's look around, and be alert to God's coming in our very ordinary daily rounds, unexpectedly to fill us again with great joy” (<http://ndpc.org/sermons/20041128.pdf>).

What will we hear if we listen for angels, if we listen to our hearts and the Spirit of God within us? Maybe, just maybe we will hear, or sense at least, the very presence of that divine Presence which is beyond all our senses. Perhaps for a moment it will be for us as it was for the shepherds. Perhaps it will be like the opening of a heavenly door. Perhaps we will overhear the song of the angels.

I adapted the following from author and lecturer, Marianne Williamson, who wrote, “A quickening pulse, an open door, a mystery now beckons us. It whispers, fly forth free... Who, we wonder, whispers thus? Who, indeed, is there, and knows [us] well, behind that door... [God] comes now. Softly, gently... [God] knows each hair and secret, every butterfly and tortured cry. Quantum physics is child's play to [God]; [our] slightest pain is more important... [God] doesn't look like anyone. [God] doesn't look like us. And

yet [God] is...The whole thing. The big picture. The new, the old. The answer. The hope...[God] is here. And [God] has power. And [God] has desire. To set [us] free...[God says] Darling, come. Hide no more. Run no more. Seek no more. Cry no more. Hit no more. Yearn no more. Prove no more. Destroy no more. Defend no more. Attack no more. Relax. Come here [God says] I'm here...I'm here...[God's] in front of the door. [God's] behind the door. [God] is the door. [God] is" (adapted from Marianne Williamson's *Illuminata* , pp. 293-294, 296).

When we listen for the angels and their message of comfort and hope we just might hear words like these, words like those heard by Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds—soothing words of reassurance, hopeful words of encouragement, sustaining words of promise, surprising words of joy. All of these are the words and songs, the hopes and dreams of Christmas as found in a straw-filled manger, just as the angels said.

*Hark! The herald angels sing,  
Glory to the newborn King;  
Peace on earth, and mercy mild,  
God and sinners reconciled!"  
Joyful, all ye nations rise,  
Join the triumph of the skies;  
With the angelic host proclaim,  
"Christ is born in Bethlehem!"  
Hark! The herald angels sing,  
"Glory to the new-born King!" AMEN.*

Written by Rev. Jimmy Only  
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## PASTORAL PRAYER

We come before you in awe, O God, freshly aware of your glory and your love embodied in the midst of this world. Here amid dirt and straw, amid the noise of cattle and the labor of birth, we perceive your work. We dare to believe that it is you, God, coming to be among us in the person of Jesus, and so we praise you with songs of joy. Glory be to you, O God, forever and ever.

We pray for all people who find the holidays sad and difficult to bear. For people in the military and humanitarian relief workers, regardless of their country of origin, who are separated from their families during this season, we pray. For those who have lost family and friends, we ask your assurance that their loved ones rest secure in your everlasting arms.

As we celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace, we pray for our world's leaders that peace and justice might spread throughout our world.

And now, O God, we offer you the gratitude of our hearts for your arrival on that starry night so long ago. May the hope that was born in Bethlehem be born in us tonight, through Jesus Christ the newborn king we pray. AMEN.

The first paragraph of this prayer was adapted from the *Book of Worship, United Church of Christ*, p. 480.