

WHO ARE YOUR ANGELS?

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.' ²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' ³⁴ Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' ³⁵ The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶ And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God.' (Luke 1:26-37, NRSV)

What's on top of your Christmas tree? Are you a star family or an angel family? Or do you really buck tradition and top it with something else? My family's trees have always been topped by an angel. Currently, we're featuring one that my son Matthew made out of a coffee filter. Our angel tradition goes way back.

The first year that my parents were married, they bought 3 angels made of white, fluffy feathers to top their Christmas tree. And while a lot of things have changed in my parents' house since 1960, those angels have remained intact. They've topped the tree for more than 40 years, and they're still going strong. No matter what ornaments hung on the rest of the tree, no matter what packages lay below, no matter how old or young the family posing in front of it, those 3 feathery angels stayed the same. Same look, same place, same everything. Those angels were and are very much predictable.

The angels that are more than mere decoration, the angels we read about in the Book of Luke, are an altogether different story. The angels in the Book of Luke are full of surprise. The angels of Christmas Eve specialize in the unexpected.

I remember the first time I ever saw an angel do the unexpected. It was in this sanctuary on Christmas Eve. The year was 1994, and I had only been working here for six months. Since this was my first attempt at a Christmas Pageant, I was a little nervous. But I began to relax after our P.F. youth group did such a great job reenacting the Christmas story. I counted it a victory that the wise men hadn't tripped over their costumes as they marched down the aisle, Gabriel had remembered her lines or suitably faked them, and most importantly, Mary and Joseph hadn't dropped the Baby Jesus. In the true spirit of Christmas miracles, we were on the verge of pulling it off. All we had left was the children's choir.

I was seated up here on the chancel when our children, dressed as sheep, shepherds, and angels, assembled on the chancel steps and began to sing their carols. Everything went as planned until “Away in a Manger.” It was during “Away in a Manger,” somewhere about the time the cattle were lowing and the baby awakes (and for the record, I never bought the line, “Little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes,” even if he was God’s Son!), that two angels began behaving unexpectedly. There they were, all decked out in their robes, glittered wings, and halos, when one little golden haired angel decided that the angel next to her was invading her space, so she gave her a good shove. The second angel was not about to take this abuse, and gave the first angel a shove in return. And so as the children continued to sing their angelic carol, I found myself separating those angels before someone lost her wings. On that night in our sanctuary not so long ago, I realized something. Something that the people in a Bethlehem stable had learned well over 2000 years ago: angels are unpredictable. Angels are full of surprises.

The first angelic surprise in the Book of Luke came not to Mary, Joseph, or the shepherds. The first surprise came to Zechariah, whose wife, Elizabeth, was Mary’s cousin. Zechariah and Elizabeth had no children, and in their advanced years, had given up this dream. However, one day Zechariah, a priest, was working alone in the sanctuary when he encountered the angel Gabriel. You might think that a priest, of all people, would not be floored by an encounter with the divine. Wrong! The text tells us that Zechariah was terrified and overwhelmed with fear (Luke 1:12). As is the case with all of the angelic encounters early in the Book of Luke, the angel led with the words, “Do not be afraid.” And then Gabriel gave him the unexpected news—their prayers had been answered and they would have a child, who should be named John.

Even though he worked in the religion business, Zechariah had his doubts about the angel’s message and asked for a sign. He got his sign all right—he became mute until the day of John’s birth. When this baby grew up he was none other than the locust-eating, fiery prophet known as John the Baptist, the one who baptized his cousin Jesus in the Jordan River.

Six months later Gabriel showed up at Mary’s house with the words, “Greetings favored one! The Lord is with you” (1:28). Apparently the look on Mary’s face let Gabriel know that she wasn’t feeling particularly favored at that moment for the next words out of Gabriel’s mouth were, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God” (1:30). He then announced the most amazing news her ears had ever heard, that God had chosen her to bear God’s own Son, Jesus.” Unlike the doubting priest, Zechariah, young Mary asked one question for clarification and then responded with faith saying, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (1:38).

In the next chapter of the Book of Luke, we find one more angelic appearance related to the Christmas story. It so happened that certain shepherds were out doing their jobs, taking care of sheep in the fields. They weren’t working in God’s sanctuary like Zechariah. They were simply keeping an eye on their sheep when all of a sudden an angel appeared, surrounded by God’s glory and like Zechariah and Mary before them,

they were terrified. Once again, before bringing the divine message, the angel calmed them with the words, “Do not be afraid...for I bring you good news” (Luke 2:10a). The angel told them the good news of a Savior’s birth in Bethlehem, and gave them a major clue in finding the newborn babe. He’ll be the only one cradled in an animal feeding trough! As if their minds had not been blown enough, the shepherds saw the night sky shining bright as day with multitudes of angels singing glory to God. Suddenly the sheep didn’t seem nearly so important, as they ran to Bethlehem in search of the heavenly infant.

Angels. Seems like they’re popping up everywhere in the Book of Luke. What are we to make of them today? 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 each of the three encounters—with Zechariah, with Mary, and with the shepherds, the angel brings 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 people of all kinds. They brought it to the young and the old. They brought it to every day laborers and to a priest. They brought it to men and to a woman. They brought it to a home, a sanctuary, and a field.

Who do angels come to today? I hope they have come to you. Yes, I believe that angels continue to walk among us. Not the kind with halos and wings (except in our Christmas pageant of course), but the kind with flesh and blood, the kind who make it a point to calm our fears and bring us good news. I believe that the people who comfort us with words of hope and encouragement are carrying on where those angels in Luke left off.

I remember someone who acted as an angel to me my freshman year in college. His name was Rev. Ken Watkins, and he was my campus minister. Ken was the angel I talked to as I struggled with my grief following the death of my grandfather. I can’t recall any specific words Ken said, but I remember his kindness, his compassion, and his wisdom. Meeting with him helped restore my battered faith and heal my hurting heart.

I remember another angel I met in college, Dr. Ray Lloyd, the pastor of the church I attended there. Dr. Lloyd is the person who unexpectedly changed the course of my life when he offered me a free trip to visit his alma mater, Southern Seminary. I was a junior at the time, making plans to attend graduate school in psychology, but I took him up on his offer anyway. To make a long story short, I ended up attending the seminary, and switching career paths from psychologist to minister. And behold, that school brought me good news of a great joy, for unto me was given a girlfriend. I found her wrapped in a sweatshirt and jeans, taking notes in a classroom. And suddenly there was with us a multitude of bridesmaids and groomsmen, and a minister saying “Glory to God in the highest! I now pronounce you husband and wife.” Yes, my unexpected encounter with Dr. Lloyd that autumn afternoon had a life-changing impact on me.

Who are your angels? Who are those people who have been there when you needed a word of encouragement, or some direction in your life? On those days when

you've felt like Zechariah, when you've stood in desperate need of hearing some good news, who has been there to listen and care? Who has served as the answer to your prayers? On those days when you've felt like Mary, much too overwhelmed or inadequate to do what God calls you to do, who has encouraged you by saying, "Fear not, for you have found favor with God"? In those times when we've been like the shepherds, merely minding our own business as we go about our work, who has broken into our lives with an offer too good to refuse? These are the angels in our lives. These are the unexpected messengers of God's love.

Those of us who have heard this message are given the chance to dust off our own wings as well. The beauty of being open to God's Spirit in our lives is that some days we get to be Gabriel. We get to bring good news to those around us. We get to warm people's hearts with a message of hope. We get to bring tidings of comfort and joy.

As we celebrate the gift of the Christ child, born 2000 years ago, let us celebrate as well the angels who brought the good news, and the ones who continue to do so today. May we give thanks for them. May we follow their lead. And in this holy season, may our voices, angelic or otherwise, ring out, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, good will toward all." AMEN.

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PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving God, you have given us so many good gifts: a beautiful world in which to live, joyous music to lift our hearts, beloved families and friends to share this life, and most of all the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ. As we recall his lowly birth in this sacred season, may we feel deep in our souls the true significance of Christmas: the gift of Jesus to people everywhere. As we receive your love, help us respond with gifts of our own. Inspire us to share with the hungry, the refugee, the homeless. Guide our hopes and dreams that together we might build a better, more peaceful world. For those who find the holidays a sad and stressful time, we ask your grace and consolation. May the joy of this blessed season help them find and name blessings in their own lives.

We thank you, dear God, for the gladness and delight of Christmas, through Jesus Christ we pray. AMEN.