

Pardon the Interruption: Angels

December 27, 2016

Our advent series has focused on the interruptions to the lives of Mary, Joseph, and the Shepherds. On Christmas Eve, we celebrated the greatest interruption into the world – Jesus. He turned the world upside down, not only in the way he came into this world, but through his ministry, his teachings, his death, and his resurrection. As we continue the series Pardon the Interruption, we are going to take a moment to focus on God's "interrupters;" the angels. As we heard read in our scripture this morning, the angels play a critical role in the Christmas story. Most of us are aware of the multitude of heavenly hosts that proclaim the birth of Jesus to the shepherds, but this series has really helped me to recognize the prominence of the angels throughout the story.

Many of us have different feelings or beliefs about angels. We all may have a different perception of who they are and what they might look like. There are many influences on our image of angels – scripture, television, movies, art, personal experiences, etc. If we were to close our eyes and imagine an angel, we all may have similarities – wings, white and gold, etc. Growing up, this was one of my first images of an angel (Donald Duck). Cartoons often portrayed the angel on one shoulder and the devil on the other. Art continued to influence my view of angels. These two cherubs hung over my bed for as long as I can remember. I have always felt them watching over me. When I taught music, one of my favorite songs that I did with my chorus was "All Night, All Day, angels watching over me my Lord...." The bible has over 200 references of angels. Some scholars believe when it says "Angel of the Lord" this is a reference to

God. Others believe that it was the preincarnated Jesus, as in the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego when the angel appeared in the fiery furnace. Some believe that was Jesus. But there are many scriptural references to God's messengers and servants, as in the Christmas story.

In 1994, a new television series put the spotlight on the role of angels in our lives. It quickly became one of my favorites. (Video). *Touched By An Angel* ran from 1994-2003 and followed the work of angels Monica, Tess, and Andrew and it was surprisingly theologically correct. They were God's messengers, offering guidance, and sharing the good news. At the end of every episode, the angel would reveal herself or himself and share God's message. The primary message? God loves you. I used to love how Monica said it with her Irish accent. Psalm 91:11 says "*For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.*" This would be describing the role of guardian angels. In Hebrews 1:14 Scripture says "*Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?*" John Wesley wrote a sermon based on this text called *Of Good Angels*. He says of God's messengers their "first care is to minister to our souls." In the clip from *Touched By An Angel*, twice we hear people ask "how do you know my name." Wesley says that "his angels know the hearts of those to whom they more immediately minister."

John Calvin defines angels as "the dispensers and administrators of the Divine beneficence (or goodness) toward us, they regard our safety, undertake our defense, direct our ways, and exercise a constant solicitude (care and concern) that no evil befall us." Angels are messengers, guardians, and guides. And we see these so clearly in the Christmas story.

Let's first look at Luke 1:19. Here the angel Gabriel is talking to Zechariah – When he appears to Zechariah in the temple, he tells Zechariah “Do not be afraid.” *“I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.”* Here we see the role of the angel as messenger – bringer of good news. Now, if I were in my eighties and just was told I was going to have a baby, I might have mixed feelings about that. But it is good news. And this was not the first birth announcement from an angel. Three visitors spoke to Abraham and Sarah, telling them they were to have their son Isaac. Another messenger (angel) from God tells a woman she will be the mother of Samson.

In our second scripture this morning, we see how the angel spoke to Joseph. Here the angel is in the role of guide. Joseph's plans were interrupted by the angel. He had planned to divorce Mary quietly and get on with his life. The angel tells Joseph what to do with Mary and their unborn child. And this is not the only encounter Joseph has with an angel. After Jesus is born, an angel comes to him, this time as guardian, to warn Joseph to flee to Egypt, for Herod was searching for the child to destroy him. And a third encounter guides Joseph to return to Nazareth after Herod's death. I'm a little jealous of Joseph. I have never seen an angel, though I have looked earnestly, and he gets to see three! I have certainly had unexplainable events that could only be explained by the mystery of faith. But I have not SEEN an angel. In fact, in preparation for this sermon I think I had the help of an angel. I was struggling to find illustrations for the sermon. I spent hours researching. Then I remembered a book that I had on *It's a Wonderful Life* and thought I might find something in there about Clarence Odbody. As I reached for the book on my shelf, another title caught my eye; *An Angel a Day: Stories of Angelic*

Encounters. I have never read this book (but I will now)! I don't remember ever seeing it before. There was no inscription inside. I'm sure it was a gift, but did it ever appear at a time I needed it.

I did a 9 month internship with Hospice in 2006. During the orientation, the trainer shared some amazing stories from nurses and staff about seeing angels. I then entered every patients' room with the anticipation of seeing an angel. But I never did. Here is one story from a Hospice nurse.

The experience that stands out most in my mind is about a 40 year old professional man, in our very rural area , with AIDs. He was agnostic by faith and held steadfast to that belief throughout his decline. Often times he engaged the hospice RNs, LPNs, SWs and HHAs in intelligent conversations and debates about God, life after death and religion. All the while never wavering from his convictions. However in the days before his death, when he became bedfast, his HHA asked if he would allow her to sing a few songs while she provided personal care. He agreed, **as he had a great love, respect and affection for her**. But, asked that she "**not get too religious**" and continue to respect his beliefs.

The HHA sang "Jesus Loves Me" and some other soothing hymns, while bathing him as he was bedfast in the last days of his life. During the last few minutes of his life (**as his family was traveling from out of state to be with him**)- he said to the HHA:

"Do you see them???"

"Who?"

"The angels...They are here for me! I have to go now."

"She said "No, D. I don't see them. You need to wait your mom and dad will be here

very soon!"

He said "Tell them I can't wait.." She said "Who D? Who should I tell?" He said "tell my family the angels came for me and I could not wait."

In our third scripture reading, we see the angel Gabriel again with Mary. Here is this innocent, naïve teenager, who is full of faith. Again the angel says "do not be afraid." There is a pattern here...(9:45) On a side note, my apologies to whoever was sitting over there by the side door a couple of weeks ago when I burst through the door with angel wings. I heard the gasps....I should have stopped and said "Fear Not!"

Mary received the good news. She had found favor with God. Isn't that what we all would like to hear? That we have found favor with God? Here's the good news....you have! God loves you! That's why he went to all this trouble to tell you so...coming to us in the form of an infant so that he would be fully human and fully divine; so that our relationship with God could be restored. Hear the good news from the angels to you this day! God is with YOU! God loves YOU!

The final sighting of our angels in the Christmas story is to the shepherds out in the fields. "*Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.*" This angel is fulfilling the role of messenger, bringing good news to the shepherds. But it's not just for the shepherds. It is for ALL THE PEOPLE. It is for you, for me, All Ages, All In! But here in this encounter, it is not just one angel. Suddenly the sky is filled with them! This is an important celebration! The heavens are rejoicing! Jesus is born! "*Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace and goodwill toward men.*" We know that afterwards the shepherds went out and told everyone what they

had heard and seen. Do we not need to do the same? This is not our very own little secret.

Some of you may have stories of angels and other what may be called God moments or Glory sightings. Have you told others? Or is there a fear that people won't believe you? Do you think you might be imagining things? There was another story that I found as I was researching for this sermon. It was about a little boy who had been trapped by a garage door. He was only 3 years old. The door came down and crushed his sternum. He later described the "birdies" that came to be with him while he was waiting for his mother to find him. He described a very detailed "out of body" experience as the birdies took him up and he could see the "baby" (which was him) lying on the garage floor while the paramedics worked on him. A 3 year old boy has not had the influence of media and other stories to tell him about the "birdies," or angels. This is not an overactive imagination.

God uses so many ways to get the good news to us – Scripture, prayer, the Holy Spirit, and his special messengers. And though it is a little unnerving, the angels bring peace; "fear not".

These angel encounters are just the beginning. The angels continue to be a part of Jesus' story. It does not end with the multitude of the heavenly hosts saying *Glory to God in the highest*. Angels came and cared for him after the temptations of the devil. And there is another appearance of the heavenly messengers bringing good news of great joy in Matthew. Matthew 28:20 shares this angelic encounter:

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to the tomb. There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said."

Again the voice of comfort – do not be afraid. For behold I bring you good news of great joy! Jesus is not here! And like the shepherds, Mary Magdalene did not keep this good news to herself. And we can't keep this news to ourselves either. We must go and tell it on the mountain and everywhere! Not only that Jesus Christ is born, but that he is risen. This too is good news of great joy for all people. In the Christmas story, the angels proclaim that Christ has come to the earth. This is the story of the incarnation; how God became man and dwelt among us. It is because of His coming at Christmas that we have the good news of salvation through his death and resurrection. Let us declare the message of the angels. But first, let us receive that message. Sometimes we are so excited about telling and doing for others that we forget that Christ was born for you. We are part of "all the people." God loves YOU! I want you to fill in your name at the appropriate place....

"For behold I bring _____ good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto _____ is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

Let the angels interrupt you with the message that God loves you. Receive this joy today, and share it. Joy to the World, the Lord has come!

