



The Shepherd's Angels
 Rev. Dr. Glenda Hollingshead; December 21, 2025
 4th Sunday of Advent
 Luke 2:1-20

We are nearing the end of our Advent sermon series inspired by Erin Wathen's devotional *Calling All Angels*. Angels—those mysterious figures who appear throughout Scripture, yet, more often than not, go unnoticed. We've made them small, sentimental, safe. But the biblical story rejects that version for angels in Scripture do not decorate the scene. Arriving unannounced, with urgency, light, and news that refuses to leave the world unchanged—angels interrupt. Angels disrupt. So, on this Fourth Sunday of Advent, with the candle of Love to guide us, let us consider the Shepherd's Angels, and with them, the blessing of disruption and the blessing of welcoming the other.

Luke tells us the shepherds were doing what they always did. Watching the sheep. Keeping the night shift. Living inside a routine that was repetitive and for the most part, invisible. Make no mistake, shepherds were not romantic figures in the first century. They were poor and they lived on the margins. It is precisely into these margins that heaven breaks in when the shepherd's nightly routine is interrupted by an angel of the Lord who stands before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them. So, of course, they are terrified. "Do not be afraid," the angel says,

for I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” Suddenly, the lone angel is joined by a multitude of angels and their praise erupts in the middle of a field. “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those he favors.”

In response to such an unbelievable experience—such unbelievable news—the shepherds feel compelled to respond. “Let us now go to Bethlehem,” they say. In haste, they leave the field and their sheep behind, and with all the courage they can muster, they move toward the disruption rather than away from it. They move toward the promise of God’s love made flesh among them.

While the first strangers the shepherds encounter that night are the angels, their good news leads the shepherds to another kind of stranger altogether—not a messenger with angelic wings, but God made flesh. God as a baby. Poor. Vulnerable. A Savior has been born—but not where power usually lives. Not in a palace but wrapped in cloth and laid in a feeding trough. Born to people like them—yet still profoundly *other*. God has crossed every boundary to be near, and in doing so, has become unfamiliar in a way no one expected. Nearness over control? Vulnerability over dominance? What radical love.

Such is the amazing, all-encompassing love of God. And, often, to our surprise, God’s love does not come quietly. Sometimes, it makes a ruckus. Sometimes, it disrupts our routines, our plans. But disruption is not something we prefer—not something we would ever prayer for! Rather, we prefer stability. We prefer predictability—a faith that reassures us rather than rearranges us. But Advent insists that God’s love often arrives as an interruption. It invites movement. It invites change. And love embraces the holy disruption of “God with us” as a welcome guest instead of an intruder—instead of “the other.”

As Erin Wathen reminds us, in society today, our instinct when we encounter difference is often caution—if not outright suspicion. Opening ourselves to the “other” takes spiritual discipline, because it runs against both our fight-or-flight instincts and a culture that trains us to live in echo chambers, where difference is easily labeled as danger. We begin to equate the familiar with safe and the unfamiliar with threatening. Over time, we lose the spiritual muscles needed to receive surprise—especially surprise that arrives wearing a human face we did not expect. Angels, after all, often look like strangers before they look like messengers. The shepherds had no such buffers. Their work demanded attentiveness—watching, listening, staying awake in the dark. And maybe that made them spiritually available in ways that comfort rarely does.

Choosing love does not mean pretending there is nothing to fear. It means refusing to let fear have the final word. The angels say, “*Do not be afraid.*” And then they proclaim, “*Glory to God... and on earth peace.*” Not someday. Not eventually. But now—beginning in a field, with shepherds, in the middle of the night. When the angels leave, and the shepherds trek to Bethlehem to “see

this thing that has taken place,” they do not keep the experience to themselves. Luke tells us they make known what they have been told. They return to their fields changed. The sheep are still there. Their work is still there. But their world is no longer the same. That is the blessing of disruption.

So what might love’s disruption look like for us? It may look like being interrupted by someone’s pain when we would rather look the other way. It may look like listening instead of reacting. It may look like crossing a line—social, political, cultural—that we have been taught not to cross. Love disrupts our habits of fear. And fear, in these times, is plentiful. We are surrounded by messages telling us who to distrust, who to avoid, who to blame. Fear promises safety, but it delivers isolation. Love, on the other hand, is risky. It asks us to move toward one another.

Advent does not ask us to abandon our lives; it asks us to wake up to them. Readiness for holy disruption is practiced attentiveness—slowing down enough to notice, making room for interruption, allowing ourselves to be changed by what, or whom, we did not expect to encounter. This Advent, may we resist the urge to seal ourselves off from surprise. May we choose love over fear—not because love is easy, but because it is faithful. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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