

Luke 1 & 2 12-17-17

The Angel Angle

Quickie survey question. What do you put on the top of your Christmas tree? Huh? Do you have a tradition about what tops off all the decoration on your tree? How many put a star up there? How many put an angel up there? Any other options? Our topper has always been a very feminine-looking angel that perched nicely on the top branch. Angels go with Christmas don't they? But, have you ever noticed that manger scenes often include wise men whom we know were not there at the manger? And they include animals who are not mentioned at all in the Biblical account. But they include no angels. Not that we know what angels are supposed to look like, but my goodness, angels certainly have more to do with the Christmas story than do animals. How many of you have seen the new Tyler Perry movie, *The Star*? Beth saw it and really liked it. I understand it tells the Christmas story from the perspective of the animals who may possibly have been involved. It gives the animal angle. But it would be hard to preach that, since the Scriptures don't mention them. But it mentions angels – and not just once. Angels are all over the Christmas story. In Matthew angels come and speak to Joseph several times, but in Luke, within just the first two chapters we read of three visitations by angels. So, our approach to this Christmas meditation is to take the angel angle, to consider the role of the angels and particularly what we see came to pass as a result of their ministrations.

We are looking at the three angel stories in Luke. The first comes from the very beginning of the gospel and it is about the birth of John the Baptist, the cousin and forerunner of Jesus the Messiah. Luke 1: **5-7** *When Herod was king of Judea, there was a Jewish priest named Zechariah. He was a member of the priestly order of Abijah, and his wife, Elizabeth, was also from the priestly line of Aaron. 6 Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous in God's eyes, careful to obey all of the Lord's commandments and regulations. 7 They had no children because Elizabeth was unable to conceive, and they were both very old. Don't you wish that was more specific? I do. I would like to know what qualifies Biblically as "very old."* **8** *One day Zechariah was serving God in the Temple, for his order was on duty that week. 9 As was the custom of the priests, he was chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and burn incense. 10 While the incense was being burned, a great crowd stood outside, praying. 11 While Zechariah was in the sanctuary, an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the incense altar. 12 Zechariah was shaken and overwhelmed with fear when he saw him. 13 But the angel said, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah! God*

*has heard your prayer. Your wife, Elizabeth, will give you a son, and you are to name him John. 14 You will have great joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 15 for he will be great in the eyes of the Lord. He must never touch wine or other alcoholic drinks. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even before his birth. 16 And he will turn many Israelites to the Lord their God. 17 He will be a man with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and he will cause those who are rebellious to accept the wisdom of the godly.” 18 Zechariah said to the angel, “How can I be sure this will happen? I’m an old man now, and my wife is also well along in years.” I would point out here that Luke tells us Zechariah and Elizabeth were very old. But wise old Zechariah knows better than to say that his wife is old. They are instead, “well-along in years.” I like that. **19-22** Then the angel said, “I am Gabriel! I stand in the very presence of God. It was He who sent me to bring you this good news! 20 But now, since you didn’t believe what I said, you will be silent and unable to speak until the child is born. For my words will certainly be fulfilled at the proper time.” 21 Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah to come out of the sanctuary, wondering why he was taking so long. 22 When he finally did come out, he couldn’t speak to them. Then they realized from his gestures and his silence that he must have seen a vision in the sanctuary.*

We skip down now to verse 57 **57-64** *When it was time for Elizabeth’s baby to be born, she gave birth to a son. 58 And when her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had been very merciful to her, everyone rejoiced with her. 59 When the baby was eight days old, they all came for the circumcision ceremony. They wanted to name him Zechariah, after his father. 60 But Elizabeth said, “No! His name is John!” 61 “What?” they exclaimed. “There is no one in all your family by that name.” 62 So they used gestures to ask the baby’s father what he wanted to name him. 63 He motioned for a writing tablet, and to everyone’s surprise he wrote, “His name is John.” 64 Instantly Zechariah could speak again, and he began praising God.*

Well, what a cool story that is! Visitation from the angel Gabriel, who we will hear from again in a moment. When Beth and I visited Utah I saw and heard a good bit about the angel Moroni – among the Mormons the best-known angel because he is the one who allegedly came to Joseph Smith in 1823. But for us, Gabriel reigns supreme among the angels, the good ones at least. The Mormons revere him too. They actually teach that Noah was the incarnation of Gabriel. Who knew? His name, “Gabriel” means, “God is my strength.” A great name for an angel. This angel appears in the book of Daniel, and then here in Luke. He apparently was an angel of great privilege and got the most important assignments. So, we read of him again in Luke 1:**26-38** *In the sixth*

month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, 27 to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. 28 Gabriel appeared to her and said, "Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!" 29 Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. 30 "Don't be afraid, Mary," the angel told her, "for you have found favor with God! 31 You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give Him the throne of His ancestor David. 33 And He will reign over Israel forever; His Kingdom will never end!" 34 Mary asked the angel, "But how can this happen? I am a virgin." 35 The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and He will be called the Son of God. 36 What's more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she has conceived a son and is now in her sixth month. 37 For the word of God will never fail." 38 Mary responded, "I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true." And then the angel left her.

So, what do we know about angels? The term means "message" or "messenger." Angels often serve as God's messengers. You find the word "angel" tucked in to our term, "evangelist." The prefix "eu" or "ev" means "good" and so an evangelist brings good news. He is a messenger. Sort of like an angel. But evangelists are human, angels are not. What exactly they are is hard to say. In Hebrews they are called, "ministering spirits." They are not intrinsically physical and so they don't have wings per se. But they do take on bodies to perform certain functions on earth. But they take on bodies like we rent cars – for a specific purpose to interact with humans. Not having bodies angels are also sex-less or gender-less. In a way they were transgendered before it was cool. Apparently too they were around before the creation of the earth. Someone told the story about God talking to an angel about creating the world. God says, "I just made a 24 hour period. It will be half light & half-dark & will keep repeating itself until the end of time." "Wow" says the angel. "What will you do next?" "Well," God says, "I think I'll call it a day."

Hey, we have one more story about angels to look at – the familiar account of the shepherds on the original Christmas night. Luke 2:**8-20** *That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. 9 Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, 10 but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. 11 The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! 12*

And you will recognize Him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger.” 13 Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying, 14 “Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.” 15 When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, “Let’s go to Bethlehem! Let’s see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” 16 They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger. 17 After seeing Him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. 18 All who heard the shepherds’ story were astonished, 19 but Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often. 20 The shepherds went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. It was just as the angel had told them.

Our third angel story. The Bible provides a bunch of stories about angels, but if that leads you to think that angelic visits were more prevalent then than now, think again. Angel visits are recorded in Scripture not because they were routine, but because they were rare. The Bible, like most historical records, includes the unusual events, not the commonplace. You can see from the reaction of those to whom the angels appeared, that they were not used to such occurrences. Not at all.

Well, let’s move now to look at those reactions. In fact, we are going to see four reactions common to Zechariah, Mary and the shepherds. The first of them I bet you can guess. What marked the initial reaction of Zechariah, Mary and the shepherds? It was the same reaction angels always seem to get from humans. What was it? Fear. Alarm. Dread. Terror. Trepidation. Astonishment. Consternation. Panic. Trauma. 1:12 *Zechariah was shaken and overwhelmed with fear when he saw him.* We read that Mary was confused and disturbed. The shepherds were terrified. And angels seem to begin every speech the same way. “A funny thing happened on my way to earth...” No – How do they begin? *Fear not.* Would you like a visit from an angel? Who thinks they would like that? I am not a thrill-seeker. I have no interest in sky-diving or even roller-coasters. I don’t like surprises as a rule, and I really don’t like being pranked in a scary way. But, as a Biblical scholar, I must say that I would be happy to get an angel visit. You know why? They most always bring good news. It might be odd news. News that is hard to fathom – but almost always really, really good. So, after you get over the shock of seeing an angel, calm down and, like the angel says, “Do not be afraid.”

The second common reaction to angels is questioning. Questioning. Doubting. Skepticism. Zechariah was a priest, well-along in years, but when he was finally touched by an angel he lost the ability to speak – a mild judgment for his failure to trust what the angel said. He questioned Gabriel who apparently rolled his eyes and then showed Zechariah his ID. I don't know if angels get miffed or not, but we read him saying in verse 19, *"I am Gabriel! I stand in the very presence of God.* The implication is that you can take his word to the bank. They could start fixing up the nursery and they could paint it blue – a baby boy is on the way. But Zechariah couldn't talk about it because he was initially a doubter. Christianity is not for the gullible. If you read the Biblical record you find plenty of skepticism among the heroes of faith. In fact, the city of Doubt seems to be on the road to Solid Faith. Same thing with Mary. When Gabriel told her she could fix up a nursery and paint it blue she didn't say, "Cool" she said, "Uh, that sounds like a nice plan but we have this little virginity problem to get past. I am not sure your heavenly planning team has taken that into account." Apparently, her disposition was a bit more trusting than that of old Zechariah, so she didn't go mute. But I hope you see that the first virgin-birth skeptic was Mary.

Interestingly, the shepherds did not seem to struggle with doubt so much did they? Mind you, they had two advantages. One, they were not being told about something miraculous. The news they got was that a baby had been born. The location was odd – but the event, not so much. So, it was easier for them to believe the angel. They also had the advantage of being in a group. After the angels sang their song and went back to heaven, they would look at each other and ask, "Was that for real?" The angelic appearance in private could make you wonder if you are crazy – but when your buddies have the same experience it is highly confirming. It is like that for me too. When I hear your stories of how Jesus came to you, how your eyes were opened, how you were set free by Jesus, how your heart was changed, how the word of God brought you life it confirms my faith and my experience. I think, "Wow, Jesus does this for lots of people as He did for me." Outsiders will look at us and wonder, "How can you Christians believe all this stuff about the supernatural, about virgin births, about miracles and resurrections?" And I wonder, "How can anyone not believe it?" I have heard so many accounts of the power of the gospel transforming lives – I can't help but believe it and it has happened to me. Personally, I get especially blessed by the testimonies of brilliant men and women. Folks like R.C. Sproul and Chuck Colson and Eric Metaxas – all of whom came to faith as adults. I get blessed by stories like I have heard this year from my brother Frenchy Theberge and Gerry Richardson of how the Lord came into their mid-life worlds and totally changed their hearts and their minds and their lives. This is what we do for each

other in the body of Christ. We build each other up by our testimonies. We say, “Yes, I heard the angels too. I saw them singing. You aren’t crazy, this is real. Let’s head to Bethlehem together.”

Okay – that takes us to our next point which is that, after the angel encounter, all our friends did obey. Zechariah named his son John when that was considered odd. Mary said, “I am the servant of the Lord, be it done to me as you say.” The shepherds ran to Bethlehem to see the child. They all did obey and they did so because, despite their wonderings, they believed the angel. It’s okay to be unsure. It’s okay to doubt a little – just so the doubt doesn’t control your behavior. They believed enough to do as they were told.

We will call that a quick third point and move on to our fourth commonality. All our friends, after they obeyed the angel, rejoiced. They rejoiced or they praised God. Really they joyfully praised God. That sums it up. The shepherds went back to their sheep who were probably getting a bit worried and it says they were rejoicing and praising God for all that they had seen. Mary and Zechariah both broke into an original song that landed in the gospel of Luke. Mary said in Luke 1:**46-49** *Oh, how my soul praises the Lord. 47 How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior! 48 For he took notice of his lowly servant girl, and from now on all generations will call me blessed. 49 For the Mighty One is holy, and He has done great things for me.* You can imagine what some of Mary’s relatives were saying to her about being pregnant before the wedding. You can imagine the opposition to the promise that was hitting her from without and from within but she did what we talked about last Sunday. Remember? What was that? She outrejoiced them. Her spirit rejoiced in God her Savior.

Then we read about Zechariah. When he finally got to speak it says he was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied saying, **68** *Praise the Lord, the God of Israel, because He has visited and redeemed His people.*

That is the final stage of the angel cycle. Fear, questioning, obedience and joyful praise. Note where it ends. It ends in joy and not because an angel came. The angel is just the messenger. The joy and the praise results from the coming of another – the son of God by name, the Prince of Peace, the Messiah-King. For, to quote an angel friend of mine, *Behold I bring you good news of a great joy which shall be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.*