

“The Message of Angels: Hope for the Hungry”

Sermon preached by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt

Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean, VA

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Luke 1:5-25

Our scripture text for today comes from the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke. After a brief introduction, explaining his purpose in writing the book (“to set down an orderly account of what has been fulfilled among us” so that his readers “may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed”), Luke starts right in with the visit of an angel heralding the remarkable conception and birth of a long-awaited baby. But the angel isn’t announcing the conception and birth of Jesus. The angel is bringing news that a child will be born to a childless couple who are well on in years. That child will be John the Baptist. Listen to how this couple is described, what the angel tells the man who will be the boy’s father, and how the father and mother react to the news. *Read Luke here.*

In her marvelous poem, “An Angel Filled Advent,” the Presbyterian poet and elder Ann Weems asks “Wouldn’t it be wonderful if Advent came filled with angels and alleluias,” “a hovering of heavenly hosts tuning their harps and brushing up on their falalas” every morning, their music filling “our waking hours with the promise of peace on earth” and their message filling our nighttime dreams “with nothing but goodwill.” An angel-filled Advent, she says, “has so many possibilities.”¹

I think Ann Weems is right. So this Advent and Christmas season, I’ve decided to preach a series of sermons in which we will look together at stories of supernatural angels visiting different Biblical characters in the time leading up to and right after the birth of Jesus. Since the word “angel” literally means messenger, together we will attend to the messages that these angels brought those they first encountered. Then we will pay attention to what those encounters might have to teach us. And I hope, in the process of our listening to these angel voices in worship, we will all be more attentive to the angel voices we hear elsewhere in our lives throughout this season. After all, not every messenger from God comes clad in gossamer wings and a halo.

Today we begin with the angel Gabriel visiting an old priest named Zechariah. Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, despite the fact that they are devout worshippers of the God of Israel and keepers of the law, are childless and “getting on in years.” It is no accident that Luke begins his story of Jesus’ life here, with an old, childless Jewish couple.

You see, any reader or hearer of that account who was familiar with the Hebrew scriptures would immediately make a mental leap to the Old Testament narrative of the aging Abram and Sarai, who, after having packed up all their belongings and set out for unknown lands at God’s promise and command, then waited and waited and waited and waited and waited for the child God had promised to be born to them. Year after year, Abram’s beard grew grayer until it became snow white. Year after year, Sarai’s beautiful long hair grew thinner. The wrinkles on both of their faces kept etching deeper. Season after season, Abram asked about and Sarai felt in vain for some stirring in her womb, until eventually they had just about given up hope. And *that’s* when *their angel* came, in the guise of three travelers in need of

hospitality, to announce that Isaac would be born. In a situation which seemed humanly impossible, utterly hopeless, God stepped in to do something new. That was a story that was foundational to the Hebrew people.

This is the context that Luke wants to set for the birth and life of Jesus. That's why he doesn't start with Mary and Joseph, but with Zechariah and Elizabeth. Zechariah and Elizabeth are Abram and Sarai all over again. Like Abram and Sarai, they represent the faithful people of God, waiting, waiting, waiting for the promise the prophet Jeremiah made to be fulfilled. For hundreds of years they waited, from the time of the Babylonian exile, through the period of Persian rule, to the era of Greek domination and the repression of the Seleucids, and finally to the time of the Roman Empire, the people had been hungrily awaiting the coming of a Messiah, a deliverer from God. Generation after generation, they had known nothing but disappointment, but there was still that hunger, still that longing.

When I think of that hunger, I can't help but think of Carly Simon's hit song, the one Heinz foods used to advertise their ketchup way back when I was in elementary school: *"Anticipation, anticipa-tion, it's making me wait. It's keeping me wai-ai-ai-ai-aiting."*

One of the values of the season of Advent is that it reminds us that we are still waiting and not just on the coming of Christmas when we can open presents. We are waiting for the time when swords will be beaten into plowshares, and spears into pruning hooks. We are waiting for the time of justice and righteousness that Jeremiah foretells to finally and fully become a reality.

When we do Advent right, it can get us in touch with that deep hunger for the world to be more like the word pictures the prophets paint, but that longing isn't restricted to this season. That hunger swelled the ranks of churchgoers in the days and weeks following 9/11, but as life gradually returned to a new normal it ebbed away. When the world seems darkest, we want to believe that there is something more.

But the hunger for something more isn't limited to those times. It comes on us when we look at our lives and think: Is that all there is? Is it all just about the acquisition of stuff, the making of money, the building of a reputation, the preservation of appearances, the construction of a career? We long for our lives to truly make a difference, to not just be going through the motions. I believe deep in every one of us there is a hunger to connect with the holy, a longing to be a part that is larger than ourselves, something larger at work in the world.

It was a hunger like that which kept Zechariah and Elizabeth on the right path, true to keeping the commandments, even though their faithfulness didn't seem rewarded with the answering of their most fervent prayer: the desire for a child. Year after year, they stayed faithful to the covenant, they kept the commandments, until finally, in today's text, their prayer was answered. But they have no idea what is about to hit them. After all, by the time Gabriel comes to Zechariah, the old priest has been wai-ai-ai-ai-aiting so long, that he's just about given up hope.

It all starts like your average, ordinary day at the Temple. Zechariah, whose section of priests is on duty, is chosen by the casting of lots to be the priest who goes into the Temple and offers the incense.

Imagine it like getting a phone call from Hunt Howell asking you to be the worship leader, or Mr. Lawrence asking you to be the acolyte. So Zechariah was just doing what he was supposed to do, taking his turn, when bam, an angel appears.

That can happen, you know. Oh, it may not be as dramatic as all of that. We may not meet Gabriel with a flaming sword, or be knocked off our donkey like Paul was on the road to Damascus. For most of us, the encounter with the bearers of God's message isn't quite that spectacular. It can happen in worship, in private prayer, in a study group, or during the work or school day. It can happen in a conversation with a family member or a friend. Some new insight strikes us. We go from feeling all Grinchy to having our heart grow three sizes that day. Tears come unbidden. We have a clear sense that we need to do something or other. It's not exactly being encountered by an angel. And then again, maybe it is.

Annie Dillard, the poet, essayist and theologian, writes of the power and possibility of divine encounter in this way:

It is madness to wear ladies hats and straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offence, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.²

The possibility of encounter with the divine exists even in the midst of ordinary life.

So what does Gabriel say to Zechariah? After saying "Fear Not", (which as far as I can tell is what every Biblical angel says upon encountering a human being), here is the message the angel delivers to Zechariah, and to the faithful people of God of his day and age, and to you and me, is "*your prayers have been heard*". You will have a son, named John, and he will bring you great joy. But the purpose of your prayer being answered isn't your own agenda - it's about something larger, it is about the hearts of parents being turned toward children, it is about the unwise learning righteousness, it is about people returning to God and living into God's kingdom of love, it is about God's reign being realized on earth.

Angel messages, at least as far as I can tell from the Bible, are never just about our own private joy, comfort and happiness, they are never just me and you Jesus and that's it, they always invite us into the larger vision of a large God who cares for the whole world.

Twenty-nine years ago today, November 29th, 1980, Dorothy Day died in New York City. In a eulogy for her in his "The Outsider" column, the Roman Catholic journalist and author Garry Wills wrote, "*She was not good at owning things. She was good at giving things away, including herself. It is the only way, finally, to own oneself.*"

In her own and this century's teens, she was an ardent defender of other people's rights. She continued to speak up for the unprotected when no one else would do that. During World War II her protests at the interment without due process of Japanese Americans caused J. Edgar Hoover to open his extensive file on her.

Without her, how much bleaker would be our record. She fed the poor, which may not be the Christian's final task, but should normally be the first one.

She was the long distance runner of protest of our time, because her agitation was built on serenity, her activism on contemplation, her earthly indignation on unearthly trust. This or that cause with its noisy followers, came and went, but she was always there. "Rest in peace" one prays over the dead, but she reposed in restlessness, so long as there was no peace - and her moral discontent should be continued. Let her rest in our disquietude.

Dorothy Day showed us that people who stand with and for others cannot act from a calculus of individual advantage. They must act as they do from a higher urgency, a love beyond what most of us think of as loving. So far from distracting them from earth's injustice, as Marx claimed religion did, Dorothy Day's faith made effective radicalism not only possible, for many people, but imperative. We may not even be able to possess the earth unless we aspire to heaven - like our sister, Dorothy, who is dead and now lives.³

I think I saw an angel Wednesday night. I was at the movie theater watching that great inspirational new movie, based on a true story, *The Blind Side*.⁴ It wasn't like Gabriel with a flaming sword. It was just a fleeting moment. You couldn't really see the angel on the screen, but the angel was there. Leigh Anne Tuohy, played by Sandra Bullock, was in a car with her family riding along when she saw a large, 6'5 350-pound black teenager walking in shorts in the dead of the Memphis winter. And something told her, "I need to stop." She went back and asked him, "Where are you going Big Mike?" When he told her, "The gym, because it will be warm there," and it was well past the time the gym would be open, she said, "Get in. Get in Big Mike." She took him home, let him sleep on the couch that night, and before the story was through, she, like Elizabeth and Zechariah, had a new son.

I don't think she was praying to have a new child. Certainly not a 6'5 350-pound African-American child. But I wonder if Michael Oher wasn't the answer to her prayers.

I think the prayer probably went something like this. She probably learned how to pray it in her Baptist church. It was probably,

*"God, show me what you want me to do with my life.
Show me some way that I can reach out to people in need."*

That is a prayer that will always get answered. I've been around ministry long enough to know that there are some prayers we make that do not get answered, at least not in the way we'd like, but *that* prayer will always be answered. *"Show me what I can do to reach out to someone in need."*

In Jesus' name.

Amen.

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

¹ This excerpt from her poem “An Angel-Filled Advent” can be found in Ann Weems, *Kneeling in Bethlehem* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), p. 16.

² Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters, revised edition* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1988), p. 40

³ Garry Wills, “The Outsider” column, Universal Press Syndicate, 1980.

⁴ *The Blind Side* is based on a wonderful 2006 book by Michael Lewis, *The Blind Side: Evolution of a Game*.