

## **“The Message of Angels: Carrying Christ Beyond Christmas”**

*Sermon preached by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt*

*Immanuel Presbyterian Church*

*McLean VA*

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*Matthew 2:13-22*

Today I conclude my sermon series on angel messages in the days leading up to and after Jesus' birth by looking at the angel's messages to Joseph after Jesus was born.

When last we saw Joseph, at least in Matthew's gospel, an angel had come to him to tell him, "Do not be afraid to embrace what is, for out of what is, the goodness and love of God can be birthed into the world." So Joseph took Mary to be his wife, and they had a child and named him Jesus. Then wise men came from the East, looking for a child who was born King of the Jews because they had seen his star at its rising. They first went to Jerusalem, of course, because that was the seat of royal power, the place where Herod lived. This was disturbing news for Herod and he called the chief priests and the scribes, and they told him and the wise men that scripture said the king would be born in Bethlehem (which was nine miles from Jerusalem). So Herod sent the wise men there, telling them to come back and let him know after they had found him, so that he, too, might go and pay him homage. You know the story - they went, they bowed down, they gave him gifts, and being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went home by another way.

Here is where our text for today begins, with an angel appearing to Joseph in a dream, warning him to flee to Egypt because Herod is going to come looking for the child to try to kill him. Matthew's agenda in saying that Jesus' family fled to Egypt is in part to set up a parallel with Moses, who came out of Egypt to deliver his people from bondage and then brought them laws from God. Matthew, writing to an audience comprised largely of Jewish Christians, means to say that Jesus is a Moses figure. Early in his ministry, Jesus will go up a mountain to deliver a sermon filled with challenges to go beyond the letter of the law in the name of compassion. But before Jesus ever gets to that point, he shares another commonality with Moses. Both of them, as babies, escape the murderous rage of a leader who is so intent on eliminating challenges to his authority that he is willing to kill infant children. All is not sweetness and light, Matthew says. From the beginning it is clear there will be opposition to Jesus and his message. Listen now for how the angel guides Joseph as he protects Jesus - and for the lengths to which Herod will go to wipe out any threat to his power. *Read Matthew here.*

The Christmas season is nearly over. Next Saturday morning the Worship Committee and other volunteers will come, disassemble, and put away our tree which had been decorated with ornaments our children made. They will put away the wreaths and bows until next Advent, and our sanctuary will be back to normal.

A similar sort of thing will happen in many of your homes this week, if it hasn't already. I know that Judith and I and the girls will be doing our own degreening, taking down our tree, and carefully wrapping up our own precious ornaments and decorations to store for another year. One of the things we will put away is our frilly tree top Christmas angel. We'll make sure it gets put snugly back in its box, put it in another larger box, and shoved to the back of the closet as we go on about the rest of our lives. Oh, we'll still have wooden and ceramic angels here and there around the house, but the Christmas angel in all of its glory will be out of sight until next Advent.

This morning I feel as if, in coming to the end of this sermon series, we are boxing up the angel. So I want to take one last look at the message of angels around the time of the birth of Jesus, in hopes that even if this Advent and Christmas series of sermons is at an end, we might carry their message with us throughout the year. The angel message for today is: "Even if you box up Christmas, take the child with you so that he can grow to become a man."

More precisely, what the visitor who comes to Joseph in a dream says is this “Get up - take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt, for Herod is about to search for the child to destroy him.” Matthew doesn’t want us to miss that right from the start of Jesus’ life, he faces opposition. If he is in fact born to be a king, then others who are trying to cling to power and authority are going to feel threatened. If he is in fact Lord, then others who would wield power and authority are going to want to do away with him. It is a pattern which plays itself out during Jesus’ earthly ministry, as the chief priests, scribes, and Pharisees oppose him at every turn and then finally work a deal with Judas and Rome to have him crucified. But if it hadn’t been for Joseph listening to the angel in his dream, and carrying the child with him to a place of safety, Jesus never would have made it that far. It may sound strange saying that Egypt was a place of safety, but that is what it was at that time. Estimates say there were as many as a million Jews living in Alexandria at that time, so Joseph and Mary and their child would likely have found safety and community there. And they needed it.

Our angel for today reminds us that Jesus and his message face opposition. Sometimes that opposition comes from those who want to overlook how Jesus reached out to people on the margins of society - the least, the last, the lost, the tax collectors, the lepers, and the women with questionable reputations, Samaritans and, eventually, Gentiles (like the wise men who came to visit from the East). Sometimes, if we are honest, we find *ourselves* opposing that sort of boundary-transcending love. We may not be like the different groups in the old joke about the people (insert denomination here) who have a special soundproof room in heaven (because they think they are the only people there), but most of us can come up with some people we secretly think are, or at least wish were, outside of God’s redeeming love. From Nigerian men with explosive underpants to people in the KKK, from purveyors of hate speech to people we know well who have hurt us deeply.

On the other hand, sometimes the opposition Jesus and his message face comes from those who would make following him too easy, as if it weren’t costly to be a disciple of a man who so embodied love and so sought to be in communion with God that it led him to the pain and humiliation of a cross.

For several years in Statesville, I was a member of the Rotary Club. One of the things I noticed while I was part of that club was that there were more expectations for attendance and participation placed on me as a Rotarian than are placed on members of most congregations of any denomination in the United States. Showing up for meetings once or twice a year would never have been acceptable. I’m just saying...

Now don’t get me wrong. My heart thrills to see such large crowds on Christmas Eve and Easter. And I would not want to do a thing to discourage them. But I long for them to be more meaningfully involved through the year. Not for my own ego, but for the good of their spiritual lives. Without regular communal worship, the intentional practice of spiritual disciplines like prayer, study of sacred scripture and other spiritual writing, the sharing of faith stories, honest self-examination, the forgiving of others, and service to humanity, it is difficult to grow a soul. Particularly in a social climate which is increasingly either actively hostile toward or at best dismissive of Christian faith and its practices. One night a year will not effectively shape a soul, and neither, frankly, will one day a week (if it is not intentionally integrated into a larger life of faith and practice). Shaping and growing a spiritual life takes commitment and discipline - it is not a “one-off” thing. It is always good for me to remember this at the beginning of a new year, as I seek to keep the resolutions I’ve made.

In the church I served in North Carolina, we had an annual tradition of putting on something we called Project: Christmas - a drive through Christmas experience. For three consecutive nights on the last full weekend before Christmas, the church parking lot and grounds became the staging area for this thing. Visitors in their cars would be waved in to the lot on the east side of the church, where they were first serenaded by carolers standing around a Santa made out of giant bales of hay. While they listened, elementary aged children would bring hot cocoa and cookies.

Then we'd move that group of cars on to the next station, in front of a huge red puppet stage, manned by the junior high youth, who had learned to move the puppets mouths in time with recorded music. Following that treat, the group of cars was ushered around to the west parking lot, facing a large field where senior high youth played parts in a living nativity. As the story was read aloud over loud speakers, first Mary and Joseph leading a real live donkey, then a rag tag group of shepherds who had just seen an angel with a gold tinsel collar and halo, and finally three kings pointing to a Moravian star hanging high in a tree branch, came to a little stable some men of the church had built.

It was a huge production, requiring massive amounts of set up and take down, especially on the last night. To top it off, the weather was usually cold, and sometimes wet. I will never forget one particularly frigid, drizzly final night when we all rushed in to get out of the night air after packing up everything we could. One of the women of the church came in some time later holding the baby doll we used to represent Jesus. "I can't believe you left him out there alone in the cold," she scolded us. "That's child abuse!" You know what though? We were so glad to get it over we just forgot him.

That's what I always hope doesn't happen to you and me after all of the Advent and Christmas excitement. We take tags from the tree, focus more on our personal devotions and acts of sharing, and get closer to God. Then when the season is over, we're so glad it's over, we think we're through. But the work of faith is only just beginning. If we don't carry Christ with us and let him grow in us, that Christmas Eve glow can too easily dim in us. We've got to let Jesus grow to be a man

The British hymn-writer Fred Pratt Green puts this so beautifully in a hymn he entitled "The Word Is Born This Very Night." I'll conclude with it here, because I think it makes the perfect segue the communion meal we are about to share.

*The Word is born this very night:  
Hail, Mary, full of grace!  
A hanging lantern sheds its light  
On Joseph's anxious face.*

*The Word must come in human form,  
In God's redemptive plan.  
A babe takes every heart by storm,  
But who will heed the Man?*

*The Word is born this very night,  
And humble is the place;  
The world is dark, but hope is bright,  
And sinners look for grace.*

*The Word has come to end the war  
Which Adam first began.  
O bless the Babe who sleeps on straw  
But listen to the Man.<sup>1</sup>*

In Jesus' name.

*Amen.*

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Pratt Green, "The Word is Born This Very Night", Stainer and Bell Ltd. 1972.