

The Reading of Luke 1:11-16 An Angel of the Lord Appears to Zechariah

¹¹Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. ¹⁴You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. ¹⁶He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.

The Reading of Luke 1:26-33 The Angel Gabriel Appears to Mary

²⁶In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

The Reading of Luke 2:1-20

The Birth of Jesus

2 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

The Shepherds and the Angels

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel

said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah,^[a] the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host,^[b] praising God and saying,

¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"^[c]

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

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The Angelic Message – Do Not Be Afraid

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Preachers – tell the good news of God’s love.

Prophets – call us back to the ways of God, and remind us to show compassion for others.

Teachers – help us to know wise choices from foolish ones.

Friends – walk with us as companions on the journey of life.

God uses all four: preachers, prophets, teachers, and friends to guide us on the path of righteousness and to help us to live our best human lives possible. We know about these creatures. They are familiar to us. We can describe who they are and what they do. We probably even know their names. We can thank them for their role in our lives, or may sometimes curse them for calling out our weaknesses. But they are unmistakably human. Some individuals in these categories may seem closer to God than others – but I have never had the sense that they are otherworldly, somehow transported from heaven to deliver messages here on earth.

But what about angels? Who are they? And what do they do?

Are they supernatural winged creatures that show up only with a blinding light?

Are they extraordinarily good singers? You know, like Karla and then some.

Are they merely a specific kind of messenger from God?

Are they still showing up in human lives now, or was that only a biblical thing?

At no other time of year do we think about angels more than we do at Christmas. They show up when we unpack our nativity scenes. We sing their Glorias with as many syllables as the musical phrasing allows. But when the season is over, we usually put them back in their boxes and store them away without a thought until next December. We don't expect angels to actually show up in our lives. But it looks as though those who have angelic visitants even in the Christmas narrative don't really expect them either.

If anyone should have been prepared to greet an angel of the Lord, Zechariah might have been the one. He has been a temple priest for more years than I've been alive. He gets chosen on this particular occasion to enter the holy of holies. The angel appears on the right side of the altar of incense, and answers a prayer that he's been praying for what seems like a lifetime, telling him that he and Elizabeth are finally going to have a child. And still, still the first words out of the angel's mouth are, "Don't be afraid." Something about angels must strike that fearful expression in the faces of human beings. Gabriel says the same words to Mary, and the angel that appears in the field says the same to the shepherds. So, whether you are the temple priest who should have seen it coming, or the shepherds in the field whose usual fear-filled moment is how close the wolf howls are that night, angels seem to have to ease human anxiety when they show up.

I really can't tell you why that is on first appearances. What it is that makes angels so frightening is a mystery to me because I haven't met one, at least not one who instantly made my heart beat faster and my palms sweat. The good news though is that the fear quickly seems to give way to conversation. Angels, as the roots of the word remind us, are messengers, messengers of God to be precise. Angels always have something to say (or sing) – directly – to the person (or group) receiving the message. And it typically appears very one sided. Even though Sarah laughed at

her angel visitant when she found out she was pregnant in her old age in the book of Genesis, and even though Zechariah doubted that he would be a father at his age in this pre-Christmas narrative – the angel wasn't going to change any outcomes. The angel of the Lord doesn't cause the message – just delivers it. You asked. God answered. End of story. Even with Mary's modest "yes, may it be so" – she seems to have already been selected to be the birthmother of Jesus. There's no doubt that when the shepherds are told about the birth of the Messiah, they are going to go and see.

And yet, I think the angelic messenger function is more than just a conveyance of information. Receiving a message from an angel also weights the importance of the information contained in the message. For Mary and Elizabeth both, a pregnancy test would have yielded the same result. Nevertheless, meeting Gabriel and being told that God has a special task of motherhood for you or having your husband come home and try to tell you through his silenced voice that something crazy happened at the Temple means that the promise fulfilled or prayer answered in those situations is radically different from your niece's Facebook pregnancy reveal. They are meant to be something special and out of the ordinary. Which is what makes them supernaturally so interesting, the fine details of a story that continues to be told year after year.

But that was then, and this is now. We may repeat the story, and even if we believe it was true then, may have our doubts as to whether angels are still visiting human beings now. Can we still be sent a direct word from the Divine? Or will thoughts of angels disappear altogether in a few weeks when we have put away all the decorations?

Though I'm a skeptic of angel visitants when it comes to winged creatures singing out in the night sky or showing up to give someone signs of imminent power or prosperity – I'm a believer when it comes to God continuing to send us messengers, signs of change and transformation,

announcements of God's startling truth that wake us up from the ordinary. These words aren't the comforting message of preachers, or the disturbing message of prophets. They aren't the steady reassurance of friends, or the ongoing support we get from our teachers. No - Angelic messages are the ones that break through our ordinary routines to startle us, and send us perhaps on a different path than we expected. Rightfully so, the direct word can surprise us and cause us fear.

Whenever a message from God seems to come directly to us, our first response probably is going to be fear and trembling. What does this Word mean? Can it be trusted? Am I just being crazy? I dare say, the church has never much cared for those outside the Biblical stories who encountered God personally. It seems too dangerous. Too unpredictable. Too easy to make up, and too crazy to take seriously. Understandably, the message sometimes has to be tested. Is it consistent with what we already know to be true about God? Can it be confirmed through our more common conversations with reliable preachers, teachers, and friends? If so, then celebrate, you have experienced God's glory, and the typical response is, as we often note it to be in scripture – praise, gratitude, and wonder.

But even more than the one bringing the message, what I find fascinating are the words we encounter as holy. When we feel as though God has communicated with us, somewhere between faith and doubt as to what has happened, will be an opportunity for transformational change. Angels, amazingly, sometimes state things that seem to be incredibly obvious. "I bring you good news of a great joy." But, they also clue us in as to what is really real. We can easily live our lives in a fog – going through the motions – oblivious to the amazing power of life and renewal all around us. Angels point us toward God's work in the world and at times align who we are with that work.

The stories I could tell about being touched by sacred connection are there. Perhaps you could tell your own. I've had those moments, and delighted in them. But the goosebumps come, not in the telling, but in the remembering. Remembering that God is not somehow less present now than in Biblical times, but still sending us good news, great joy, and alleluias to fill our hearts with joy.

“To you is born this day, in the city of David, a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

And all who turn their attention to this message will likely hear the angels echoing:

“Glory to God in the highest heaven and peace on earth among those whom he favors!”

May this Christmas night be a time of hearing God's message to you, an ancient message of peace, and a future message of hope. Amen.