

8 December 2019

What Do We Do with Angels?

Luke 1:26-38

As we consider the witnesses of Christ's birth this Advent, we note that not all of those witnesses were from this earth. We read from Luke 1, verses 26-38:

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.' ³⁴Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' ³⁵The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God.' ³⁸Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

Last week we talked about some of the earliest witnesses to Christmas: the prophets who, through the Spirit of God, grasped that God would one day do something utterly new, would remake the world and reset the covenant with humanity. Their vision of the future coming of Christ wasn't very specific, but as far as the purpose and meaning of Christmas, they were exactly right. Today, though, we're talking about another set of advance witnesses, who are *very* specific. So let's talk about angels.

And when I say that, the chances are that some of you are thinking "Yay! I love angels!" while others are cringing. The reason for both these reactions, I think, is because our usual picture of the world of angels is a sort of sentimental mash, and some like that sort of thing and others don't. Very little of it comes from the Bible, though. Most of what we think regarding angels could be better described as fanciful elaboration or just straight-up folklore. So before I look at the Christmas angels – like the one who talked to Mary – let me try to separate what the Bible actually says about angels and what has grown up around them since.

In scripture, angels are essentially messengers. That's what the Greek word *angelos* means: it's just the common word for messenger. And this is the primary function of angels throughout scripture. In Genesis, the patriarch Jacob has a dream in which he sees angels going up and down a ladder, delivering messages to earth. Sometimes, scripture describes an angel delivering a specific message one-on-one. When this happens, it is usually when the message is something that might not be believed otherwise. For instance, young Gideon, hiding in a cistern because he was afraid of Midianite raiders, received an angelic visitation to let him know that God had chosen him to lead Israel's armies against them. Or again, it was an angel who revealed to Samson's elderly, childless parents that they were about to have a son. Both unexpected

messages. Beyond this basic function, though, there are a couple of other tasks that angels perform. Occasionally, they are enforcers – acting as agents of God’s punishment. When Adam and Eve are banished from the Garden of Eden, God sets an angel at the gate to make sure they don’t sneak back in. Angels are sent to Sodom and Gomorrah before those cities are destroyed, and in the book of Job, in the strangest case of all, we encounter one particular angel whose entire job is to test human beings to see how faithful they really are to God. In Job, that angel is called simply *hassatan*, or “The Satan.” Finally, in one or two cases, angels are sent as protectors. In one story, for instance, the prophet Elisha and his servant are surrounded by an army about to attack them, when suddenly the army drops its weapons and flees. Elisha’s servant asks “What just happened?” and Elisha prays for God to open his eyes. The servant sees an army of angels standing guard over them.

There are a few more stories of angels, but that’s basically it in scripture regarding their function: messenger, enforcer, protector. But, oh my goodness, look what’s happened to angels since then. They’ve become *cute*! They are



adorable little urchins who hover around us helping us out with household tasks or, in a weird confusion with Cupid, the Roman God of sexual desire, shooting us with little poisoned fall-in-love darts on Valentine’s Day. (Did I say poisoned? My bad. Must have been thinking of something else.) And other than that, what function do angels perform? They are *Guardian* Angels, watching over us to keep us from stepping off bridges, or whatever. Everyone has an assigned Guardian Angel, some of whom are apparently better at their jobs than others. And where do these angels come from? It turns out, on the authority of the



Family Circus cartoon, that they are often the spirits of our deceased grandparents, who sit up on clouds, absorbed in watching us go about our day to day tasks, because we are so amazingly interesting, and occasionally dropping in to steer us in the right



direction. If they do a really good job at saving the day, then they earn their wings and somewhere a bell tinkles. It’s all very heartwarming. But it has almost nothing to do with the biblical picture of angels. In other words, in the popular imagination, angels have been tamed. They have become friendly, nauseatingly sentimentalized helper spirits, as

represented on a million artistically cringe-worthy bookmarks at a Christian bookstore near you. It’s enough to make a grown Bible student cry.



So now, let’s go back to the angels in the Christmas story. First an angel appears to Zechariah, father of John the Baptist, then – the text we read earlier – that same angel appears to Mary. Finally, some nine months later, a host of angels appear to shepherds outside Bethlehem. None of these angels are cute. Every human who sees them is terrified. And all of them come for

the one purpose that has been forgotten in our kitsch popular re-imagining of angels: they are messengers of God, not personal attendants of humans. Specifically, they bring messages that would be laughed off if they came from any other source. Those messages are: “I know that you and your wife are old; but you’re still going to have a baby” and “So what if you’re a virgin; you’re still going to have a baby” and “Yes, the Messiah has been born, and you – a bunch of grubby shepherds – are the first ones we’re telling.” All unexpected messages. Once the angels deliver their messages, they take off. None of this gently guiding people in the right direction; people can choose for themselves how they’ll respond to God’s message. All of this is consistent with what the Hebrew Bible says about angels. None of it has anything to do with the dreck that we’ve come up with since then.

So, after all that, what do we do with angels? Well, first of all, I believe that they are real. Some are skeptical, but I don’t see this as much of a leap of faith. If you believe – as I do – that God created us and this world simply out of the sheer joy of creation and from the desire for love in relationship, then angels aren’t much of a stretch. If you believe that God is creative by nature, then why wouldn’t God’s creative nature have expressed itself in worlds and universes and dimensions, beyond our own? Nor should we assume that all of God’s other creatures are like us. In fact, that would be an incredibly arrogant assumption. Really? *We’re* the be-all and end-all of God’s creative impulse? Us?

Moreover, if you accept that behind God’s creativity is the desire for love, then it should not be surprising that God has sought to communicate with us by many different means. So, the occasional use of an otherworldly visitor to communicate a particularly hard-to-believe message seems reasonable, which is exactly what the angels are doing in the Christmas story. They are there because God is about to do something unheard of, something no one would believe if someone told them about it or if they read it in a book. At Christmas, God did something new and remarkable, and that remarkable promise was communicated by remarkable messengers.

So, what about today? Are there still angels? And my answer again is, “Why not?” But can we at least drop some of the later legends? No, you do not have a guardian angel to protect you from harm; you have choices. No, angels are not the spirits of your dearly departed ancestors. That’s not what Christianity teaches; that’s what paganism teaches. (And, while we’re on the subject, I can’t imagine that our dearly departed spend a whole lot of time in heaven watching us go through our lives on earth. Would you? We’re not that interesting.) But apart from all that, I see no reason to say angels might not still deliver messages. I don’t really expect to encounter one in my lifetime, but then, I wouldn’t expect it, would I? That’s the point: angels generally deliver the unexpected word.

More important than the reality and the proper understanding of angels, though, is a more basic message: God is always trying to speak to us, by whatever means possible: the words of scripture, the promises of prophets, the promptings of conscience, the example and teachings of Christ, the indwelling Holy Spirit, and occasional angelic visitors. Most of all, though, God speaks to us through the voices we are most likely to hear – people we meet. Hebrews 13:2 says this: *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.* Listen. Listen everywhere. The message of Christmas has not changed: God loves us and is waiting to do something new.

One of my high school friends in Singapore was on a diet most of the time I knew her, but one year she was trying especially hard. She was in a shopping center one day, standing

alone and staring forlornly at the ice cream vendor, when a short middle-aged Chinese man that she had never seen before walked in front of her, paused, then said, “You know it’s not good for you,” and walked on. A bit of a shock, there. But Joy responded as most of us might have done. She turned and walked away, but then – deciding that it was no stranger’s business if she got an ice cream cone – she went back and jolly well bought one. She stepped out into the courtyard of the shopping center, defiantly, and looked up. There, leaning over the railing of the second level, was the little man, waving his finger disapprovingly. She threw the cone away and went home. Joy always called that man, whom she never saw again, “my angel.”

Yeah, I don’t think so. At least not the sort who visited Mary and made the shepherds sore afraid. I don’t get the sense that Gabriel polices New Year’s Resolutions for people. But remember that the word angel simply means “messenger” and remember that God is always speaking by some method or another and remember that God loves us all the time and not just in times of crisis. So listen. Listen always. Amen.