

Christmas Angels

Luke 2:1-21

Christmas Eve Sermon, 2011

First Baptist Church Dayton

Above the Bethlehem sky, it is hard to tell if there are more stars or more angels. In fact, the holy book is filled with angels: warrior angels and warbling angels, choirs of angels and battalions of angels, singing angels and smiting angels. There are seraphims and cherubims, fallen angels and faithful angels and two have names: Michael, the archangel and commander of God's army and Gabriel, the angel sent to Mary. Michael probably would have scared Mary to death.

One of my favorite angel stories is about the poet William Blake. As a ten year old, Blake had his first vision on a walk. Sauntering along, the boy looks up and sees a tree filled with angels, bright angelic wings bespangling every bough like stars." The Blake Society in London has planted an angel oak in the poet's memory. Perhaps we should plant an angel oak here at First Baptist Church to stimulate our imaginations. After all, Blake practically invented the concept of imagination.

What I suggest is imagined truthfulness. If we can imagine it, it could be true. The sky could be filled with as many angels as stars. After all, angels are attracted to Christmas like iron to magnets.

So imagine this: The universe originated in the holy imagination of God. God fashioned pre-existing matter into a robust, fully functioning, interdependent series of galaxies and universes. The angels were there all those billions of years as the engineers and construction crews, crafting the universe.

Angels are mentioned 280 times in the Bible and fifteen of those times are here in Luke's Gospel. As I reviewed the biblical record, I was intrigued with the fact that angels are celestial but they do the chores. They run errands for God and they run heaven's communication department. Angels often travel in dreams. We dream and an angel's antenna picks up the dream and pops in with a communique from God. Making what we imagine into reality is part of our vocation as followers of Christ.

Here's a brief collage of angel work: An angel of God found Hagar in the wilderness, stopped Abraham from killing his son Isaac, rescued Lot from Sodom, found a wife for Isaac, appeared to Moses in the burning

bush, guided Israel to the Promised Land, saved Daniel from the lions, rescued Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the fiery furnace, and even led a couple of jail breaks for Peter.

Angels are always close to Jesus wherever he goes: at his birth, after his temptation ministering to him, at the empty tomb. They must have been there through all those dark days from Good Friday through Easter morning. After the heart of God broke at the death on the cross, the hearts of angels must have been the next to crack, followed by Mary and the other women at the cross. When Peter drew his sword in the garden and cut off the ear of a servant, Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. ⁵³Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?" No wonder angels sang "Peace on earth." They were following their King.

Like children attracted to parades angels show up whenever God acts on behalf of humans. They are not our brothers and sisters but as an angel says in Revelation, "I am a fellow servant with you and your comrades who hold the testimony of Jesus." No child has ever received such a royal welcome as this child born in a stable. Listen, birth and resurrection are a single piece. At the birth, angels testified: "Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." At the empty tomb, angels testified: "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen."

Angels are joyful creatures by nature. Smile at an angel and he will start singing. And I bet they dance too. Medieval theologians supposedly debated "How many angels can dance on the point of a needle?" Well, a heavenly host burst out singing, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" They had been practicing their Christmas musical for centuries. Jesus says, "I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repents."

The word "angel" means messenger of God, and some of God's angels are human. When someone does an act of kindness, we say, "You are an angel." In fact, what I'm trying to tell you is that you are one of God's angels. Let me tell you an imagined truth. When Paul says that Jesus ascended on high and gave gifts to his people, I interpret that to mean that Jesus sprinkled angel dust on our heads and gave to us the spirit of angels, the abilities of angels, and the assignments previously given to angels: some

apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastor-teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.

In the letter to the Hebrews, we read, "When you come to Church, you have come **to innumerable angels in festal gathering.**"

Perhaps there is someone you know for whom this is going to be one tough Christmas. You can be her Christmas angel. There is someone for whom this Christmas is going to be mostly darkness and you can be their Christmas angel by letting your light shine. Will you find a way to increase someone's strength, relieve someone's pain and grief, heal a broken heart? Will you stand by someone who needs to be more courageous this year? Bring some good news to someone who has lost her way and isn't sure what she believes? Offer a spirit of joy and praise to our callous, angry country? Lift your voice in praise above the noise of brutal criticism?

Let me offer you one example of a Christmas angel. Garrison Keillor was in a deli on 10th Avenue, where an elegant young woman, wearing a Nebraska scarf and a Midwestern accent, was managing a herd of eight teenage boys, ordering them breakfast from the lady behind the counter. The boys spoke Spanish and they were mildly challenged.

One of the boys earnestly desires a sesame bagel, toasted, with cream cheese, but the deli is out of sesame, and this is a cruel disappointment to him. His face crumples and he is about to melt, and the young woman puts her head down next to his. Her pale cheek against his cheek, she murmurs to him, and a string of his enormous tears runs onto her face, and she wipes it away and says something in Spanish which makes him laugh.

A girl from the prairie, using her Spanish to care for damaged boys in a callous world, where the poor and powerless get short shrift. . . . She's my Christmas angel. (*Chicago Tribune*, 22 December 2009).

Merry Christmas, God's angels!