

“Sharing Emmanuel: angels for God”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
December 4, 2022

Luke 1:26-38 and Matthew 1:18-25

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Babies and dreams and angels, oh my! The Christmas story is amazing, and perhaps no character more excites our imagination, feeds our hope, and frustrates our rationality, than angels. We read about them in the Bible. We watch them in our pageants. Mr. Tony hides one every year for the children to find. I have, in my study, an angel statuette, given by a survivor of domestic violence, who said *we* were her angels. There have been TV shows, movies, and books. And none of us quite knows what to make of these fantastic creatures.

Renowned scholar and pastor Walter Brueggemann says this might be a problem. We just don't take these angels seriously. He recounts a Christmas play his 10-year-old son wrote for Sunday school, in which a donkey and a lamb comment on the weird happenings in Bethlehem. When they see the celestial beings proclaiming the good news, the lamb says, “Gosh, some angels.” Brueggemann says that, while he does not know the Aramaic for “Gosh, some angels,” he suspects their response might have been a little more intense than that. Brueggemann explains that for the ancient world these angels weren't cute little babies with wings. They were terrifying messengers of God. They came in dreams, in visions, in fire and earthquakes, and they are at the center of the Christmas story.

Without them, Joseph never becomes father to Jesus, Mary never understands what God is doing through her and her child, John never becomes prophet to Jesus, shepherds never rally to the manger, and the world never learns of the new thing God is doing.

Whether we believe or disbelieve, whether we take them literally or figuratively, the angels cannot be dismissed. They are Scripture's way of saying: God is not silent. God communicates to the world. Nothing could be closer to the heart of the Christmas message: God comes to us in Jesus.

But first, God comes to us in angels.

An angel comes to Mary, an unmarried teenage girl living in relative poverty. He tells her that God loves her. “The Lord is with you,” he says. He sees that she is afraid. He sees everything, every worry, every hope, every frustration and desire, and he says, “Do not be afraid.” He calls her by name. He promises that, through her, God is changing the world, dethroning every power that hurts and corrupts, and replacing those powers with a child... her child, God's child. And what's most amazing of all: Mary says, *OK, I'm in*.

An angel comes to Joseph, a man who supposedly descends from the great King David, but that was a thousand years ago, and now he's just a regular guy trying to put bread on the table. The angel calls him by name also, and says, “Do not be afraid.” The angel sees the fear in Joseph, not

only because God's suddenly in his bedroom, but also because he's deathly worried over Mary and this baby that's not his and what he's supposed to do. The angel promises that, should he adopt and father this child, Jesus will save his people, "and they shall name Emmanuel, which means God is with us." Again, amazingly, Joseph says: *OK, I'm in too.*

The Greek word *angelos*, from which we get our word *angel*, says nothing of wings or cherubs. It means "messenger." Angels are messengers, words from God to you and me.

What does it mean to share the news that God is with someone—to tell them that God is right here, right now, even in them, a child in their womb, and through them, God is imagining and creating a new and better world? What does that do to their fear, how they live, their future? How does it change how they see themselves, their worth, their purpose?

What would it look like for us to do that? What would it mean for us to look at someone, as that angel does, and see God in them and tell them so—to tell them how wondrous they are, that God has a purpose for them, that God is being birthed in them?

Maybe we can be angels too.

In his pivotal book *I and Thou*, published in 1923, Jewish philosopher Martin Buber says there are two kinds of interactions. The first, "I and it," regards others as separate objects to be analyzed, used, and experienced. For example, if I look at you, and I merely see a set of labels (the color of your skin, the school you went to, the quality of your clothes, how handsome or pretty you are, who you voted for), and if I merely consider your utility to me (how you can make me happy or cause me trouble), then we're in an "I-it" relationship. But if I look at you, and I really try to see the whole you, if I listen and engage you as an equal, as a mystery, who is connected to me—if I love you, stand in wonder of you, not because of what you can do for me, but just because you are you—that is an "I-thou" relationship. To relate to another person as "thou," says Buber, is to relate to that person as if God were in them.

If we were to do this, if we were to meet one another as "thou," as the angels meet Mary and Joseph, maybe we'd slow down. We'd notice each other. We'd look into each other's eyes. We might cry or smile, or laugh. We'd speak and act with love, with patience. We'd learn each other's stories. And we could do this because God does this for us.

Let's be honest: this is hard. I mess this up daily. I get caught up in whatever I think I'm supposed to be doing; I get stressed and busy; I start making snap judgments; and I forget to *see* the people right in front of me. I can do this to strangers. I can do this to people I love. But then I remember the times when I have been *seen*, when angels have come to me—not with wings, but angels nonetheless—and reminded me that God is here with me, in me. And when I remember, I stop; I try to look at the next person as Gabriel looked at Mary.

This is how we proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ—not with pamphlets and canned speeches, not with million dollar budgets and mega-churches—but with loving relationships, one person at a time. We tell each person we meet, in word and deed, that God is with them.

If we saw ourselves first and fundamentally as angels to one another, proclaiming one another's sacredness, think about how that would transform politics, economics, war, racial injustice, and so much more.

In a speech delivered in 1962, before a church conference in Nashville, on Christmas, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. quoted Martin Buber. He said, "Man is not a thing... So long as the Negro is treated as a means to an end, so long as he is seen as anything less than a person of sacred worth, the image of God is abused in him and consequently and proportionately lost by those who inflict the abuse." King said that desegregation wasn't enough; we needed integration, a community of mutual I-thou relationships.

"We do not have to look very far," he said, "to see the pernicious effects of a desegregated society that is not integrated. It leads to 'physical proximity without spiritual affinity.' It gives us a society where men are physically desegregated and spiritually segregated, where elbows are together and hearts are apart."

King might as well as be speaking to us, 60 years later, for we are largely a society that dehumanizes, separates, and fails to regard the holiness of one another, fails to proclaim Emmanuel and any moral bearing that would have on our actions—and once dehumanized, it is no wonder that we have violence, that we have politics of hate, that we have a growing and perverse gap between the rich and the poor, that most people are going through life on auto-pilot, merely trying to accrue enough pleasure and success and material goods to inoculate them to the pain of life.

We need an angel.

We need someone to come here and tell us: do not be afraid, I see you, God sees you, God loves you, God is with you, through you peace and justice and love are breaking into this world, all you've got to do is say, *Yes, I'm in.*

Two thousand years ago, two people—who had no power to their name—were visited by angels, told *Emmanuel*, and they said yes. Just imagine what we could do if all of us, just in this room, heard this Christmas that same angel message, and turned around and shared it with others, looked at people as if they were carrying Christ inside of them. It changed the world then, and it's still trying to change the world now, through you.

So, don't worry about the wings, my friends. Be an angel. **Amen.**