

## “Heard Any Angels Recently?”

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Text: Luke 1: 8-15; 26-38

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The morning liturgy contains numerous references to the presence of angels: in the call to worship, the hymns and just now the scriptures. Angels are what is called “a hot item” right now. aren’t they? Some people collect figurines. Many used to watch the TV show “Touched By An Angel”. Does all of this interest suggest that angels play a role in our lives or are they really just a fairy tale? Anyone of a scientific bent might say, “There aren’t any such creatures.” Let’s look more closely at how angels are used in the Bible before making our decision.

The concept of angels is a very primitive part of the traditions of the Near East and the Biblical story is enmeshed in the folklore of the culture of that part of the world. Stories from the Babylonian and Mesopotamian era were adapted to relate to the Israelite account of the workings of their God Yahweh. In Genesis 18, for instance, Abraham entertained three angels, not aware of their real nature, and was rewarded with the promise of a son despite his and Sarah’s very old age. The story is simply the Hebrew version of a well-known tale of hospitality being rewarded that has exact parallels in other cultures of the Near East.

Angelology throughout the ancient world was a means of explaining the contact that deity had with mortal creatures. A system of angel specialists developed: there were communication experts who appeared to Daniel and others with messages; there were obstetric specialists such as Gabriel who came to Mary. These angels served a very specific purpose in cosmic theology among Near Eastern people.

Now comes the tricky part. Is it to be assumed that because angelology is very primitive, it has no relevance for 2006? That is a dangerous assumption to make because then the Bible becomes a static history book. Do we have to get into some kind of time machine and travel back through space in order to grasp what the bible is all about? The Bible is not merely a book of the past. It comes alive in every generation and our task in the church is to search out the meaning for our day and our lives.

For all who think that listening for angels is foolish, consider for a moment the intent of these heavenly beings. An angel in the Old Testament is called “ma’lak” which literally means “a messenger.” No text messaging back then. God’s communication with his people was described as taking place via angels because that was the thought pattern of that time. From them came divine orders or promises that provided guidance as people sought God’s eternal purpose.

Messengers communicate God’s intention for his people. Think about that concept. Do we not need, as did the people of Biblical times, ways in which the divine message penetrates our lives over and over? Let’s forget about white robes and fluffy wings. Let’s simply talk about how God’s message gets through to impact upon our lives.

In my first parish, Marilyn and I were invited to attend a post-Christmas conference for young pastors held in Minneapolis. On the 26<sup>th</sup> we left our children with grandparents and boarded a train in New Jersey. It was a long trip. A billboard came into sight as we approached a station some place in the Midwest. A little girl was pictured saying her prayers. The caption read “Man does not live by bread alone.” A bread company had provided the space. That little girl might have sprouted wings as far as I was concerned because after a long train ride and missing our family the billboard touched me with the real meaning of Christmas.

Another Christmas in another church, a college student who was not even a member of our congregation sent me a note and a catalog called "Alternative Christmas," which described the many ways we can minimize the commercial stress of this season. The note said, "I saw this in a bookstore in NYC and immediately thought of you." I don't know what your reaction would have been but for me it was as though the angels on high had just come through in wrapped around digital sound. Such a thoughtful act – again I was reminded of the true nature of the gift of the Christ child.

Do you see where I am heading with these personal examples? In my life, it has been in just such ways that the angelic hosts are heard. It doesn't matter that in neither case there were no adorable figures dressed in white with long robes and wings. God had communicated with me through a billboard and a thoughtful college student. Using this guide, isn't it conceivable that our great God communicates with us in a multitude of ways? In other words, "angels", "messengers," may come in as varied assortment as ornaments on a Christmas tree. On so many occasions, I have been too busy, too self absorbed, too distracted to hear the singing but the wonder of wonders and the heart of the Christmas story is that God never gives up. The divine message of love, peace and justice keeps appearing, whether it be a billboard, a Christmas letter or something else.

Back to our original question: are angels, messengers from God, so ridiculous if conceived in the terms that I have been suggesting? Pause briefly and think of the ways in which this year God's message has gotten through and touched your life. I would not be surprised, using different forms, if you too have stories about billboards and unexpected gifts. One of the astonishing revelations of scripture is that God can use an unbelievable assortment of events and people to be carriers of the divine message. Mary Magdalene – a troubled woman,... Zacchaeus a tax collector...they were not the stuff of which we think angels are made. They certainly weren't angelic and yet God doesn't seem to share our hang-ups. Why, sometimes he even uses us as his angels! Don't look to see if wings are sprouting but it is true that God has use for each and every one of us. God, on more than one occasion, has called us to be the bearers of his way in the midst of the world's ways: A word after worship, including others in our prayers, working together on the session or deacons, inviting someone to church – so many ways in which we can be messengers of the divine revelation.

We need angels. Make no mistake about that. Sophisticated human beings in a technological world in which more is learned in first grade than the people of Jesus' day learned in a lifetime need to hear the angelic chorus. We need to hear because so often we bog down in moving from day to day. In so doing, we miss the angels singing of the glory of our Creator. Angels, in all their shapes and sizes, offer a vision of life that moves beyond the routine, the normal, and the mundane. All the feelings we have of hope, love, peace, all come to rest in that manger in Bethlehem. Therein lies not just a baby but also the glory of God!

This glory shone 'round people like the shepherds in the fields and the wise men and the glory certainly was there with the very ordinary parents, Mary and Joseph. The glory of the Almighty is all around us. In the classic story of the "Ancient Mariner" someone made this comment that expresses the morning message: "in the old days there were angels who came and took men by the hand and led them away from threatening destruction. There are no white angels now. But yet people are led away from threatening destruction. A hand is put into theirs, which leads them forth into a calm and bright land, and the hand may be that of a little child."

Have I made a believer of you? Angels are not such crazy things after all. Not if we look upon them as messengers, dressed in many costumes, bringing to us once again the Good News of God's love revealed in Jesus Christ. Let's try to listen for the angels. Pause for a moment. Do you hear any angels?...ah, a few smiles. You heard them.

Praise God!