

Choirs on High
Preached by
Rev. Linda D. Even
United Church of Fayetteville
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Third Sunday of Advent

For Reflection

"The earth has grown old with its burden of care, but at Christmas it always is young, the heart of the jewel burns lustrous and fair, and its soul full of music breaks the air, when the song of angels is sung."

Philip Brooks

Hebrew Scripture: Isaiah 12:2-6

²Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the LORD GOD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. ³With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. ⁴And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted. ⁵Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. ⁶Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

Gospel Reading : Luke 1:8-15; Luke 1:26-28; Luke 2:8-11; Matthew 1:18-21; Matthew 2:13; Matthew 2:19-20

Luke 1:8-15

One day Zechariah was serving as a priest before God because his priestly division was on duty. Following the customs of priestly service, he was chosen by lottery to go into the Lord's sanctuary and burn incense. All the people who gathered to worship were praying outside during this hour of incense offering. An angel from the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw the angel, he was startled and overcome with fear. The angel said, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayers have been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will give birth to your son and you must name him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many people will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the Lord's eyes.

Meditation: *Choirs on High*

Angels can be found not only in the nativity story but throughout scripture. Their types, roles and tasks are many. There are cherubim and seraphim who have cornered the market on wings and glow with the glory of God; there are "thrones" who have great spinning eyes and serve as the chariot of God; there is the hierarchy of angels—principalities, archangels, and regular old angels; there is a reference to fallen angels. We would, however, be hard-pressed to find an angel of death or a guardian angel anywhere in scripture.

The word angel comes to us from the Greek word *aggelos*, meaning "messenger". All angels in scripture—as opposed to those in the vast and complex world of angelology from all sources, ancient and contemporary—scriptural angels are servants of the Lord God Almighty, not of humans. All of the angels in the nativity story are messenger angels, not any of the other kinds. Almost always, angels bring news to an individual. The only exception I know finds itself in this story. We'll get there.

While we don't think as often of the birth announcement to Zechariah in this season as we do another birth announcement, it's important to note the messages of God with regard to birth are not gender specific. The first one in the story came to the incipient father, a disclaimer that he need not be

afraid, followed by instructions for the child's upbringing and naming. Because Zechariah suffered a failure of imagination with regard to the power of God and the giving of life, he was struck mute for the duration of his wife Elizabeth's pregnancy.

Then, there is the most famous birth announcement that leads to all our celebrations. Listen carefully for its similarities to the one that came to Zechariah.

Luke 1:26-30

When Elizabeth was six months pregnant, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a city in Galilee, to a virgin who was engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David's house. The virgin's name was Mary. When the angel came to her, he said, "Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you!" She was confused by these words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. The angel said, "Don't be afraid, Mary. God is honoring you. Look! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus."

The angel began by announcing Mary was getting good news; then echoed the "Don't be afraid" used by Zechariah's messenger. It's always wise to be a little nervous when an angel shows up. They bring news; they might even bring good news, but they rarely bring convenient or comfortable news. This one was another birth announcement for another child and another instruction for naming. Mary accepted the news of this extraordinary happening, probably less out of greater faithfulness than Zechariah, but because, in her youth, she had not yet developed the hard shell of realism we are prone to as life has its way with us.

But the Lord was not finished sending angelic messengers to parents and it was Joseph who would hit the trifecta. Listen to the most famous of the visitations to Joseph.

Matthew 1:18-21

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. When Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly. As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

This time the angel appeared in a dream. The messenger of God told Joseph not to be afraid. He would not be dishonored by taking Mary for his wife. Following the angel's instructions for the care of the mother were those for the care and naming of the child and why this would be so important. Later: after the birth; after the crowd at the manger; after the visit of sages from the east; an angel of God would appear two more times to Joseph: once, warning him to depart to Egypt and so avoid what will become known as the slaughter of the innocents, Herod's attempt to disrupt God's plan; and still later the instruction to return home after Herod himself had gone the way of all flesh. All those times, Joseph listened to the angel. All those times it made a difference for the world.

And our last angel message for the day; not the last one in the nativity chronology; but this one just after the birth of Jesus, and most important for us today—the only one given to a group of people.

Luke 2: 8-14

Nearby shepherds were living in the fields, guarding their sheep at night. The Lord's angel stood before them, the Lord's glory shone around them, and they were terrified.

The angel said, "Don't be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you—wonderful, joyous news for all people. Your savior is born today in David's city. He is Christ the Lord. This is a sign for you: you will find a newborn baby wrapped snugly and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great assembly of the heavenly

forces was with the angel praising God. They said, "Glory to God in heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors."

There is the same pattern: the reassurance; the proclamation of good news; how the shepherds shall identify the good news and why it is good news at all. Each divine messenger has echoed and expanded on the message that came before—until it spreads throughout the local people and eventually the world.

The nativity story is a lovely, magical, heart-warming story that we love to tell again and again. Of course, as people of faith, we understand there is something more to our Advent and Christmastide practice of rehearsing the story than simply rewarming our hearts. The practice is designed not to make us an audience, but to inspire—literally "to fill us with the Spirit" to make the story a living thing in our own time. Of course, we are realists, scientists and all highly practical people who understand that angels have been retired as holy messengers, not that we'd be likely to let a winged creature in our front doors if they showed up other than on Halloween—no matter how many times they told us they brought good news and not to be afraid.

So, what would happen, if on this Christmas Eve, while I am reading about the appearance of the angel and the heavenly choir to the shepherds, our dimly lit sanctuary begins to glow with a golden light. You think, "Of course, Linda is always messing around with the lights for effect." Then it dawns on you that, just like now, you can see both my hands. Whatever is happening, it's not me.

Then, as the glow brightens, a beautiful angel with all the requisite features of legend—the robe, the halo, the wings—drifts from the ceiling and settles gently on the floor in the middle of the aisle. But you are a people of logic and science and practicality and immediately think, "Wow! UCF has really upped its technological game since the pandemic started! That is an amazingly realistic hologram." But you are a people of realism and logic and immediately think, "The likelihood of Linda spending a small fortune for a flashy special effect on Christmas Eve is slim to none. Therefore, it is more logical that this is a real angel than a product of technology."

Now that our focus is entirely on the angel, it utters the message it was sent to bring. "Don't be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you—wonderful, joyous news for all people. Today is born in the city of Syracuse a child who will make a difference in the world. He is a child of God. This is a sign for you: you will find a newborn baby wrapped snugly in a house on South Geddes Street where the heat has been turned off."

Suddenly, the air above us moves as though someone has turned on the fans at high speed. Our gaze is lifted higher to see a great choir with the angel God. They said, "Glory to God in heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors."

The shepherds responded to such a choir on high.

Luke 2: 15-16

When the angels returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go right now to Bethlehem and see what's happened. Let's confirm what the Lord has revealed to us." They went quickly and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger.

What would we do? Would we go to confirm what the Lord had told us like they did, or would we say, "It's Christmas Eve; there are presents to wrap; a turkey to thaw; children to put to bed; the in-laws are coming; it's time to be with family and we're afraid to go to South Geddes Street in the daylight let alone at night"? brushing any pangs of conscience away by saying "We'll take it on faith."

Truth be told, it doesn't matter all that much what we do on Christmas Eve. The story's retelling each year is to help us rehearse our own behaviors and responses. Advent's training is so that we can avoid failures of imagination; so that we can see that the world is aglow every day with the glory of the Lord. Every minute of every day, somewhere in the world a child full of the promises of God is born; a child who changes the world by virtue of being in it. All too often, somewhere in the world, there is still

a slaughter of innocents, sacrificed to someone's fear or greed for power. Every day, God is sending assurance and good news; sending a word about keeping children safe. God sends messages every day about how we should change the lives of these children and be changed by them, if, like those in the stories we tell who looked upon the faces of heavenly messengers—if, like them, we are not afraid to receive the occasionally scary, often inconvenient, sometimes socially unacceptable extraordinary good news of life that is possible only with God. Just like those parents and those shepherds, we too have a choice to make every time. These seasonal choirs on high invite us to reflect on what our choices would be and are—and the world cries out to hear our answers.

Prayer for Others and Ourselves

Most merciful God: in this holy season,

we do hear the cries of children under threat and the keening of parents who grieve; this day especially we remember your children whose lives have been ended, whose family life has been disrupted, whose livelihoods have been destroyed by violent storms across the Midwest.

We hear the cries of children who are hungry and of their parents who cannot feed them.

the children who are in danger and of their parents who cannot keep them safe.

the children who are wasted by disease and the ones who die of violence and of their parents who must go on after they are gone.

the children whose possibilities are cut short by those who are afraid and the fears of their parents about the place the world might be.

restore in us a sense that all children are your children
that all creatures bear the spark of your being
that the creation itself is crafted in your image

restore in us hope, vision and imagination
that we might respond to your faithful messages of assurance and good news and
be agents of your purposes in the world.

Lord's Prayer

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
thy will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day, our daily bread.
Forgive us our debts
as we forgive our debtors
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil,
for thine is the kingdom and the power
and the glory forever. Amen.**