

Do Not Be Afraid
Luke 2:1-14
Frist Presbyterian Church
Christmas Eve 2017

Prayer

Great God, as you came at night when all was still, so enter our lives this night. Illumine our paths with the light of Christ, so that we may clearly see the way to go, the truth to speak, the life to live. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

Sermon

The writers of the Bible take it for granted that there is a realm called heaven... and that heaven is FAR away... it is where God is – sitting in glory – surrounded by other divine beings. Yet, Biblical writers also assume that heaven is NEAR – as near as our hearts and minds... our hands and voices ... and that heaven intersects with earth at key places and key moments in the lives of the people of God. It is at such key moments that God’s heavenly messengers venture forth to speak and work and to be seen on the earth.¹ These messengers – whom the Bible calls “angels” – convey that God comes to us... is concerned with our welfare... and is willing to intervene in our affairs to make sure we know that and to set us on the right path. Angels, in other words, show us that God is willing to meet us where we are.

I confess I’ve never known quite what to make of angels, but I DO KNOW that in the gospels they often say two things when they come to visit. First, they always say: "Behold." I guess they say “Behold” because they have a message and they want you to listen. The other thing angels say is, "Be not afraid, Mary..." When Gabriel brings Mary word of a child to be born, he says, "Do not be afraid." As we just heard, when the angel appears to the shepherds, she offers both “angel lines” in one sentence, "Be not afraid, for behold..." And then later, on Easter morning, when the women come to the tomb to look for the body of Christ, they encounter an angel who says – you guessed it – "Do not be afraid." Now, you might assume they simply mean, “Do not be afraid of ME, *the angel*.” Whatever you make of angels, the experience of one would surely be daunting. But I think there’s probably more to be afraid of than the angels themselves. It’s also the message they bear. As I mentioned, the word “angel” simply means “messenger”. The Bible never mentions wings or robes or halos. We made all that up. Angels are the “messengers” by which we mortals hear some word from beyond us. Angels are like skylights in the ceiling between heaven and earth through which truth finds a way in. In the Bible, no mortal can look upon God’s face. God is too vast... too holy... too majestic for our feeble human minds fully to comprehend. So, God relates to us in ways appropriate for us – through a mediator – a messenger.

Have you ever seen an angel? Have you ever felt angel wings brush across your cheek?²

¹ Susan Garrett in an article found at: <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/angels/>

² From “Fearless”, a sermon by Michael Lindvall preached to the Brick Presbyterian Church, New York City, December 24, 2008.

I used to think that I had never personally encountered an angel. And if you mean a supernatural creature in a white robe with halo and wings, it's true - I've never seen an angel. But... if by "angel" you mean someone who has shown up at just the right time to offer me just what I needed then I HAVE seen angels. If you mean flesh and blood people who have spoken sudden, deep truth to me... who have brought me a Godly word that I needed, I HAVE HEARD angels' wings. If you mean everyday events that reveal the hidden and mysterious workings of God, then yes... absolutely... I HAVE met angels. You see, the angels I'm talking about look like members of your family. They look like the people sitting next to you tonight. They look like the strangers you meet every day of your life. Angels meet us where we are and give us what we need most. Have you ever encountered an angel?

Sometimes what we need most is someone to help us bring a little bit of order out of the chaos of life. Did you see the article in the "religion" section of yesterday's Charlotte Observer? Lynne Hinton - a UCC pastor in Guilford County - reminded me of a story Frederick Buechner shared of a visitor who came to him during a very dark time in his life. You see, Buechner's daughter was gravely ill... he, too, was literally sick with worry over her... and he got this call one day from a friend in North Carolina... only the friend wasn't IN North Carolina - he was in Vermont... because when he heard about Buechner's daughter, he had gotten in his car and driven 800 miles to Vermont - just to be with him... just in case he was needed. His friend didn't even know if Buechner would be there... but he was there, and he writes: "I have never forgotten how he came all that distance and I'm sure he has never forgotten it either." Buechner doesn't recall anything particularly religious about their time together. In fact, there was no real talk of God and no real prayers were spoken. And yet, he knew that for a little time "both of them were healed."³ Sometimes God meets us where we are through angels that bring comfort and peace and order to the chaos of life. "Behold!" she says when she comes... "Be not afraid".

And then, sometimes God meets us where we are through angels who UPSET the order we have grown comfortable with. They, also, say "Behold! Be not afraid" ... because these angels... whether family or friends or stranger almost always do something that can make us very afraid: They break into our space. They interrupt our routine. They pierce the walls we erect around ourselves. They know us better than we know ourselves. And they come with the very thing we long for and fear at the same time. They come with threatening intimacy in the beat of their wings - intimacy with them, and perhaps intimacy with the God whose truth and beauty they bear. It is the very thing for which we long... and the very thing we fear.

The truth is that God most often breaks through to us in relationships. The truth is that God usually comes to us - not in theories or ideas - rather, in experiences of great love. The message delivered may be soothing... or it may be hard to hear love God usually finds us in flashes of intimacy... in moments of deep communion.

I assume that you all have your angels - these messengers through whom God meets you where you are. These angels are your family... your friends... or even strangers. They remind you that God is always with you... that you are deeply loved... and sometimes - with brutal, liberating honest - they call you back on the right path. They offer you that which you most long for and that which you most fear. Yet, when they come, do not be afraid of them.

³ Lynne Hinton in "Real Friends are the angels in our lives," Charlotte Observer, December 23, 2017.

Do not be afraid to tell your son how much you love him when he's home for just a few days. Do not be afraid to respond when an in-law you've been at odds with opens a window for grace to come in. Do not be afraid to forgive the daughter you've been angry with when she cracks the door that leads home. Do not be afraid to listen if someone's words start to run deep around the dinner table. Do not be afraid to SPEAK truth even if it makes you vulnerable... to HEAR truth even if it makes you vulnerable. Do not be afraid to forgive. Do not be afraid to accept forgiveness. Do not be afraid to love stubbornly. Do not be afraid to receive love gratefully. Do not fear the angels... they only wish to bring you closer to the truth, closer to one another, and nearer to God.⁴

In the name of the Father and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

⁴ Lindvall again.