



Angels **THEN AND NOW**

MOUNT OLIVET
ADVENT & CHRISTMAS
2022 DEVOTIONAL



THURSDAY, DECEMBER 1, 2022

INTRODUCTION

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some have entertained angels without knowing it.

HEBREWS 13:2

This Advent, we're focusing on angels: their role, function, and significance in the Bible. And...I'll start with a confession: for as long as I can remember, I have associated angels almost entirely with the Christmas story. Which means that I was surprised to learn that they are pretty much everywhere in the Bible! Sometimes they speak words of promise and comfort, sometimes they offer instruction and warning, and sometimes they simply share the good news of what God is doing in the world to bless God's people.

Before jumping into all things angelic, two notes:

- 1) We get a strong hint of the function of angels from the name itself: "angel" comes from the Greek "angelos" (think "Los Angeles, City of Angels"). The literal translation of "angelos" is "messenger," which is primarily what angels do, deliver messages from God.
- 2) As this passage from "The Letter to the Hebrews" indicates, we don't always recognize angels in our midst. We should, therefore, treat everyone with respect and hospitality, because we never know when some stranger we meet is actually an angel! Similarly, we may be invited to be someone else's angel as we offer words or actions of hope and help that they need.

So this Advent, as we again hear about the angels that visited Mary, Joseph, Zachariah, and the Shepherds in the Christmas story long ago, let's also sharpen our eyes and ears so that we can see – and sometimes even be! – angels here and now.

Dear God, let us receive your messages of comfort, hope, and peace, and let us joyfully share them with others! Amen.



FRIDAY, DECEMBER 2, 2022

WORDS OF PROMISE AND COMFORT

Abraham looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran to meet them, and said, “My lord, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree.” ... Then one of them said, “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.”

GENESIS 18:2-5, 10

This is the story referenced in “The Letter to the Hebrews” we read yesterday. Abraham, patriarch of Israel, was promised land, blessing, and descendants years earlier. In response, he moved with his wife Sarah to a new land. It has now been years since that original promise, and they still have no children. One day, when he sees three strangers passing by, Abraham offers them hospitality. One of them then announces that he will return in nine months when Sarah will deliver the long-promised child.

This story offers two insights. The first we’ve already noticed: we are called to treat all people with kindness, as each of us is created in the image of God and may be enlisted to share God’s words. In short, you never know just when, where, and through whom God will deliver a message, so treat everyone as a potential angel!

Second, when we do receive a message from God, it’s a good idea to trust it! Immediately after the long-awaited child is promised, Sarah, who has been listening in, bursts with laughter. (And as she is 90, who can blame her!) The angel calls her out and, as a reminder that God’s promises can and should be trusted, instructs the couple to name their child Isaac, which means “child of laughter.”

Dear God, give us eyes to see all people as those who bear your image and message. Amen.



SATURDAY, DECEMBER 3, 2022

WORDS OF PROMISE AND COMFORT

When the water was gone, Hagar cast the child under one of the bushes and went and sat down opposite him a good way off, saying, “Do not let me look on the death of the child.”

She lifted up her voice and wept, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, saying, “Do not be afraid, Hagar. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast, for I will make a great nation of him.” Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water.

GENESIS 21:5-19

Not all the stories about Abraham and Sarah are about trust. This one, in fact, shows the exact opposite. Before Sarah gives birth to Isaac, she doubts God's promise and tells Abraham to have a child with her servant, Hagar. But when Hagar becomes pregnant, Sarah resents her and treats her poorly (Genesis 16). Hagar runs away, but an angel commands her to return and promises that God will protect her son, who is named Ishmael. Once Isaac is born, Sarah and Abraham do not want a reminder of their distrust or a rival to Isaac's claim as heir, and so they send both Hagar and Ishmael away. As we hear in this story, when they run out of water, Hagar places her young son under a bush because she can't bear to watch him die.

At just this moment of tragic desperation, the angel of the Lord returns, promises that God will keep God's promise to her and make a great nation of Ishmael, and shows her where to find water. All of which reminds us that angels come when most needed, remind us of the trustworthiness of God's promises, and are there to help.

Dear God, use us to remind each other that your promises are trustworthy and true.

Amen.



Second Sunday of Advent

DECEMBER 4, 2022

WORSHIP:

MPLS: 9, 10 & 11AM

WEST: 9, 10 & 11AM

SCRIPTURE:

LUKE 1:26-38

“GABRIEL VISITS MARY”



MONDAY, DECEMBER 5, 2022

WORDS OF PROMISE AND COMFORT

Elijah went a day's journey into the wilderness and asked the Lord that he might die. Then he lay down and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food for forty days and forty nights to Sinai, the mountain of God.

1 KINGS 19:4-8

Stories of angels coming to the aid of God's people run throughout the Scriptures. In this one, Elijah, the mightiest of Old Testament prophets, has recently called out the faithlessness of Israel's king and queen and defeated their false prophets. In response, they have called for Elijah's death and he has been on the run ever since. As this scene begins, Elijah has given up all hope and asked that he might die. God, however, has other plans, as suddenly an angel meets Elijah in his need, giving him food and drink to strengthen him for the daunting journey ahead.

What I find most interesting about this story is that, similar to how at Mount Olivet we emphasize that we are "blessed to be a blessing," the angel provides Elijah with food and drink not simply out of kindness but also for a reason: to strengthen him for the journey ahead. Elijah's work is not yet done. And in the chapters that follow, Elijah will continue his prophetic work, challenge the false prophets that remain, and name and train his successor.

All of which makes me think that perhaps when God sends someone into our lives to help us, we might ask the following: what am I being prepared for? What work does God need me to do? In asking and answering these questions, we make good on the help our angels have offered us.

Dear God, let us see in the help you give an invitation to bold and faithful service. Amen.



TUESDAY, DECEMBER 6, 2022

WORDS OF PROMISE AND COMFORT

Nebuchadnezzar said, "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants who trusted in him."

DANIEL 3:28

The Book of Daniel is filled with some pretty unusual stories, several of which involve angels and help us appreciate their role in our lives more fully. In this one, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon creates a large statue to represent his god and commands all the people in Babylon to worship it. Three faithful Israelites – named Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego – refuse and are thrown into a fiery furnace. But when the king looks in, he sees not three bodies being consumed by the flames but four, each walking around freely. In amazement, he realizes an angel has protected Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and he summons them out of the furnace and praises their God, the one who protected them because of their trust.

Sometimes, an angel brings comfort and help simply because we need it, as in the case of Hagar. Sometimes, an angel brings comfort and help because God has more for us to do, as in the case of Elijah. And sometimes an angel brings comfort and help so that others might see in this blessing a sign that God is faithful, cares for God's people, and is worthy of their trust and praise. This is what we see in the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. There is a line from Matthew's Gospel that comes to mind: "let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

Dear God, when you help us, remind us to thank you so that others may know the source of our blessings. Amen.



WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 7, 2022

WORDS OF PROMISE AND COMFORT

He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

MARK 1:13

We don't often think of Jesus needing help. Hagar, Elijah, Shadrach, and his friends, sure. But Jesus? No way. I think that's likely because even though we confess, in the words of the Nicene Creed, that Jesus is "fully God and fully human," we take the first part more seriously. And that makes sense: Jesus has command over nature. Jesus heals the sick. Jesus casts out demons. And, finally, even after Jesus is crucified on the cross and died, God raises him to a new life that does not end. How, then, could Jesus need help? Because, as we confess but often overlook, Jesus is also fully human. Which means he is just like us. And just to be clear, I mean that Jesus really is... Just. Like. Us. Which means there are times when Jesus needs help, as in this verse.

Which raises a question: if Jesus at times needs help and receives the support of angels, shouldn't we? Yes, if an angel came to us in a great time of need, most of us would likely accept that help. But given that we've already seen that we don't always recognize angels, anytime someone offers us help, it might just be an angel and so we should probably accept. And that can be hard. Most of us want to be independent, even self-sufficient, and receiving help may seem to undermine that. But it doesn't have to. Perhaps the angels in this story and in our lives can remind us that part of being human is being connected to each other, both giving and receiving help, trusting that this is how God designed the world to be.

Dear God, let us give help eagerly and receive help joyfully. Amen.



THURSDAY, DECEMBER 8, 2022

WORDS OF PROMISE AND COMFORT

As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were afraid. But he said to them, “Do not be afraid; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised. Now go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.”

MARK 16:5-7

The line between proclaiming good news and offering words of promise and comfort can be pretty thin. In this case, I think the words of the messenger in white are more promise than simply announcement because Jesus does not actually appear in Mark’s report of the resurrection. There’s the promise that he has been raised and the command to go meet him in Galilee, but no Jesus.

Mark is the only one to tell the story this way, and I think he does it because he realizes that all those people reading his story – back when he first wrote it all the way up to us – also don’t get to see the resurrected Jesus. And so the word the angel offers is promise – “he has been raised; he is going ahead of you” – and comfort – “Do not be afraid!”

I actually find it helpful to think that Mark was writing his Gospel for people who didn’t get to see Jesus – that is, for people like us. And I find it reassuring that even though the women at the empty tomb had a hard time believing the angel’s words of promise and comfort – they at first flee the tomb in terror and silence – in time they come to faith and share the good news. If they have a hard time, falter, yet in time prove faithful, perhaps we will, too!

Dear God, use the angels in our life to promise us that you are faithful and let those promises strengthen our faith. Amen.



FRIDAY, DECEMBER 9, 2022

WORDS OF PROMISE AND COMFORT

While Jesus was ascending and his disciples were gazing up towards heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

ACTS 1:10-11

As we’ve seen at a couple of points already, angels are not always identified as angels. In the first story we read, Abraham welcomes three travelers and it’s only later that he realizes they are angels. In Mark’s story of the resurrection, it’s a “young man in white” who shares the promise that Jesus is alive. So also, in this story from Luke’s book of Acts, God’s messengers are described as “two men in white robes.”

But if we’re not sure they’re angels in terms of their appearance, we know they are from their message. They meet the disciples just after Jesus has ascended into heaven and make them a promise that, in time, Jesus will return in just the same way. Once again, it’s just the right word at just the right time, as the disciples were likely wondering how they would manage without Jesus. The promise of his return frees them to do the work in front of them.

Notice that the hallmark of angels isn’t the name used, or their appearance, or anything else about them, but only the message. Angels come to make promises, to declare what God is doing to save us, and to offer words of comfort and courage. Which means that any one of us may have encountered an angel – those who encourage us at moments of struggle. It also means that we each have the opportunity to be an angel for another – sharing God’s promises and hope with those we encounter!

Dear God, let us look out for those who need a word of encouragement so that we can be their angel. Amen.



SATURDAY, DECEMBER 10, 2022

WORDS OF PROMISE AND COMFORT

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God. And he said to me, "The words you have heard are trustworthy and true!"

REVELATION 22:1, 6

In the book of Job, we hear that the angels shouted for joy when God created the world. In these closing verses of Revelation, we discover that they are present at the very end of the world as well. Which might be a helpful reminder: across all of human history there has been need of angels. There has been need, that is, for reminders of God's grace and love, for words of comfort, courage, and hope, and for the assurance that God is with us.

Why? Because that's part of what it means to be human. We are often beset by challenges, overwhelmed by fears, and made insecure by the uncertainties of the world. We are, that is, dependent on God's grace. And the primary role of angels throughout Scripture – from the creation of the cosmos in Genesis to the close of the ages in Revelation – is to share the message that we need not be afraid because the God who created the world out of nothing is with us and will not let us go.

It's a good message to hear. And it's a good message to share. Because it is a message that is, as the angel said, trustworthy and true.

Dear God, bring people into our lives who will share with us your promises, and grant us the courage to share those same promises with all who need to hear them. Amen.



Third Sunday of Advent

DECEMBER 11, 2022

WORSHIP:

MPLS: 9, 10 & 11AM

WEST: 9, 10 & 11AM

SCRIPTURE:

MATTHEW 1:18-25

“AN ANGEL VISITS JOSEPH”



MONDAY, DECEMBER 12, 2022

WORDS OF INSTRUCTION AND WARNING

When Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him.

MATTHEW 1:18-21, 24

An angel appears to Joseph three times in St. Matthew's story of Jesus' birth. The first visit was likely the hardest. Neither Mary's unexpected pregnancy nor his decision to end their relationship is what he had hoped for. Not what he had dreamed of or planned for or anticipated. And it's not fair. He has done everything right: worked hard, planned for their life together. He has done his part. And everything changes with the sudden and unwelcome news of Mary's unexpected pregnancy, as he loses all that he had hoped for, planned for, and dreamed of. Rather than expose her to public shame and possible punishment, he resolves to end their relationship quickly and quietly.

Until an angel gets involved. The angel offers words of encouragement – “do not be afraid” – that are also words of instruction – “take Mary as your wife.” And he does. Joseph overcomes the disappointment he feels and follows the angel's counsel. And that's important to note: it's one thing to receive good counsel, but another to take it. Who is it in your life that you trust to give you good counsel? And what encourages you to follow it?

Dear God, let us recognize you at work in the trusted counsel offered to us by friends, family members, and colleagues. Amen.



TUESDAY, DECEMBER 13, 2022

WORDS OF INSTRUCTION AND WARNING

Now after the Magi had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.”

MATTHEW 2:13

The second appearance of an angel to Joseph is to warn him that wicked King Herod plans to kill the infant Jesus because he perceives in this babe – the one the Magi had proclaimed to be “the king of the Jews” – a threat to his rule. And so the angel instructs Joseph to flee to Egypt.

Egypt. The place where the twelve sons of Israel found refuge during a famine. The place that eventually became the site of Israel’s enslavement. The place of God’s incredible and unforeseen rescue. There are many places beyond Herod’s reach – most of which would have been easier to get to – and so I don’t think it’s an accident they are sent to Egypt. Rather, in this flight, the one named Emmanuel – “God with us” – retraces the steps of his people. Egypt is a place of safety, and danger, and eventual deliverance, both in the Old Testament story and in the life of Jesus.

As Joseph heeds the warning of the angel and takes his young family abroad, we experience more fully the promise that Jesus is one of us, identifying with all refugees and immigrants who have had to flee their homes, identifying with all who seek safety, identifying with all who are vulnerable and must depend on others for their welfare.

The “King of the Jews” starts out on the run. And so we should probably not be surprised that Joseph’s son turns out to be a different kind of king than any before him... or after.

Dear God, let us see in the infant Jesus your commitment to everyone and especially to those who are alone, away from their homes, and vulnerable. Amen.



WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 14, 2022

WORDS OF INSTRUCTION AND WARNING

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.” Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel.

MATTHEW 2:19-21

In this third and final appearance, the angel keeps a promise made to Joseph earlier: that the angel would come back when Herod was dead and the baby safe. That time has come. Jesus’ time in Egypt, in exile, is at an end.

And as with most endings, it also marks a beginning. The beginning of his life as a carpenter’s son. The beginning of his growing up and maturing. And soon enough, the beginning of his ministry of grace to all those in need.

Angelic messages are often like that – they come at points of transition, interrupting quietly ordered lives, drawing some things to close, and initiating other things. Or maybe it’s the other way around. Not so much that the angel’s appearance causes all these transitions and changes, but rather that angels appear – whether in a dream or in broad daylight, and whether dressed in white robes or in the words of someone close to us – when we are most in need of them. That is, the angels in our lives come at those points of change, transition, and tumult in order to offer us words of courage and comfort, instruction and warning, so that we can detect God’s hopes and plans for us and follow them.

Dear God, help us to trust that you will come to us when we most need you. Amen.



THURSDAY, DECEMBER 15, 2022

WORDS OF INSTRUCTION AND WARNING

Then the donkey said to Balaam, “Am I not your donkey, which you have ridden all your life to this day? Have I been in the habit of treating you in this way?” Then the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road, with his drawn sword in his hand.

NUMBERS 22:30-31

Talking donkeys, a foreign sorcerer, and a deadly angel. All the makings of a great Christmas play, right? Oddly enough, this peculiar story figured as one of the closing scenes in some medieval nativity stories. In it, Balaam, a foreign sorcerer, is summoned by the king of Moab to curse the Israelites. As Balaam sets out to meet the king, an angel appears with a sword in hand to thwart Balaam's progress. While Balaam can't see the angel, his donkey can, and three times his donkey goes in another direction to avoid the deadly angel. Each time, Balaam beats his donkey with a stick, until finally God gives the donkey the gift of speech to protest its treatment and then opens Balaam's eyes so he can see his peril.

Why is this peculiar story connected to Christmas? Medieval nativity plays ended not with the arrival of the Magi, but with the Holy Family's flight to Egypt, presumably riding a donkey. And so these early plays connected the donkey that endured punishment to save Balaam to the donkey that saved the Holy Family. Both of these stories were celebrated on a day devoted to these humble beasts: the Feast of the Asses. (I kid you not!)

As silly as this may seem, there is something really interesting in God's decision to warn Balaam through the lowliest of animals. Why not a direct message from an angel? Or through a dream? Or a prophet? Perhaps God wanted to humble the mighty sorcerer. Or teach him the sacredness of all animals. Or... truthfully, we just don't know. All we know for sure is that God speaks to us in a variety of ways – some quite surprising! – but always in order to save.

Dear God, let us hear your voice even when it comes in the most unusual of ways. Amen.



FRIDAY, DECEMBER 16, 2022

WORDS OF INSTRUCTION AND WARNING

Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Get up and go towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” This is a wilderness road.

ACTS 8:26

I doubt Philip was particularly pleased to receive this angelic command. This story comes relatively early in the book of Acts, the story of the growth of the early church. Philip, one of the disciples, has just had an amazing preaching tour, converting most of the city of Samaria. And as a reward... he's sent on a hike down the backwater road between Jerusalem and Gaza, a journey of about 60 miles. And, in case we are wondering, Luke – the author of Acts – tells us “this is a wilderness road,” as in lonely, bleak, and dangerous.

On the way, he meets a fellow traveler, an Ethiopian eunuch who also happens to be the treasurer of the queen of Ethiopia. Not only is it surprising to meet someone else on this desert highway, but this most foreign of foreigners is reading from the prophet Isaiah. And then he asks Philip for help in understanding it. And then he asks if he can be baptized. And then – just in case we weren't sure God's at work here – there's a pool of fresh water available in the middle of the desert for this baptism.

The backstory here matters: Eunuchs were considered cursed by the Old Testament. At that time, it would be unlikely that an Ethiopian would be reading Isaiah. Even more unlikely for the treasurer of Ethiopia to be contemplating baptism into a Jewish sect worshipping a crucified rabbi. Yet despite this hat trick of disqualifiers, Philip baptizes him, inaugurating the spread of the Gospel well beyond the confines of Jerusalem. That is, because Philip obeyed the unlikely and frankly unappealing command of the angel, Christianity has now spread well beyond its borders and is on its way to becoming a global religion.

Dear God, let us trust that you desire all people to hear the word of your grace. Amen.



SATURDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2022

WORDS OF INSTRUCTION AND WARNING

In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort. He was a devout man who feared God with all his household. One afternoon he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, “Cornelius.” He stared at him in terror and said, “What is it, Lord?” He answered, “Send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter.” When the angel who spoke to him had left, he called two of his servants and sent them to Joppa.

ACTS 10:1-8

Again, a little backstory is helpful. Cornelius is a Roman centurion, which also means he’s a Gentile. Peter is, well, Peter, the leader of the disciples and chief evangelist in Jerusalem and the surrounding cities. These are two people, in short, who wouldn’t normally be hanging out with each other. Yet the angel commands Cornelius to invite Peter to his home.

Why? Because God wants to do a new thing. Up to this point, Christianity is essentially a Jewish sect. That is, some Jews believe Jesus is the promised Messiah, while others do not. Which means almost all of the believers at this point are Jewish, and if someone wants to become Christian, they need to become Jewish first, including obeying all the Jewish laws. But very soon, Peter will be called upon to see all people as God’s children, God’s chosen, and to place no barriers – including laws about food or worship – in the way of someone experiencing God’s grace in Christ.

This is not an easy move for Peter to make. He would not normally welcome someone like Cornelius into the faith. But God – in an action initiated by one of God’s angels – surprises Peter with just how expansive and inclusive God’s grace really is and then invites Peter to be more and do more than he’d ever imagined. Which means we should probably be prepared for one of God’s angels to do the same with us!

Dear God, help us to see all people as your beloved children. Amen.



Fourth Sunday of Advent & Christmas Communion

DECEMBER 18, 2022

WORSHIP:

MPLS: 9, 10 & 11AM

WEST: 9, 10 & 11AM

SCRIPTURE:

LUKE 2:8-15

“THE ANGELS AND THE SHEPHERDS”



MONDAY, DECEMBER 19, 2022

WORDS OF GOOD NEWS

On his way to Haran, Jacob came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down, and he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the Lord stood beside him and said, “The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring, and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring.”

GENESIS 28:10-14

Jacob is on the run. He has just cheated his brother out of the family inheritance and is fleeing across the desert to escape his wrath. (The desperation of his situation is signified in that he has only a rock to serve as a pillow!) In the midst of his troubles – troubles he has brought on himself – he has a dream of angels.

While the old Gospel spiritual sings of us “climbing Jacob’s ladder,” it’s actually the angels, and not Jacob, who are climbing up and down. Which is significant, as without Jacob doing a thing, God now makes to Jacob the same promise God made to Jacob’s grandfather, Abraham: land, offspring, and blessing. All this to a cheat and a scoundrel. Yet Jacob is a cheat and scoundrel through whom God plans to bless the world.

Which is a good reminder: God doesn’t send angels only to those who are good. God doesn’t bless only those who deserve it. God doesn’t use only those who are righteous. Rather, God chooses to speak to, bless, and use all of us, even – and maybe especially! – those who don’t seem to deserve God’s attention or blessing. Good news, indeed!

Dear God, let us be open to your words of grace, goodness, and blessing. Amen.



TUESDAY, DECEMBER 20, 2022

WORDS OF GOOD NEWS

Zechariah said to the angel, “How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.” The angel replied, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.”

LUKE 1:18-20

It’s hard not to feel a little bad for Zechariah. I mean, he and his wife Elizabeth are well beyond child-bearing years, and so his stunned disbelief is pretty understandable. And in response, the angel Gabriel renders him mute until this son, John the Baptist is born. Perhaps the moral of this story is that when an angel speaks, we’d better listen!

And there’s something to that. But... perhaps Zechariah losing his speech is not so much a punishment but instead serves as a sign, a sign that when all these things come to pass so also will his speech be restored and he will be able to render fit praise. Perhaps, that is, the angel is preparing him to testify to God’s goodness, testimony that will be all the more powerful after a time of silence.

In what ways might God be inviting you to give thanks for God’s blessings? And where might you have experienced an angel sharing words of promise and good news? At the heart of this story is the recognition that God can do anything, even offer children to those too old to conceive. Which means that when God enters our life, we should be prepared – and expect! – God to do amazing things.

Dear God, prepare us to hear your promises and believe them. Amen.



WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 21, 2022

WORDS OF GOOD NEWS

In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

LUKE 1:26-28

Mary is perplexed, Luke reports, and if we give this any more than the moment's thought we usually do, we recognize instantly that she has good reason to be. "Why me," she might wonder when greeted by the angel, "what makes me special?" Or maybe, "Doesn't God – the creator and sustainer of the vast cosmos – have more to do than be concerned with one such as me?" Or, "What on earth could bring a heavenly messenger to my home?" All this and more must tumble through her scattered and perplexed thoughts.

We have heard this story so often it is easy to domesticate it, for it to seem to us the usual course of things. But of course to Mary it is beyond extraordinary: God's messenger visiting to bring her greetings and blessing. What might we have thought should an angel have come to us? What might we have done when we heard of the Lord's favor and blessing?

But there's more. Because we, too, actually are included in Mary's story. All we have to do is add one more question to realize it: What do we do, in fact, when we hear that Mary's child and God's own Son, whose birth the angel is about to herald, lived, shared the good news, died, and was raised again, all so that we might have life and have it abundantly?

Perplexing indeed!

*Dear God, surprise us once again with the promise of your grace, favor, and blessing.
Amen.*



THURSDAY, DECEMBER 22, 2022

WORDS OF GOOD NEWS

The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.” Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. For nothing will be impossible with God.” Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

LUKE 1:26-38

Mary’s story is too good to rush over, so let’s look a little more closely, especially the angelic message. Strikingly, the angel not only offers Mary the classic formula of good news – “Do not be afraid!” – but also concludes with the promise that in some ways summarizes the whole of Scripture: “Anything is possible with God!”

For just now, imagine that Gabriel’s words are addressed to you: “Do not be afraid, for anything is possible with God.” What would you want to try, attempt, or dare if you heard such a message? Or, perhaps more to the point, given that this is the promise God offers each of us, what shall we try, attempt, and dare? Simply because all things are possible with God, we need not fear – not the challenges in front of us... or the opportunities. We too, with Mary, can answer, “Let it be according to your word!”

Dear God, prepare us to be surprised by your love and grant us courage to dare great things. Amen.



FRIDAY, DECEMBER 23, 2022

WORDS OF GOOD NEWS

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, '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.'

LUKE 2:8-11

By and large, shepherds were shepherds not because they loved animals or hoped for a career in ranching, but because they couldn't keep or get any other kind of work. Shepherds were pretty much at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder and very few people would have expected that they would be the first people who will hear the message of God's redemption.

Yet across Luke's Gospel, one of the dominant themes is that God comes for those who are on the outside – those who are poor, vulnerable, and of no account in the world. Why? Perhaps because they are the ones predisposed to listen and rejoice. Angels could have visited Herod or Augustus or Quirinius or any of the other powerful characters that make cameo appearances in Luke's story. But why would they rejoice at the announcement of a king? What need have they of God's redemption when, to all outward appearances, they themselves were like gods?

No, the angels come and sing their news to those for whom it meant something: outcasts, ne'er-do-wells, the lonely, poor, and lowly – unwed teenage mothers and loser shepherds and all the rest – all, that is, who are in need. For, ultimately, the only requirement to receive God's love is to need it. Which means that angels come also to us!

Dear God, thank you for seeking out those who need you, people like shepherds... and us!

Amen.



SATURDAY, DECEMBER 24, 2022

WORDS OF GOOD NEWS

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

LUKE 2:13-14

In this small portion of the Christmas story, there is something totally expected and totally unexpected. The angels – indeed, the whole heavenly host! – do two things. First, they praise God. This is the expected part, across Scripture, it is only fitting to give God – the One who created and still sustains the vast cosmos – praise. But then the angels sing the promise of peace to all those God loves. And I think that part is perhaps less expected. Praise for the all-powerful God, certainly. But to promise peace? To, in fact, say that the most important thing in the world to God is that we enjoy peace, that we prosper and flourish, that all people know of God’s love?

But I think that at the heart of the Christmas story is the insight, revelation, and good news that God is more like a loving parent than an all-powerful king. More like a partner than an emperor. More like one who is more interested in saving through love than judging through righteousness. And precisely because that’s hard for us to believe, God surprises us by coming not in power but in weakness, not in glory but in vulnerability. God comes to be one with us and one of us in the babe born at Bethlehem. And... pretty much nobody expected that, then or now!

Dear God, let us receive you into our hearts once again, knowing and trusting that you love us as your own children. Amen.

Join Us!

CHRISTMAS EVE WORSHIP SERVICES

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 24

2-10pm, Mpls Campus

1pm: Special Christmas Eve Instrumental Concert*

2-4pm: Cathedral Choir and Orchestra

5 & 6pm: Instrumental Solo and Vocal Duet with Orchestra

7-9pm: Senior Choir and Orchestra

10pm: Candlelight service with Senior Choir and Orchestra

Livestreamed hourly at mtolivet.org

**Thanks to the generous donation from a Mount Olivet family, we are pleased to offer this special musical program.*

2-6pm, West Campus

2 & 3pm: Cathedral Choir, String Quartet, and Harp

4 & 5pm: Senior Choir, String Quartet, and Harp

6pm: Candlelight service with Senior Choir, String Quartet, and Harp

CHRISTMAS DAY WORSHIP SERVICE

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 25

Mpls Campus, 10am*

West Campus, 10am*

*Communion at 9:30am



MOUNT OLIVET LUTHERAN CHURCH

MINNEAPOLIS CAMPUS, 5025 KNOX AVE S, MINNEAPOLIS, MN 55419, 612.926.7651

WEST CAMPUS, 7150 ROLLING ACRES RD, VICTORIA, MN 55386, 952.767.1500

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